

# ISI Lecture Program

## Lecture Archive

### The Young, the Good, and the West

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#### THE YOUNG, THE GOOD, AND THE WEST Michael Platt

I. From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, all across the continent of Europe, the Iron Curtain has lifted. Behind that line almost all the ancient states of the East, with their capitals, Warsaw, Budapest, Prague, Bratislava, Zagreb, Belgrade, Bucharest, Sofia, Tallin, Riga, Vilnius, Kiev, and their captive populations have regained their freedom. In Germany, the wall imprisoning the East has crumbled, the Germans have enjoyed their reunion, and set about the task of unification. Now far into the East the Gulag has thawed; now the specter of Soviet Communism no longer haunts the West; and now all over the world the threat of nuclear war seems to have receded.

Meanwhile, the free markets of the West and the new ones in Asia continue to produce all those goods and services that constitute progress, in such abundance as to make vast populations comfortable, beyond the expectations of desire itself and even the dreams of visionaries. Indeed, the world seems now nearly united in calling democracy the best regime, free market capitalism the best economy, and science the most humanitarian enterprise of humanity. Some speak of a new world order. Still others dream of the end of history. Investors everywhere smile.

Nevertheless, despite these welcome events, agreeable developments, and sanguine hopes, the West seems troubled.

Though wealthy, the peoples of the West are not happy; though at peace, they are haunted by the unrelenting cold war that terrorism is; though living longer and longer, they fear death more and more; and though ever advancing in technology, they feel weaker. Compared to previous generations, the people of the West, though still free, are everywhere more dependent on government, more burdened by bureaucracy, more vexed by regulation, more heavily taxed, and more deep in debt, both personal and public, yea, unto their children's children. By almost all indices, of theft, of murder, of divorce, of suicide, of how it treats its offspring, and how willing the citizenry is to defend its way of life, the West seems in decline.

Certainly we are not what our parents and grandparents once were. Though they belatedly recognized the threat of national, imperial socialism, both Hitler's new kind and Japan's ancient one, and though they needed alliance with a third national, imperial socialism to win, the great democracies called forth a supreme exertion and defeated both Germany and Japan. Yet despite the valiant work of Churchill's worthy inheritor, Margaret Thatcher, the English today are no equal to the hearty islanders who frustrated Hitler's Luftwaffe so finely. Despite the refounding achievement of DeGaulle, the French today are no match to the French who were ashamed of their Vichy betrayal, resisted occupation, fought their way to German soil, gained a place at the peace table, and founded the United Nations. And despite America's two-ocean victory, its enormous economic expansion since, and its 'victory' over Soviet Communism, the American people today are not equal to the united nation they were in World War II. For more than a thousand days and nights those men and women waged war against two mighty tyrannies. Recently a leader of the West called a tyrant, a Hitler, but ceased fighting him after a hundred hours, leaving him stronger, more able to oppress his people and, with time, more able to threaten his neighbors with mass incineration and mass plague. Except for superior arms, none of the descendants of the victors of World War II could defeat the nation they were fifty years ago.

Each of the great democracies is weaker than it was then. Weaker, sicker, blinder, blind to its own corruption — or rather indifferent to it, for although there are critics, although insight exists, although the evidence can even be presented in terms that the morally obtuse recognize, little is done. Insight exists, but not will. Everywhere sloth, sloth, sloth prevails. And even to its own survival, America seems blind. Upon Communist China, with its vast Laogai system, so much more thoroughly enslaving of the mind and so much more economically productive than the Gulag—upon this tyranny, with its submissive millions, with its pervasive espionage, with its penetrating political donations, with its expansive navy and far-reaching missiles—upon this totalitarian empire, America chooses to look most favorably. Its consumers amused with trinkets, its business men dazzled with profits, and its politicians indifferent to liberty, America seems to have concluded that the world is safe for democracy, that the war to end all wars is over, and that no virile armed force will ever be needed again.

To be sure, the West has woken from slumber before. Before it beat him, the West appeased Hitler; before it defeated the Japanese, it ignored them; and for decades, before it decided to defend itself against missiles, not just deter them, the West gave ground to Soviet advances, calling retreat coexistence and then détente. Yet it rallied against Hitler, against Japan, and against the Soviet Union. Perhaps the West will rally again.

When it rallied before, the West had to recognize its enemies; now, in addition, it must recognize itself. That is a far greater task, for it requires very painful self-criticism. In what follows I will offer some, to you, my fellow Westerners. Later I will give some reasons to think we are already rallying.

## II. THE TEENAGER

Today, if we would recognize our enemies, we must first recognize ourselves.

Sometime after World War II, a new sort of human being appeared in the West. The flat, listless, anxious, petty souls of the youth of today have been well described by Allan Bloom, but their uniqueness has not been appreciated, their genesis investigated, or their plight commiserated sufficiently. There were no "teenagers" before World War II. Compare the entries in Webster Second and Third; only after the war does the adjective "teenage" become the noun, "teenager." What differentiates the teenager from all previous generations of young people is the absence of the desire to become an adult; the highest aspiration of a teenager is to become a more perfect teenager, a movie or rock star. Before the Second World War, there were youths; they grew up playing and studying, being foolish, ambitious and silly, but always wanting to grow up, to become men and women, good citizens and God-fearing souls, mothers and fathers, someone worthy of their own self-respect. Their heroes and heroines were such people; if they didn't have one nearby in their own family, they looked for one in their town, perhaps in their church, congregation, meeting house, stake, or synagogue, or in their school. And if they did not find enough good there, then they searched in their reading. Not any more; the horizon of significant adult life has disappeared for them.

The day the Teenager was created was a sad day for every youth in America. Imagine yourself young, unsure of yourself, swayed by strong passions, by turns ashamed and proud, oft shy and oft assertive, always awkward, filled with new desires and hard on yourself for having them, by desire pressed forward toward independence and by desire drawn backward toward conformity, tempted by clique cruelty, by affectation, by enslavement to pleasure, and by premature bonds, but fighting on, knowing that you want to become something better, someone capable of accomplishing good, deserving your own respect, and maybe one day becoming a good parent —imagine such struggling youths hearing their own parents saying, "Take it easy, enjoy yourself, adulthood will just happen, this is the time of your life."

You can see it portrayed in the films of James Dean. In all of them, he is an orphan, an orphan with no parents in *Giant*, an orphan with split parents in *East of Eden*, and an orphan *with* two parents in *Rebel Without a Cause*. *Rebel* imitates what was going on in

the 1950s most faithfully. In it we see "Jimmy" enter a new high school and face a moral question: Should he fight if challenged? Should he risk his life, and perhaps the lives of others, to defend his honor? Should he, perhaps, do it to destroy the reputation of a teenage tyrant? Or should he ignore the foolish challenge, go his solitary way through high school, and continue to prepare to be a man? Jimmy chooses to fight, frees two former slaves of the tyrant, and wins. By so doing, he becomes a good, strong man, and even a kind of father (to the character "Plato"). Jimmy is not a rebel without a cause, but a young man with a purpose. All this, however, is achieved not only without the help of his parents but despite a contumacious mother and a pusillanimous father. The lesson is clear: in the new America, the kids are on their own. They have been on their own now for forty years.

We have slid a long way since shy, sensitive, self-pitying, questioning, confused, polite, proud and gentle Jimmy Dean struggled to become a man. When I look at the blank eyes, apathetic expressions, empty faces, the hair fashioned like stegosaurus or shaven like Dachau inmates, note the leather garb, mutilating jewelry, ill-fitting tops, and shuffling pants, when I watch their cold videos, hear their music beat to the whip, and above all, when I listen to the Teenagers of today talk about their lives, the world and themselves, I grieve for them and I fear for the world. These children would rather that the world perished; they would rather you perished; they would rather that their parents perished; they would rather they themselves perished; and they kill themselves, their parents, and others in unprecedented numbers. Without desire, without pleasure, without passion, they seem to say, "I hate everyone in this room; I hate everyone I know; I hate, I hate, I hate . . . everything." "Daddy, Daddy" Sylvia Plath is their precursor, "tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" Macbeth their ancestor, and the swine-preferring Prodigal Son their archetype. They want neither to love nor to be loved. It is a question whether any affection can ever reach them, although not a question that should stop any one from trying.

### **III. THE ORPHANS AND THE GREAT BOOKS**

Thus orphaned, the youths of the West are in the condition of Telemachus, amlet, or Huck Finn; they must bring themselves up. Unfortunately, today they are more like Hamlet than Telemachus and more like Huck than Hamlet. And their absent fathers are no Old Hamlets, let alone Odysseuses. For years the young people who now arrive in college have heard their parents say, "Let the kids work it out on their own," which they have rightly understood to mean, "We don't much care."

Arriving in college, these children will need some vista of greatness to satisfy the longing in their souls, or to stir it up if Allan Bloom is right about their listlessness. From time to time such students may find some greatness in their teachers, but they will only find it for sure in the great books that are occasionally still taught in the colleges. Nothing else speaks to the soul's greatest longings the way those books do. Most of the greatest minds are dead and are, thus, only available to us through the writings they have left us. Happy then the student who chances upon the greater teachers an Allan Bloom will introduce him to. That chance depends largely on the existence of a Liberal Arts, Great Books, or

Western Civilization elective, requirement, core, program or major. And for most students, it also depends on meeting a teacher so formed by that greatness that he represents it vivaciously to students. Such teachers do not grow on trees. They are not watered by the affluent, but impoverished graduate schools of today. Often such teachers only spring up by getting to teach in such undergraduate programs. As Lionel Trilling once said, "Everything I am comes from the opportunity to teach in such a program." Today there are precious few of them. And the best way to introduce one to a college without one might be to call it Forbidden Books.

I would then, with Mr. Bloom and others, have such orphans study the two parents of the West, whose strong marriage, of reason and revelation, have made it the inquiring, the striving, and the loving thing it is. Simultaneously then, I would have them study that great movement of mind, beginning with Homer and Hesiod, including the tragedians and historians, and culminating in Socrates and all his consequences: Plato, Aristotle and Alexander, Cicero, Vergil, and Tacitus. Nor should one neglect the four modern Socratics: Montaigne, Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. And I would have them study the parent of revelation, beginning with the Great Creator of Genesis, including the long story of man's choices, of steadfast Abraham, stern Moses and persevering Job, shaky Saul, and wayward David; and withal God's charitable and sagacious interventions, culminating in suffering Christ and all His consequences, including Augustine, Thomas, Francis, More, Luther, Calvin, Pascal, Newman, Kierkegaard, and Péguy.

These are the parents and their relatively distinct progeny. We in the West are one long consequence of reason, especially as the Greeks first practiced it, and of revelation, as the Jews first received it, and especially of the meeting of these two, sometimes a clash, sometimes a conversation, sometimes a chorus in harmony. We are especially the consequence of the unification of these two accomplished by Christianity. To the Jew, Christianity said, "Some of the laws are suspended by the new revelation of Christ, some strengthened by it (e.g., on divorce), and some set aside, for example, those on politics, for the "things of Caesar" are rightly governed by reason, not God or Moses or the law given by the one to the other." And to the Greek, Christianity said, "There is more in heaven than your philosophy kens of, and more on earth as well, for without breaching reason or contradicting it, or denigrating the nature it is true to, the truth of Christ surpasses it." The most comprehensive, subtle, rich and happy expression of this unification of reason and Christian revelation is to be found in Thomas Aquinas; the most deep, subtle, noble, and anxious in Pascal; and the most beautiful and sweet, in Rembrandt.

Yet the student of the West may wonder and must inquire whether these parents, of reason and Christian revelation, do go together. Is it a marriage? Various voices that a student must listen to, Tertullian and Luther on one side, and on the other, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, agree, saying that there can be no true relation between faith and philosophy. Are they right? Should philosophy and faith divorce? And if they should, which parent should you, their child, choose to stick with? "Faith" say Tertullian and Luther. "Reason" say Bayle, Voltaire, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, though Nietzsche adds "passionate reason." Who is right? Which will you choose? Is one right? Does

reason without faith lead to liberty, understanding, and happiness. Or does faith without reason lead to righteousness, salvation, and heaven? Or are both sides wrong, and the child who is forced to choose forever maimed by having grown up in a broken home? You must decide. You must think. You must meet Socrates. You must meet Christ. Not to know them is to be an orphan of the West. For any human being, West or East, it is to miss two of the greatest opportunities for self-knowledge. As inquiring Socrates died to make us wise, so wise Christ died to make us loving.

The reminder of these deaths might teach something important to the student of the West. The founders whose marriage made and still makes the West were both put to death by the West. Has the West regretted it? Yes, and no. Athens so regretted the hemlock that it banished the accusers; Jerusalem so regretted the cross that many a Saul changed to a Paul; and Imperial Rome so regretted its Pilate that it turned Christian. Although the esteem in these regrets contributed importantly to the founding of the West, nevertheless, were Socrates resurrected, would he last seventy years? And were Christ to come again would he last thirty-three? No, if Socrates reappeared, if Christ came again, they would once again be put to death. Daily they are, have been, and will be put to death. The hemlock is always being proffered to the philosopher, approximately in proportion to his imitation of Socrates, and the Cross is always being erected for the Christian, approximately in proportion to his witnessing Christ. Nor does the fact that Socrates is somehow responsible for Aristotle and that Christ is somehow responsible for the Church mean that the combination of Aristotle and the Church that the West nearly was in Paris long ago, that that combination would not repeat the crime of Athens and the crime of Jerusalem. After all, Thomas, in whose thinking Aristotle and Christ combine as never before or since, was censured by the Church, fortunately in absentia, after he had been "absented" from this little threshing floor, streeted with straw, our earth, and was, presumably, dwelling in beatific felicity, in any case, safe from Bishop Tempier. Yet, unfortunately as well, for the Church, for had Thomas been alive and thinking when intemperate Tempier and like others condemned his teachings, Thomas would not only have refuted them but might have convinced the Church that he had, and then his students need not have gone underground for years.

This shows us something important. Though these two, Socrates and Christ, are the founders of the West, the West is far from its founding. It could not be otherwise and it will always be so. Founders are both in what they founded and immeasurably high above it. No institution is greater than its founder. *Politique* is not *mystique*, as Péguy knew. Institutions, especially countries, do necessary things and sometimes achieve fine things, things that nothing else could, but none is finer than what a noble human being can achieve. Only human beings can be friends. When countries are said to be "friendly," it just means they are not foes. Although souls need cities to be in, no city is higher than the soul. And so it is with Socrates and with Christ. Justice was profoundly important to both, yet both recognized something higher above it, eros in the one case, love in the other.

Thus we study founders such as Socrates and Christ with two dispositions, with gratitude for the good in what they founded and yet with awe for them, higher beings, and high measures of all below, including what they founded. Thus, when the Academy is

decadent, you may seek philosophic solace in Socrates, and when Christendom is decrepit, there in Christ you may seek ageless Life Himself. So too, when the Academy is decadent and when Christendom is decrepit, you may reform them, which means returning them to their first principles and purposes, by ardently recollecting Socrates and Christ, and while reforming the institutions, endure the tribulations and suffering accompanying such reform, succeeding or failing, by dwelling with them. Time spent strolling with Socrates and Christ gives a happiness no institution could ever enjoy, or hinder. However, even when these institutions were in the best shape ever, nay even if they were to be in the best shape they could ever be in, still high above them are their founders, Socrates and Christ, the one providing an understanding few others can, and the other providing a peace no one else ever could.

To the student of the West, these two lofty teachers enforce a second important lesson. Do these two, Socrates and Christ, agree about important things? Do they understand things the same way? Do they provide the same sort of peace? It is hard to discern what each teaches or thinks, and it is harder still to see if they go together. Perhaps they agree, but if so, is it clear where, or how, and why? We would very much like to be present at a conversation between Socrates and Christ, yet a conversation between them might go no where, it might not even start, and who are we to speculate about their lofty meeting? No one stays wide awake with Socrates the night of the *Symposium*, and none of his chosen disciples stays awake with Christ the night He asked them to. Who are we to say we would do better than Aristophanes or Peter on the night when Socrates and Christ converse? Raphael painted the conversation of Plato and Aristotle as "The School of Athens." What the conversation of Socrates and Christ would be we do not know. "The School of the West" has never been painted. Perhaps Rembrandt could have. He didn't. We can't.

Of the West then, we are the products and also the failures, for reading the best minds of the West we cannot but recognize that in them there is something not only vastly superior to Western institutions but vastly superior to us. Thus time spent with Socrates and Christ is time spent with souls whose lofty excellence is a constant personal accusation and yet whose company provides a joy few of the living, however good, can give us, or, for much the same reason, prevent. For the record of their time on earth we are mightily grateful to the institutions they founded, and yet we cannot forget that they are the measures of those institutions.

Thus, although Socrates asks Athens to care for his sons and would, I presume, approve of Plato's writings, and might approve of his founding of the Academy, he would hardly approve of everything Academic since, perhaps not even the succession of civilizations, regimes, and cities that have followed, including those summed up as "the West." Likewise, although He charged His disciples to found a Church, Christ would not approve all its doings, let alone those of all Christendom, and still less "Christian civilization." (Thus, although neither Socrates nor Christ would be animated by the passion that stirred the marchers at Stanford to chant "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western Civ has gotta go," they would not in defending such a civilization for an instant regard it as the highest thing. Nor would they approve of Western Civilization courses that failed to look

higher than it, to what it has looked higher to, to Socrates and Christ, and, higher still, to what they look up to.) And although Thomas may be said to have brought reason and revelation, Aristotle and Christ, together, we don't know what either would think of the meeting. After all, neither Aristotle nor Christ speak of each other, and not at all of the consequence of the conversation their students and disciples have imagined, "the West." All criticism of the West falls short of what Socrates and Christ, just by existing, provide.

Mention of Socrates and Christ might remind us of something else about the soul's relation to greatness. It is not only true, as Mr. Bloom so rightly emphasizes and exactly describes, that the soul longs for answers to the greatest questions but that the soul wants to become great. If not deformed, a youth dreams of being some one he can respect, of doing something worth remembering, indeed of becoming someone worth remembering, someone great. Some dream of discovering truth; more dream of achieving a great good, or of resisting a great evil. Some want to be an Einstein; some want to be a Davy Crockett; others want to be an Albert Schweitzer, or a Mother Teresa; some want to be a Shakespeare or a Solzhenitsyn; and others want to be a Joan of Arc or a Lincoln, a DeGaulle or a Churchill. The great books speak to these longings. Homer's heroes fired the imagination of young Alexander and young Sam Houston. Plutarch's Lives, which include a life of Alexander, have fired youths as well as instructed statesmen. The Platonic dialogues set the emulative soul on fire to be like Socrates. Likewise the Bible, which shows a youth the greatness in obedience of pious Abraham, beautiful David, and stern and stubborn Moses, and the greatness in love of Christ.

Nor can the soul stop at emulation. For one thing, there is more than one sort of hero worthy of emulation. Which should I choose to be like? How can I choose between them? Why choose one rather than the others? Perhaps there was once a time when the choice was easy, when the question barely arose, when it was clear to all, or nearly all, in one's village, one's country, and one's civilization, what the best way of life is. Not any more. Perhaps it never was. Thus the student burning to be great must ask: What is great? The student wishing to be just must ask: What is just? And the student desiring truth must ask: What is true? And even: What is truth? Philosophy, at least a little philosophy, is now indispensable, at least at the beginning of adulthood. The confluence of a thousand and one 'cultures' has confused all and thrust reflection upon each youth raised in one but forced by exposure to the rest to consider all.

It is a long time since one could leave it at reading Homer, wanting to be Achilleus, or Odysseus, and worshipping Zeus. Since Julian the Apostate, no one has done more to revive the worship of Dionysus than Nietzsche and yet he and his Zarathustra philosophize far more than they dance, pour libations, or sacrifice in blood. The soft, pastel paganism of Botticelli, the multicultural paganism of Jung and Campbell — psychologists of the 'psyche' (which is not the soul) — and the aesthetic paganism of many students up until recently is effete, unheroic, and shallow, and it is impossible. Socrates is inescapable. Likewise, one cannot leave it at reading the Old Testament and wanting simply to obey the law vouchsafed to Moses, for one must consider what Maimonides teaches the perplexed; and not even in Israel, let alone Long Island, can one ignore Spinoza, the founder of both. And Christianity, in claiming that Christ is the



Logos (John), that reason and its revelation agree (Pascal), requires the thoughtful Christian, such as Thomas addresses in the *Summa Theologiae*, to find out how they do agree. Faith must seek understanding.

In truth these stories of the West themselves compel emulative youth to philosophize. That Homer presents both Achilles and Odysseus means we must consider both, perhaps choose one over the other, or perhaps compelled by the difficulty of the choice, seek some third hero beyond both, who would be their perfection and measure. Plato says that would be Socrates. Kierkegaard disagrees, saying it would be Christ. And Nietzsche once suggested it would be "Roman Caesar with the soul of Christ." Likewise with the Bible. Whom should one emulate? Abraham, Moses, or David? Or Job? Or none, for perhaps the Torah forbids emulation, knows only God as great, and prefers obedience. And here Christ disagrees, saying love is higher than obedience, love for others unto death, "as I have loved you"; and yet in obedience, too, Thy will be done. Maybe emulation was not permitted until Him. In any case, the diversity within the West, whose many participant cultures are invisible to the angry in American Academe today, is already inherent in the West. It requires each son and daughter of the West to seek the unity of the West, to seek it for yourself, and thus to live it in your life.

Already the indispensable founding figures of the West, in Socrates and Christ, in their thinking, there is incitement to thinking. The questions aroused by Socrates' one big speech in public (the *Apology*) compel one to go on, to his many private conversations, among them none so lovely as the *Symposium* or so comprehensive as the *Republic*. What Plato's student, Aristotle, divided up into a *Poetics*, a *Rhetoric*, an *Ethics*, a *Politics*, and part of a *Physics* and a *Metaphysics*, is in the *Republic* seen together. Few, very few, other books have such a power to speak to the young soul, to provoke it into a discovery of itself, and to exercise it into a full possession of its own powers. The *Republic* is one of those books that to miss when you are young may be to miss maturity itself. From Euclid you can learn that you have a mind, but from Plato and Aristotle you can learn that the mind can reason about the most important things. (Shakespeare and Tolstoy seem to me two other indispensables, but ones that come earlier.)

Miss the experience of reason in Plato and you are likely to become a feeble drifter, thinking "It is all a matter of opinion" or, these days, a lost nihilist thinking "It is all a matter of values." Combine the many drifters and a few potent nihilists turned active and you get tyrannies the like of which were never seen until our century. Against the peculiar evil of our time, Plato and Aristotle are sovereign essentials.

So too the Gospels, whose fourfold account of Christ requires the reader to work for understanding, to reconcile the discrepancies, to harmonize the seven last words, or not to, but in any case to have sought answers to the questions the Gospels raise. The remarks of Christ, which are as witty, subtle, and deep, indeed unique, as His suffering, require the same qualities in the reader. And so too the works of discourse that follow the Gospels, the accounts of God (theologies) of Augustine, Thomas, Pascal, Kierkegaard, and others; there too Christ incites to thought. To read Augustine's *Confessions* and not carry the story through to the final, abstract discourses is not only to "not finish the

assignment" but not to have understood what of it you did read. To Augustine it would be to choose "restlessness" rather than the "Thee" that true restlessness, seeking higher, would itself choose and then be at peace. Even after he had been saved, Augustine thought there was far to go. Faith needs to seek understanding. Thomas agrees when he addresses the twenty-five hundred close pages of his *Summa Theologiae* to pious B.A.s at Paris. And, in his way, Pascal also holds that reason and revelation can never disagree. Yet, with these discourses we must add, as their authors would, that somehow all they say is already in the Gospels, especially John's. While ancient philosophy criticized the Homeric poetry that preceded it (and refuted Aristophanes, first to quarrel with Socrates), modern philosophic theology understands itself as the servant of the Biblical story and the disciple of Christ.

So far I have emphasized the founders of the West. They come first in studies but they are not all. The moderns, unto our own day, deserve attention, if only so the student is not left disoriented upon graduating. But the ancients do come first. As Lionel Trilling observed, the unargued assumption of all colleges is that you teach modernity. That is not thoughtful. Yet, even to fulfill the aim of such a curriculum, you must study more than it. Modernity is derivative, and its very claims to superiority, to bold breaks and new continents, acknowledge this however backhandedly. To examine the bold claim of a founder who boasts he is better than all that came before, you have to know the old stuff, especially when the boaster names the person he overcomes. Thus, to examine the claims of the new republican Machiavelli, you have to know the old 'imagined Republics' (of Cicero, especially of Plato, but also the "imagined" City of God of Augustine, whom Machiavelli silently and fiercely opposes). To examine the claims of the 'new scientists': Galileo, Copernicus, Bacon, Descartes, and Newton, you have to know the old ones, Aristotle, Euclid, and Ptolemy. And to examine the claims of the great critics of modernity who nonetheless renewed its designs, Rousseau and Nietzsche, you must know both the moderns they criticize, Hobbes and Locke for Rousseau, Rousseau and Hegel for Nietzsche, and also the ancients they claim as allies (Socrates for both, Sparta for Rousseau, and the tragedians for Nietzsche).

One must recognize that the tension between reason and revelation, which seemed to have reached a high harmony in Thomas Aquinas, broke out afresh. Those figures who made the Renaissance, who are the Renaissance, called for some kind of return to ancient understanding and living, and those figures who made the Reformation, who are the Reformation, called for some kind of return to pristine Christian teaching and living. Yet Erasmus and More thought these renewals were compatible. Shakespeare may have too, and what would a Great Books curriculum be without Shakespeare, whose scope includes almost all time and place, and whose beauty pleases and depth lures on the inquiring soul. Looking upon the ensuing tumult and bloody civil wars, others, the founders of modernity, such as Machiavelli, Montaigne, and Bacon, claimed to see a new harmony of reason and revelation, which would dedicate the faithful, out of charity itself, to a politics of broad and inclusive goals, ones likely to be achieved and even secured forever, or at least progressively approximated: peace, freedom, prosperity, and comfort. Thus the faithful were invited to join a just war against fortune, to achieve an unconditional

surrender and permanent conquest of nature, for the relief of what Montaigne called, for the first time, the human condition.

Can such a conquest be accomplished? Should it be? Is it wise? Is man wise enough to rule nature? Has he grown in wisdom since the Greeks, since the Christians, neither of whom thought the purpose of life resided in such wars? Doesn't all power over nature inevitably become the power of some men over others, some peoples over others, perhaps over the whole world, some generations over all future ones, and one species over all life? Today is there not, alas, a very immediate incentive for studying the bold founders of the modern project, at the perilous end of which we seem to live? Just when the conquest of nature may mean the abolition of man, would surely be a good time to study Bacon and Descartes, who knew such a conquest to be an innovation and knew the arguments against it. Likewise is there not an intellectual provocation. Just when modern science is disappearing into black holes, bursting into a thousand particles however charming, and conceding that everything came from nothing (but not wondering if only God could create anything from nothing), would surely be a good time to examine the claim of original modern science to know the whole in principle. And what of the result of that low idealism (Marxism), namely the totalitarianism, ever advancing a war against human nature, as well as nature, and exercising unrelenting terror of against both, that has corrupted, enslaved, and killed so many millions in our century? Is this low idealism unrelated to the call for lower goals by Machiavelli? Or to the covert antitheological ire at work in him and most of his "captains," most of the subsequent moderns?

Yet is there no good in this philosophic project, the modern project, and do we not see it most in our America, in what the Framers built, the generation of Lincoln shed blood for, the pioneers filled the continent with, and what Americans have enjoyed for two hundred years? In it Machiavelli might find manifest mastery of fortune, Montaigne ease and ease of thought, Spinoza freedom of speech, Bacon warmth, and Descartes health; in it Locke might find toleration, Rousseau find innocence, Hamilton empire, Twain folly to laugh at, Whitman loafing, Cather fortitude, Tocqueville piety and liberty, and in it Lincoln might find a sign of the divine hand and the hope of humanity. Is not the good of America, mingling modern designs and Christian teachings, uniting nature and nature's God, something good and thus an argument for the partial good of the modern project? Yet even in America, some great minds have seen the end of humanity. No one has decried the ignobility of this project more penetratingly than Nietzsche. Was he wrong to? To know, you must study him, too.

Although the student should study the course of modern philosophy, it must be admitted that there is something willful and therefore not quite adequate, adequate to reality, in most of its great minds. Most are so busy changing the world that they do not see it clearly, and often ignore nature entirely, including human nature, and thus themselves. By contrast the great statesmen of the modern era, who try ever to find the good in straitened conditions, and thus always have their eye on human nature, in the fine-grained picture of it, in the shifting situations they face, and the contending characters, both adversaries and allies, seem to understand human things better. The student should come to know, in memoirs and faithful histories, a few at least of the likes of Washington,

Jefferson, Hamilton, and Madison, Lincoln, Cavour, Bismarck, Marlborough and Churchill, and DeGaulle. Their brave and sagacious efforts, whether successful or not, stand out against the darkness of modernity. It is not only in antiquity and Plutarch that nobility shines in deed and speech. For every page of Heidegger read one of Churchill. For every page of Hegel read one of Lincoln.

Likewise, in contrast to the projective character of modern philosophy, stand the great poets of the modern era, Shakespeare, Goethe, Kafka, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky; their works seem more comprehensive, more thoughtful, deeper, partly because they are not wholly modern, not rebels, but true inheritors, more akin to Socrates and Christ than Bacon and Descartes and their philosophic train. In them there is often more philosophy than in modern philosophy and often more piety than in the churches. In any case, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is simply indispensable in the life of a growing soul. Both future philosophers and future Christians, if not future statesmen, have much to learn from this great story.

This brings us full circle, for to educate the sons and daughters of the West, a curriculum of Great Books must include the stories from which the West starts, on the one hand, Homer and his progeny, the historians Herodotus and Thucydides and the tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and on the other hand, Genesis and its trail, Exodus, and onward to the Gospels. And such a curriculum must include the stories that carry forward the West to our time, among them the Faust story of the striving that in contending with nature will never find rest, the Don Quixote and Hamlet story of the noble man ever ready to take arms against the sins of the world, and the Don Juan story of the roving eros that never lifts its eyes above humanity. It is not accidental that the characteristic evil of our time has been best understood by a poet, Solzhenitsyn, in the "literary investigation" entitled *The Gulag Archipelago*. Such poetry is not only more philosophic than history, as Aristotle said, but truer, truer than "History."

Philosophy without poetry is thin, and poetry without philosophy is miscellaneous. Maxims without examples are blind. Instances without principles are deaf.

#### **IV. DIFFICULTIES, OBJECTIONS, VILIFICATIONS**

He who pursues such a curriculum will meet many difficulties, old, unavoidable, and enduring; the sides of the path have, since a generation ago, also been lined with several objections; and today straight ahead are foes vilifying the student. Such curricula are said to be white, male, and dead. Commonly this is said in enmity and in triumph. No objection, no rebuttal, let alone conversation, is expected to ensue.

That most of the great minds are dead is simply true. It always will be so. Those who don't know the past are, said Santayana, doomed to repeat it. And those who don't know the great minds of the past are doomed never to know — what they are missing. It is a vain and foolish presumption to think that because someone is alive at this hour he or she is great. Just because you are alive doesn't mean you are great, or good, or even mediocre. You should overcome such self-love, rather than lounge in it.

That the skin color of the authors of most of the great books is on the light end of the scale is true. Those who think some author with dark skin has been unjustly neglected should propose inclusion, and the proposal should be judged by the same criteria already used, not by race and quotas. Most of the great books show little interest in skin color, either prejudicially or predilectionally. To the great this natural distinction is trivial. To treat it as more is small. Those who treat race as central, such as Alexander Stephens, Arthur de Gobineau, and Adolf Hitler, are very much less than great. Nothing human should be judged by such persons. They are not fit to rule. Nor are they fit to teach. They do not belong in places of learning. The natural right of a student to study great things should not be abridged by any person, anywhere, any time. Especially not by those who are insensitive to greatness, or sensitive to it only so far as they hate it. Such hatred is of a piece with the slave holder who found his wife with young Frederick Douglass, teaching him to read, and ordered her not to; it is of a piece with any one who would have refused Booker T. Washington entrance to Hampton Institute; and it is active in all those who institute college programs based on self-love, self-love for accidental things such as race, nation, sex, parents, or origin, and with courses in which any student with the right attitude would deserve an "A" on the first day.

Like skin color, sex is a natural distinction, but it is different. It is more than skin-deep, and perhaps intricate to the soul, or at least linked to it. The clear distinctions in body of male and female not only have important purposes they point to, child bearing and feeding, and fathering and whatever (for males seem less fixed, also for the same reason, less steady, rooted, fixed), but these differences seem to reach into the souls of those different bodies, so that the soul of a woman is different from the soul of a man. It is a long question, but surely we can say that men and women are enough alike so that anything the one can understand, appreciate, or discover, the other can too, but enough different to so that there is something eternally "other" in what attracts each to the other.

Whether the great minds and their works slight the eternal feminine is doubtful —think of Penelope, Emma, Mary, Anna Karenina, Natasha, all Shakespeare's witty lasses, and all the lyrical love in the world's poetic anthology — but it is true that the vast majority of authors in such curricula are men. This is either unjust to neglected authors, an expression of the natural difference of the sexes in the human species, or a consequence of conditions and causes that could be changed.

As to the first, the burden is on those who charge it, to bring forward their candidates, and for others to admit them by the same criteria that gains admission to other candidates.

As to the second, just as nature favors right-handedness, so perhaps it favors the male, in certain respects; perhaps nature wants men to aspire to greatness and women to goodness (for which distinction see the next section); but as with handedness in nature, the favoring of the right hand is not to the exclusion of the left, with even some coincidence, perhaps partly causal, between left-handedness and genius. Here the tricky thing in achieving justice is how to be just to the generality without being unjust to the exceptional; how to support the rule that favors the majority without blocking the way for the rare minority, whose excellence, after all, may benefit all. Let Eve Curie pursue her studies and all may

benefit. Justice and the good of all lie not in the rule or in the exception, still less in exclusions or quotas either way, but in sagacity, in knowing how to arrange things so the rule rules most of the time but not always, and thus the exception gets an opportunity.

As to the third, that the number of male authors in such a curriculum is a reflection of conditions, not nature, conditions whose alteration would eventually change the composition of the great team - it is untrue to suppose that conditions make greatness, for all the great minds, although they enjoyed conditions that did not prevent their greatness shared those same conditions with thousands and millions of other persons who did not leave something great for others after their death. To be sure, for there to be great works by Shakespeare's sister, she needs to have a room of her own, but having a room will not produce such works. Sitting in that room, you may produce nothing or only something good, such as *To the Lighthouse*; this stubborn truth Virginia Woolf knew, but not many who hail her today. Will there ever be a woman philosopher? Maybe. The only candidate so far, that I can think of, is Hannah Arendt, she whose single philosophic coinage is "natality," surely connected to her sex, and yet despite the fact she never had a child, by her husbands or Martin Heidegger, which shows her coinage did not come from experience, but from thought. That her attitude to her gift and to her sex was not feminist, but human and proud, is illustrated by her response to one of her hosts at Princeton who asked her "Well, how does it feel to be the first woman Gauss Lecturer?" to which she replied, "That is hard for me to answer. You see, I have been a woman for so long."

The objection to such Great Books curricula, that they are not inclusive enough, might be animated by an appreciation of greatness. Most such Great Books programs are Western, exclusively or for the most part. Yet to maintain that the West is not multicultural is ignorant. It is. Right at the beginning Homer regards the fall of Troy, not a Greek city, as immeasurably sad, and Homer's student, Herodotus, looks out at the ways of adjacent nations, Persia and Egypt especially. So too with the Torah, in which the honor of speaking with God and of putting the hardest questions to him, is given to Job, who is not a Jew, not party to the Covenant. Soon too Greeks, who had observed that fire burns in Persia as it does in Attica, spread the fruits of a culture founded on this fundamental human distinction, of nature and convention, to all Asia, and soon too the Christians brought the good news sprung from the Torah to the Gentiles as well, meaning *in potentia* everyone. As to the later course of the West, Rome by the time it warred itself into a Mediterranean empire, was already multicultural, perhaps to the detriment of its unity, which split into East and West. Moreover, all the later history of the West is of something unified enough to call the West, federated enough to have discrete parts, and divided enough to see many wars, many conquests, many strifes, between its parts, and many tongues spring up. The latter is especially important. To know the West well, really well, you would have to know not only Greek, Hebrew, and Latin, but Italian, French, English, German, and Russian, and to consider adding at least one of twenty other languages. If that isn't multicultural, what is? The tribe of translators are right to stress, as they do in their prefaces, how very hard it was for them to translate whatever they just have, and yet the tribe of readers and students are also right to read their translations with gratitude, in proportion to their success, which to judge well you must know the original itself. Although to know the West, you need to know a dozen languages, most teachers of the

West today would be satisfied if students knew one, other than what they grew up with, by the time they left college, and surprised if even one knows one language upon entering, which was a requirement for admission to college only a generation ago.

Lest I be misunderstood, the fact that the West has been multicultural does not mean that the great minds whose study composes such a curriculum are the products of culture. Although such minds, in order to think, to teach, to write, needed certain minimal conditions, including perhaps some suffering, they were not made great by them. Almost all enjoyed the same conditions as others who imparted nothing great to humanity; and the exceptions, the sons of kings for example, who have everything you could want in the way of good conditions, seldom left any single thing great. Perhaps Alexander and Charlemagne are the only ones. Having everything you could want seems seldom to encourage greatness, or even goodness in human beings.

Yet what about the works that lie outside the West? Shouldn't they be studied? Are we not one world, one humanity, and do we not tend now to some world unification? Of course the great works of the East deserve study, but I do not think they should be the first thing studied by young Westerners, and especially not by the present-day orphans of the West. What would one think of a young Japanese student showing up for your Western Heritage course who had not memorized poems from the *Manyoshu*, who had not read and reread the *Tale of Genji*, taken the teachings of the Buddha to heart, wanted to follow Basho on one of his journeys, and practiced some daily spiritual discipline, be it the arrangement of beautiful flowers or of deadly swift blows? His ardor for Western studies would be but a reflex of his disdain for his own heritage and it would be no check to his ignorance of it, and his ignorance of himself would be corrected by no study of anything foreign. In studying the West, he would never discover how the things of the East are a part of him. Living in America would be no true adventure, since no home would have been left behind.

It is important for orphans, West and East, to study the great works of man. Being great, in scope and depth, they speak to the longings of the human soul. But it is fitting for the orphans of the West to study the Western instances of this greatness first. Today such students are as ignorant of their own heritage, especially its high founders, Socrates and Christ, as the young Japanese student I have imagined. Such high instances of the West are the basis of what a Westerner is, a measure of him, and also perhaps a distant cause of his orphaned state. For such orphans, meeting with their unknown ancestors will be an adventure, an occasion for self-knowledge, and a challenge to transform themselves, much as meeting his father was for Telemachus.

Another objection, more exactly an obstacle, is not that such Great Books curricula leave out too much, but that they include too much. How could a student study the works I mentioned in the last section, let alone in the languages I just enumerated, in less than a decade! Well, there is truth in that gasp. Undaunted, some souls will be happy to extend that ten years to a lifetime. The thing itself being good and desirable, why not more? Yet the longest such curricula, at St. John's (Annapolis and Santa Fe) and Thomas Aquinas College, last only four years. That, too, may seem long to some, for those four years are

full, with no electives. Although such a four years is desirable for all students capable of college work —after all, something like it was the standard curriculum at almost all colleges a century ago—still, a little bit can go a long way. We teachers need not provide a perfect education to do our students good. (Nor need parents provide a perfect home and a perfect childhood.) The soul is not a glass to be filled, a stone to be carved, clay to be shaped, or a liquid to be poured into a mold by some one else. We fill, carve, shape, and pour ourselves, largely. Hence, just a few of the great books will go a long way. Lincoln needed only three: the Bible, Shakespeare, and Euclid. I think meeting Socrates and Christ indispensable, reading *War and Peace* in youth decisive, and Shakespeare good for life; add three other choices from those I've mentioned and that small ensemble will raise up a fine generation. And those who come to love such an ensemble will naturally go on to master the whole orchestra and become teachers of the next generation.

What about interpretation? Don't the great books depend on it, on good teachers, and good fellow students? Yes, and no. If the proper spirit is in the teacher, if he really regards the authors as great, then both he and the students will be liberated from his inferior authority, from the lacunae in the list, and all the surrounding diversions. Governed by that assumption held firmly and communicated vivaciously, the class discussion will proceed aright. It is probably not good, and almost impossible for a good mind, to have no interpretation of the great works he is has been teaching them for years. However, if you reach such an interpretation, such as I have reached with Descartes, that Descartes' teaching is wrong in truth and pernicious in action, then you should shut up in class, and let the students discover that for themselves, and if you cannot shut up, you should either not teach Descartes, or get a friend to substitute for you. Sure, it is desirable to read a great work aright, but they are so rich that a curriculum of them can succeed, succeed in the souls of the students, despite a lot of wrong interpretations.

Most of the interpretations David Denby came away with from his one year return, in middle age, to the Columbia Great Books core, seem to me wrong, if not wholly, then in some important way, but his book about the experience shows that such a curriculum works. He respects Homer, Homer has stirred him to thoughts he never had before, ones he cares for, which are superior to the movies he reviews, even the good ones, and so he would recommend time spent with Homer to others, and defend such reading against all who would deny any eager youth the great opportunity to do so. The great books are like language. The power of speech is so natural to humans that even if you have it very imperfectly, you do have it, enough so that it transforms your life. Thus, although parents and teachers are right to correct the errors in the child's usage, such as the letter from camp: "They told us to rite. I like it hear. I caught a fish what has whiskers. Please bring candy," yet there is truth in the child's plea against correction, "You know what I mean." Important as good writing is, and almost infinite its sky above the horizon of competency, the great abyss is between the level in such a camp letter, and autism. It is sad to see a child who will never write such a camp letter, and it is also sad to see an adult who will never think a thought provoked by a great author.

However, one must admit that it would be possible, just by surrounding the books in easygoing interpretations, whether falsely uplifting or falsely denigrating, and staffing the



course with teachers, timid or stubborn, with no desire for greatness in anything, even in horses or ice cream, to construct a Great Books Lite program. But even then the books will be in the students' hands, in their imaginations, and in their minds. And even when the teacher doesn't care for inquiry, thinks himself better than the author, and tells students to "illustrate in your paper what I said about democracy in the *Republic*," still there in the book is Plato's Socrates for the student to learn from on his own. And even in colleges where there is no program with even a portion of such curricula, the majority today, there are usually individual courses, say in Plato, in the Gospels, etc. that a student can make sure to take.

And should that be lacking, a student, become aware of what he is missing, perhaps through reading what I have written here, or from Bloom or Van Doren, might still read such works on his own. Of course, it would be best to find a teacher willing to supervise an independent study and later, perhaps, a special major. If that is not possible, one might join with other similarly ardent students in an informal reading group. At Dartmouth, I used to lead such a group on Fridays, when most students were unstudiously occupied, but such a group is possible with a teacher at a distance. I once led one, on Nietzsche, for credit, by Federal Express, and later one on Shakespeare and one on Plato, via conference phone and e-mail. It is also possible to do without a teacher. In the strenuous version of such a reading group, such as we had in graduate school, all agree to read the text before meeting for discussion ; in another strenuous version, all gather to read the text slowly aloud and discuss it as we read; and in the vivacious form, we read Shakespeare aloud during the meeting, taking parts, reading the first half of a play one week, discussing it, and next time the second half. Old books and friendship go together. Though the one is discouraged by American Academe and the other not much encouraged, neither is yet forbidden, as they were in the Gulag and are in the Laogai.

## **V. THE GOOD AS WELL AS THE GREAT**

The youth of America need, then, the great books that Bloom, others, and I have recommended, that a few colleges exist wholly to provide, and that some colleges provide in some measure, but being Teenagers as well as youths, the orphans of the West need as well as the great books, the good.

College builds upon what precedes it, what precedes it in school, and most upon what precedes it in the family. If some experience of the good has not been in the family, if the family is broken, if the child has been turned over to day care or television care, if the child has been raised to be a Teenager, it will be hard for him or her to benefit much from a Great Books curriculum (unless his unquenchable desire has, in the middle of the desert he grew up in, found one oasis of good). Unfortunately, most colleges today no longer appreciate the good. Doubting truth, they ignore cheating; unable to distinguish liberty and license, they suborn promiscuity; unwilling to admit that pleasure can enslave, they shield drug dealing; and thinking big choices in life are just a matter of style, they offer no counsel to youth. And even colleges with something great in the curriculum sometimes do not seem to understand the relation of the good to the great.

The achievements of the intellect are rooted in experiences of the good. As the great discoverers tell us, the start of their great intellectual achievement often lies back in some childhood experience of something wonderful, in watching a fly walk on a wall, a current recoil from a bank, or bread mold, or wondering how much bigger than the starry sky is the whole, inquiries they had no words for then and supposed no one did or ever would. In any case, in all of us, the heart beats to the measure of the good before the understanding recognizes it. Such experiences begin in infancy, in the senses, in taste, touch, and sight; soon, as the child grows dexterous, agile, and exuberant, music infuses the good of order into the soul; and after that, the good may be cultivated in manners, in habits, and in the moral virtues, which we learn first by training, then by imitation, all long before we reflect upon and thereby perfect them. Later on, when the good has dwelt long in heart and mind, it may shine in the face and show in the hands. Many a homely girl, by appreciating the fine things that belong to her by desire, has become a beautiful woman. Many an uncouth boy, by practicing moderation, courage and justice, has become a gentleman and also handsome. Often the childhood picture of a notorious criminal shows it could have gone another way.

Growing up ought to include playing games, tag, hide-and-peek, and kick the can, seeing a garden through to harvest, and hiking up a mountain all day alone. While playing outdoors, an awful lot of primary good things —the sun, the sky, a stream, a tree, the stars — enter the soul, later to be recalled, in dark times, with peace. Nothing electronic will give that. Growing up ought to include having a pet, having a friend sleep over, and relatives to write letters to. The house ought to have a dark cellar, a cluttered attic, and snug beds; a fireplace, a piano and a kitchen table to gather around; and plenty of corners to sit quietly in. While playing indoors, while playing chess, while feeling, even with dread, that that black rook, knight, and bishop are closing in on you, you may experience a primary good entering your soul: that the rational is real. Provided with stories worth telling, growing up ought to become a good, long story itself, including many stories, all worth your retelling. It ought to be filled with a comprehensive happiness in being, sometimes sheer in its delight in the existence of this or that good thing, including yourself, sometimes diffuse, wide and wondrous, that such a whole exists at all, rather than nothing, and sometimes intense and sad, as when you love a pet who dies, lose a friend, or make a big mistake, and withal grateful for the whole. From such experiences of the good, great things can later come, the great delight that is art, the great wonder that is philosophy, the great gratitude that is piety, the great affection for family, city, and country, to be made effectual in statesmanship.

Those who miss the good that is in childhood will find it hard to make up for it later. It is hard to appreciate the good without first tasting the sweet. In the beginning the mind grows through the tongue. Mother's milk, a good bone, zwieback, apples with more tang than shelf life, good bread, ice cream you churned, meals made from scratch, in season, from your own garden or one you walked though or saw, and made in your own kitchen, perhaps by you when you got a little older —some taste of these will suffice to give memories as dear as that French cookie was to Proust. In childhood one springs away from the dinner table as soon as one can to play, but the happy memory of those meals

should be the basis of judging all later ones, whether one arises satisfied from them and whether one looks forward to them with good expectations.

It is hard to discover the true without first gazing at the beautiful. The mind grows through the eye. The pattern made by the cracks in the paint high above your crib, sunlight through a window whose panes are proportioned by the golden mean, the rich design of an oriental rug you are following with a toy train or tank, a good combination of strong colors in your bedroom, not acrylic and glaring, but with a subtle palette such as Cézanne's—a few such experiences in childhood will prepare you to appreciate the elevated unity of color, shadow, line, in Rembrandt and to think about the meaning. So, too, building with a set of hard wood blocks will prepare you to appreciate Paestrum, Monticello, and Chartres. All the precious attention Rilke devotes to spoons, cups, and plates is fitting. All things in daily use, should be beautiful. The child's first spoon in its mouth need not be silver, but its surface should be smooth and its curve attractive. It is not wrong for zeks to cherish the spoon they fashioned in captivity. The superiority of each of the ancient peasant cultures of Europe to modern, homogeneous, cosmopolitan, mass, mall culture is evident in a single spoon, plate, or chair, despite the peasant's lack of electricity and an indoor toilet.

We tasting and seeing animals also crawl, swim, walk, and run. What exercise is the child set to? Not only strength, endurance, speed, agility, coordination, and health are at stake here, but self-control, grace, and courage, in other words, the soul, too. Are all sports equal? Why do the bodies and the souls of those who played one sport in youth seem so different from the others when they meet at high school reunions? And we sensible, moving animals also dance. What music does the child hear? What singing does the family do? And if daily family life were set to the music that fits it, what would it sound like? Haydn's Quartet op. 71, no. 1, or the Stones' "Paint It Black"? Music is at once the most intellectual of the arts and, despite the fact that it has almost no element of representation in it, the most moving of the soul, moving and forming. Start the day with a good melody and you will try to hear it all day, and sometimes you will.

We animals with senses are also rational. Good tastes, good sights, and good tunes naturally ready one for good experiences of the word, of logos, in its first form, stories. The good order of Scupper the Sailor Dog's cabin, everything in its place and him in his bunk bed, is an image of his confident soul, ready for adventure. Your room, too, could be so neat. Though abandoned by their own parents, Hansel and Gretel prove equal to the Witch they burn in that oven intended for them. You could prevail too. And later in life, in some dark hour, starting from a light sleep, it will be good to recall the night King Babar went to sleep troubled, how he dreamed of the ugly vices being driven away by the handsome virtues, and awoke to find it all true. Few orphans will be so fortified. Nor, as a consequence, can they reflect that they have these good stories because someone once read them aloud to them, someone who was thinking of their good before they were in being.

Few childhoods will be filled with perfectly sweet, beautiful, and cheerful things. Or can be. Parents who strive to provide perfect childhoods will commonly pass big doses of

their anxiety to their children. Or should be. Such parents misunderstand something. Sweet, beautiful, cheerful, good things do not have to be abundantly present for the soul, which naturally seeks them, to find them and flourish. One spring, one drink, will do, and sometimes one drop may suffice. Surfeit would squelch appetite. Moreover, if a childhood is poor in primary experiences of the good, their presence in good stories may suffice. Those who have missed such experiences may then benefit mightily from reading some good books, ones that give tastes of the beautiful, meals of the good, and for dessert, heroes to imitate; give them to all, but give especially to the needy, to those who haven't had many good meals, dwelt in beauty, or had a hero for a father or an uncle. For meals read *Farmer Boy* and learn what a boy should have for breakfast every morning, apple pie. For beauty visit the *Secret Garden* and feel what power to strengthen a puny soul lies in a flower. And for heroes read the Landmark books, meet Washington, Sequoyah, Nelson, Bolivar, Carson, and Garibaldi, and know that heroes do walk the earth. They really were heroes. Later on you can appreciate the more shaded accounts.

In a well-ordered country with flourishing families, young people first become good and only later perhaps great. As children they enjoy good meals before refined dishes, bread before sauce, hearty fare before haute cuisine, lots of *latte* before *café latte*, Frog and Toad before *Stuart Little*, the *William Tell Overture* before Beethoven's late quartets, and Brueghel before Rembrandt. Although we sometimes grow by spurts, and can even name the day and hour when we first discovered something and were fetched forward by it, like Dante by Beatrice, still there is a progress from the good to the great that is steady, with steps that are best not omitted, or skated over quickly. As children, the well bred obey the commands of their parents, mind the laws of the land, and imitate the examples of the virtuous adults around them. Initial comparative weakness and ignorance makes obedience the first requirement of the child. Your young life, you might lose, unless you obey Mother. There is a snake, or a semi, or something so evil I do not want to name it to you; it is approaching swiftly, right now; obey immediately, without question, there is no time. Obedience is also the basis of later self-command. No one ever gave himself hard commands who had not first obeyed them from others. To obedience more must, however, be added. The destiny of the child is not to become a good slave, but a free adult, someone who chooses in accord with reason. Up this long ascent, the rules, indicating the wrongs to right and left, are helpful. Rule- or law-abidingness is not, however, equivalent to virtue, only something helpful to it. "Don't fall asleep at your post" is not the whole of loyalty, nor even the virtue of courage. Imitation is the way to such virtues. Moreover, although children benefit from the clarity of law, law can cover only the easy cases. Justice is far more than fairness. To decide when the rule fits and when it doesn't, there is no rule. Only sagacity can decide. Then to discern in a thicket of choices the right way and to follow it successfully, choosing the best means, prudence, the crown of the practical virtues, is required. The existence of this virtue is best shown precisely by examples, by men and women who possess it, yet it is hard to attain by imitation, since what is sagacious changes in accord with the circumstances in their multitudinous and mutually influential detail. Here then nothing but intelligence will do. Odysseus is the best example in literature, but to understand why what he does is sagacious, you have to think his thoughts, which Homer never does for you, but once.

In the soul of a well-bred youth, it is emulation that is on the way to this intelligence. Good youths are known by their heroes. It is as La Rochefoucauld says: "The influence those we love has over us almost always exceeds our influence over ourselves" (Maxims, 525). There is a natural course in our emulation. At first, we emulate like the child who wears the same clothes as his hero; later we try to act just like that hero; and finally, only by thinking like him in service of the same purposes do we emulate well. We go then from walking about dressed just like Gary Cooper, with "High Noon" whistling in our ears, to realizing that the Marshall is telling us to face the bully in our school, and on to simply asking, "What is the virtuous thing for me to do?" Only after doing that until you are thirty, so Aristotle says, will you be ready for the Great Books question, "What is virtue?" Young people need to read "a thousand good books before they read a hundred great ones," as John Senior says.

Unfortunately, there are today very few brought up to be gentlemen and ladies. Ask the waitresses at restaurants in college towns. In the manners, the music, and morality of Western public life, there is no guidance for the young, and their homes have not sheltered them from public squalor. Down the TV antenna like lightning comes everything both effete and barbaric straight into their gaping souls. That novelty of our time, the Teenager, is truly someone without parents who command, parents who counsel, or parents to imitate. With intelligent, restless orphans, we often have then no range of choice; it is either the great books, great arguments, and great longings, or nothing. It is nobility or nihilism.

Fortunately, the great books do often give great examples to emulate, great arguments to engage, and great pleasures to arouse, but they are not without their dangers. It is not only that the metaphysical among them may close our eyes to what's in front of us, that the epistemological may paralyze the knowing mind, and that the tragedies among them will surely make the soul suffer, but that the very greatness of all great books can make the soul stoop. Reading them can make you melancholy; tales of old greatness can make you sad; and great ideas can make you feel small. Orphans, especially the most virtuous among them, may suffer from the great books they read, and then make others do so. Those who seek the true without having enjoyed the good may make the true, the enemy of the good. I once knew a gifted graduate of a Great Books college who helped destroy a merely good college, half devoted to great books, just because it did not measure up to the college of his dreams, or rather to the perfect secondary book on a great book he had not yet written, which was also his justification for denying his wife a child.

There are some souls who regard the good as superficial, boring, or contemptible (which is not the same as hateful). If given Aristotle's Ethics to read, they will not say "That's pretty much what I've always thought," as Churchill did, but sum it up as "Look both ways before you cross the street." Of course, such a contemplative but unself-knowing soul may well step in front of the first semi of nihilism coming down the street; although they will not embrace it, they will not see it, or see it for what it is, and they will perish. Then there are those active souls whose idealism tramples on common and ordinary goods. Since he thinks well of himself for having high standards, the idealist is unlikely to examine himself, notice the consequences of his conduct, and trace the failure of his

schemes to himself. Since he knows he is pursuing the good, he does not think he needs to do much of it. Such souls are, to be sure, dangerous, but I am not talking about them, but rather about those orphans in whom the hunger for truth cannot stomach the good. To their flashing eyes everything merely visible seems weary, stale, and ignoble, worth torching. Thinking that the world as it is, that it better were not, and the world as it should be, that it does not and cannot exist, they may try to prove it by destroying whatever in the world or out is good. "Burn everything older than yourself," as Holden Caulfield might say and then just might include himself. And even an orphan who retains his aspirations, ones that have not grown up from a good childhood, may be cruel to whomever in whom he sees things he has not extinguished in himself.

Very often in the Platonic dialogues, Socrates confronts the opinions of some young interlocutor with knowledge, usually with the knowledge that the youngster does not know what he just claimed to know. These Athenian youths were, however, well bred; they were gentlemen; they were citizens; and they would soon rule. In Platonic terms, of course, they had grown up in the Cave, the Athenian version to be sure, but all cities are caves. We should be so lucky! To grow up in Athens where the public entertainment was provided by the three greatest tragedians the world has ever seen. The city of Pericles and Thucydides. The city of daring and endeavor. Some cave.

Today's students, the Teenagers, have grown up in no cave at all. Instead they have grown up in a pit below the Cave. Unlike a cave, this abyss gives its inhabitants nothing much to live for. Opinions these Teenagers do have, but not such as could hold a country, a civilization, or a family together. Nor do they please the youth himself. To each other and to every man and woman, such students are at best "nice," and to themselves, they are empty, or listless, as Bloom says. Most have never written a good letter, or received one. Most have never listened to two adults talk seriously for an hour. Most have never taken a walk with a friend or with thoughts. Falling in with what is critical, difficult, adventurous, and skeptical in the Great Books will not necessarily be good for such homeless ones.

Moreover, the great books often give examples to emulate that may be, in their ambiguous mixture, quite dangerous for such orphans. David, Alcibiades, Coriolanus, Augustine, Prince Hamlet, King Lear, Anna Karenina, Dmitry Karamazov — there is greatness in their souls, but you would not want someone to imitate all their deeds, or even a great many of them. To distinguish the evil from the good in them you have to be not only good already but also experienced in life. Likewise with such great thinkers as Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Nietzsche. That their great thoughts are ambiguous is clear enough from their political consequences, and even clear up closer (consider whoever in your circle of friends and teachers is taken with them), but who is thinker enough to separate the good and the evil in them? In truth, it would take some soul on their own level. And no young person, orphaned or not, is that soul. La Rochefoucauld is not wrong when he observes, "There are heroes of evil as well as good" (Maxims, 185).

It is well then if students of today meet not only the great heroes but the good ones as well. Most of the great stories do represent such men and women, but usually in

subordinate roles, Horatio beside Hamlet, Edgar beside Lear, Desdemona beside Othello. It is well then, from time to time, to consider stories where the good are more prominent than the great. Jane Austen, Willa Cather, and Henry Fielding have given us examples. And in the greatest example, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, the good are very much better than the great, Kutuzov better than Napoleon, indeed Pierre, Natasha, and nearly everybody better than Napoleon. The most revealing example is Andrei, for it is when he loses his worship of greatness, of his hero Napoleon, when he looks up at the great sky above Austerlitz and forgets "my Toulon," that he becomes something much better than great, namely good. So says Tolstoy, and this great man infatuated with goodness should be given a hearing. Neither orphan nor well-bred student will suffer from it.

Accompanying such good books in a Great Books curriculum might also come some experiences of the good as well. In no longer enforcing parietals, the colleges of the late 1960s gave up being *in loco parentis*. By saying to students in the dorms, in the dining halls, and in everything outside class, "you are on your own," the colleges of the 1960s imitated the parents who had created the Teenager a decade earlier. Both were wrong. And since then by, among other things, refusing to make drug arrests even of dealers, colleges have given up being *in loco policienis*, which not even the parents of today would approve of. What does it say about colleges that "drug-free dorms" and "study dorms" are touted as innovations? What does that say about all the other dorms? The colleges of today are profoundly irresponsible. "Student Life" should know that the life of a student is study. Everything outside class either supports or subtracts from it. Poor food, bad music, lack of clean, quiet places to study, and lax rules about conduct all subtract from study, and the rock music, promiscuity, and political activism (even for just causes) that rush in, all detract from study. It will be well then for colleges with Great Books programs to resume overseeing the whole of college life, and even for such programs to provide good experiences: to teach students to write legibly, read aloud, and memorize poems, and even to waltz gracefully, and identify stars in the night sky, as the Pierson College John Senior started within the University of Kansas did.

They cannot, however, let these be the whole of the experience of the students. Young persons arriving at college, however orphaned in spirit, should not postpone meeting reason in the form of mathematics, reason in the form of discussion, and reason in the high confrontation of the soul with great things and great books. Nor do I think that the mix of students, immature and mature, and thus the books and experiences best fitted for each are so difficult to teach in the same classroom. After Socrates had shown him he lived in a dark cave and then dazzled him with a glimpse of the sun, then frisky Glaukon needed to hear about all the inferior regimes in the twilight between that utter darkness and that utter light. To have left him in despair or ecstasy, or yo-yoing between, would have been unwise of Socrates. Likewise, for the orphan, the greatness that is in reason, in inquiry, with its risk of settled skepticism, is necessary to the self-reliance of the future man. Lincoln had no very good childhood; the Bible and Shakespeare were his home; and later it was Euclid, reasoning closely through *The Elements*, and still later thinking through matters more important to the heart of man than your geometry, that made him a great man. Almost every class is a mix, and many students are too. The line between

maturity and immaturity, between the youth and the Teenager, runs through the soul of almost all today.

For the teacher, the fundamental choice is always between speaking to the silent student who is your superior in heart and in mind, with the others enjoying the runoff from that fountain, or speaking to the higher part of the middle, with private time for the best. The good and the great are distinct; they are even sometimes at odds; but that they are ultimately harmonious is vouchsafed by the fact that those who have the most to say about the good are the greatest, Socrates on the idea of it, and Christ, its redemptive emissary, on its Creative Father and the destiny to which the good calls His best image, man.

## **VI. GREAT PLACES AND STORM HOMES**

The soul not only longs for the truth, not only aspires to become a hero, but also aches for the best place, the place where things are all in order, neat, shining, shared, and happy. We long to live right with others, to march in step, to sing in a chorus, to enjoy friends without friction, conversations without strife, and festivities without exhaustion - to be part of some just, mighty, bounteous, generous, good whole. The great books speak to this desire. They tell us of singing heavens, of just utopias, of onward armies, fruitful gardens, and conversations not confined by mortal time. Eden, Phaiakia, the Republic, the Blessed Isles, Utopia, Paradise, and Heaven are their names. These places in the great books teach us to measure the world by the standards of the soul, the best soul. And they raise our souls up to their level. As the Cabby says, upon watching the more beautiful world of Narnia come into being through a transcendently beautiful song, "Glory be! I'd ha' been a better man all my life if I'd known there were things like this."

Thus, the great political philosophers make the theme of the best regime central to their understanding of human life together. So, too, we want to live right with others now living, and we may even wish to be the founder, or at least the ruler, of such a place. Happily, the great books that are history books sometimes tell us of times when it was a joy to be alive; in them, the cities of the West rise again, daring Athens, beautiful Florence, holy Jerusalem, mighty Rome, savory Paris, and brave London. We need these great and distant places, those real, those legendary, and those actual to set in the soul's eye that we may measure the places we find ourselves in. All improvement of the place, the home, the institution, or the country that we find ourselves in begins with reflection on the best place, and is then guided by successive imitation of it. Contrariwise, the great books also supply us with the worst places; their clear features help our eyes discern what's wrong with where we are. Sodom and Gomorra, Lotus-Land, the Swine City of Circe, the Castle of Kafka, the Gulag, and above all Hell are some of these worst places. The great books supply us with these best and worst measures, variously, richly, powerfully so.

Children who grow up in a home come to these best places differently than orphans. When children from homes, who have some good experience of place, meet the great places, they understand them to be enhancements and perfections of what they already



know. Though greater, they are commensurate. They are mere better homes and better gardens and better polities than their own, not The Home as opposed to their state orphanage, The Garden as opposed to their toxic swamp, and The City of God as opposed to the City of human, all too human, Man.

Homeless orphans, who have no experience of a good place, see these best places differently. They are likely to believe that nothing like the home they ache for will ever exist on earth. Despairing of it, they may be tempted to think that only the destruction of the homeless world they have grown up in will secure what they long for. The best places they meet in the great books may become the cause of ache, despair, accusation, and revenge in them. They will more often shake their fist at the condition of the world than set about ameliorating the portion of it that is their neighborhood. Aching globally, they will destroy locally.

It is well then that the great books also include history books, where good and bad places from the middle of the scale are found, not the extremes of best and worst. Between Heaven and Hell, between the best and the worst regime in Plato, between the palace of Phaiakia and the cave of Polyphemus, there are so many grades. These middle grades teach us to choose in the half-light that our lives are mostly lived in. Most choice in life is choice of the second or third or fourteenth choice. (Pro-choice is always wrong choice, since you wouldn't assert it, if you could put forward a good reason.) Although we will always judge by the extremes, to act best we need discernment in the middle range. From the historians, Thucydides to Burckhardt, we may learn that many grades of the bad can be endured and that many grades of the good can be attained. By giving us the middle of the great scale, they may moderate our impatience for reform, whose violence might make things worse, or they may wisely reconcile us to where we are now in that middle, for things could be worse.

It is true that every Christian is prepared to acknowledge that our home is truly elsewhere, that really we are homeless, but if we Christians have grown up in a good Christian home, we will leave the destruction of the world to God, honor our father and mother, and provide our children with a home worthy of such honoring. C. S. Lewis formulated Christian teaching well when he said that although it makes sense to die for your country, it makes no sense to live for it. The things of Caesar are worthy of the respect that is in rendering, the things of Lincoln are worthy of full-measured dedication, but to Christ alone is worship due.

Although no country, even a good one, can be as good as a friend, and not even the finest human being could be as good as the idea of the good or God, nevertheless, the soul does its best with mates and cannot do without a country too. It is not only that human beings, being political animals, need to associate to survive, but that souls need associations to be in good shape. Between us and the highest we can love, we need intermediaries to keep our affections alive. Even the solitary writer sometimes needs a clean, well-lighted café to sit, to see, and to be seen in.

Nothing is quite as good as growing up in a good home, but if you didn't, you can get some of that good from other sources, from growing up in a good town, belonging to a good parish, going to a good school, or living in a good country. An orphan is someone who, doing without a home, is in search of one. The common fancy in childhood that one is not really from this family, that later they will tell you 'you were adopted,' suggests that the yearning is universal. What boy looking at his father's toe with hair sprouting from it, and knowing all his smooth, pink body has not thought, "We are different species." An experience in the snowbelt of America, when children still walked to school, bespeaks it. The arrangement was that if there were a great storm, one that would keep the children from walking back out to their farms, there was a family in town to whom each was assigned. That family was your "storm home." They would take you in. You met them early in the fall, before the snow; they knew your favorite foods; they had copies of your favorite books, and although they knew your bedtime, you felt they might let you stay up beyond it. Knowing of your storm home made the great storms less fearful, the anticipated homesickness less painful, and the world a better place. Knowing that you had a storm home, one just for you, some children wished for snow.

Today in America it is not easy to find a good town, or a good parish, or a good school, and as a consequence (though also as a cause), America is not the good country it once was. The snow has been falling for forty years now; the Teenager is someone who has grown up knowing nothing else. They have been told there are no storm homes; and you should not even yearn for one, to be in one or to start one. Nihilism "says of the world as it is, that it better were not, and with regard to the world as it should be, that it does not and cannot exist." But nature cannot be quite extinguished, and America is not as bad as it has been made to seem to these Teenagers. Moreover, in the foundation of America these orphans may find exactly the storm home their souls do still long for.

Thus, it is well for the orphans of America to learn something about the good of their own country, America. When the current scene looks like a combination of drunk Pappy, reechy Uncle Claudius, and 108 suitors on couches in your living room wooing your mom, Penelope, a recourse to the foundation in the cellar may be wise. Such a recourse to beginnings will combine a return to the home with the great adventure of meeting your father who you never knew, as Telemachus did Odysseus, and then together they restored Ithaka. In truth, it is only through such a recourse to our first principles that America will be renewed, its couches cleared of loungers and its market place of hucksters, and its houses become homes, that it might once again be more nearly good in itself and the cause of good in others.

America is not as gifted as suffering Athens, as beautiful as cunning Florence, or as aspiring as Elizabethan England, but it is good, good enough to be worthy of gratitude and obedience, even from time to time of esteem, and always of rededication. Moreover, for the orphans of America it is their own, in a way as well as a degree that the other lands cannot be, even if they have, like their unfortunate parents, grown up ignorant of it. Almost all nations need to chasten their collective self-love. The orphans of America, the generation of the Teenager, may be the first people on earth to need to strengthen their love of their own, themselves and their fellow Americans. Earlier Americans probably

needed to pray "God mend thy every flaw, Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law." Present ones need to sing "Sweet land of liberty," honor the "brave" who have made this "home" "free," and discover what a "heart too full for utterance" is.

## VII. AMERICA, THE HOME OF ITS ORPHANS

In the home that America is, everything rests on the Declaration of Independence; everything is based upon its dual principles, nature and nature's God; and, thus, everything either lives up to those principles or falls away. As the one principle looks back to Athens, where nature was first seen, so the other looks back to Jerusalem, where God, who created nature, was first heard.

In the Declaration, the two, though discerned as separate, are understood as related, both harmoniously and hierarchically. Thus the natural rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" are acknowledged to be an endowment from the Creator God; they are His gifts, to His best creatures. While their violation is tyranny, while such violation justifies rebellion, separation, and new government, it only does so if prudence can say "More good will come than be lost," but if more good will come, then it will be a sacred duty, risking life, treasure, and honor, to resist tyranny and institute untyrannical government. When later secured, these rights will be, in the Constitution, among the blessings of liberty, to be handed down to future generations. Of course their exercise will ever require and confer what the *Federalist* will be the first to call "responsibilities" upon the magistrates of the people so blessed. Always these rights remain not only natural, thus inalienable, but "endowed" by God to His creatures. As a gift they will deserve gratitude, and as a responsibility, they will require all the practical virtues in the recipients. According to the Declaration, God gave rights because He wanted man to govern himself.

The four references to God in the Declaration are beautifully designed. God appears as natural Law-maker, as Creator, as supreme Judge, and as Provident Protector. Obviously, these forecast the separation and the blending of the legislative, judicial, and executive powers of government, created by the one sovereign People under God. They also judge George III. The arrangement of the twenty-eight charges against him, proceeding from his legislative, through his judicial, and on to his executive abuses, shows his fundamental offense to be the attempt to unify all these powers, which only God does without being a tyrant. God creates men free because he wants them to govern themselves and because He wants them to worship Him freely. On this point, the Bill of Rights accords perfectly with the Declaration when, in the First Amendment, it protects both discussion and worship, through freedom of the former and noninterference with the unestablished latter. To be sure, the ambiguity of the Declaration's phrase, "Nature's God," allows Spinoza and Aquinas to lie down together like lion and lamb in the American Ark; and it won the assent of such divers men as Jefferson and Witherspoon, Hamilton and Madison, Franklin and Adams. It was meant to. The God of the Declaration created man free, free to fall and free to stand up virtuous. And perhaps destined to. That so many men, meeting together over so many years and disagreeing so very much, should nonetheless create such a robust, enduring and relatively good regime,

with so many diverse federal parts, is remarkable. In it many have seen the hand of reason, and in it some have also divined the invisible, outstretched hand of reason's God.

The Declaration then is the basis of our pursuit (our practice) of happiness, the foundation of our government, and the presage of all our history. However, it must be confessed that, although it was signed by heroes, it would need heroes to make our Independence stand, and later to perpetuate it, and would always need something heroic in the people formed by it, if only a capacity to recognize such qualities in others, nevertheless the Declaration, and even more its supplements, the Constitution and the *Federalist*, are not the kinds of things to fire emulative souls, especially orphans. Only a story could do that. Happily, and I submit almost inevitably, the Declaration has found a completion fit to educate the nation's orphans.

I say almost inevitably because the Founding Fathers intend the Declaration to begin a story. They cared for their children, for their children's children, and for the children of those children, too. Thus, in the Declaration, the Founding Fathers did not aim to institute perfection, like the Terror-izing French Revolutionaries, let alone to march toward it, like the Gulag-izing Russian Revolutionaries. Instead, they instituted something merely "more perfect," the passing on of whose blessings, such as liberty, would depend on the virtue of later generations. They left those later generations a precious gift, but also something worth doing. The American Revolution was not to be the end of the story of humanity, and if it was to be the beginning of a new order of happiness, it would only be so because new heroes, or at least new responsible statesmen, would be required.

## **VIII. THE STORY OF AMERICA**

The principles of America, enunciated in the Declaration, framed in the Constitution, supported by the *Federalist*, and looked to by the Founding Fathers, are the cause of the subsequent life of the United States of America. The story of that subsequent life is a democratic epic, it is a domestic romance, and it is a bloody tragedy.

The principles of America were not America. Although America would not be America without its principles, no country is entirely its principles. Thus the America that based its Independence from an England grown tyrannical upon the principle that "All men are created equal" did not declare its independence from the slavery that their English colonial forefathers had instituted in America. Thus, although the Constitution intended to wither away slavery, it also protected it. Truly the Constitution constituted a house that was divided. It was not really a home. For some it was worse than an orphanage. Which would it become? Slave or free? In the first two-score years after the founding, the motion was toward freedom, but in the next two score the South found that slavery was more comfortable than it could comfortably do without and that the tiger of slavery was larger than it could safely dismount from. So, slowly it began to justify what it liked, felt guilty about, and felt chained to. The series of Compromises made the House bigger but not less divided. Yet the repeal of the Missouri Compromise was worse; it set consent of the governed against justice; and suddenly the Dred Scott Decision made it possible, even likely, that the House itself might soon be united all slave. Then Lincoln rose up, debated

Douglas, split the Democratic party, and was elected president; South Carolina fired on Sumter, and then came a war longer and more bloody than any one imagine or almost could endure. Lincoln judged it just to both sides, should it last two hundred fifty years, and judged that its grave wounds would only be bound up by rededication to the founding truths, now become propositions to be made true by the mighty labor of generations yet unborn. This refounding of the nation, this Unification of the House Divided, made it possible for the epic story of America to proceed apace free.

That story tells how, in a little over a hundred years, the fairest portion of a vast continent went from frontier, to prosperity, to refinement. In the two hundred fifty years preceding the Declaration only the coast, between the Atlantic and the Alleghenies, was settled; in the next hundred and a score years, five or six times more land was cultivated, populated, made home. Jefferson, the president who committed the nation to the Louisiana Purchase, thought it would take a thousand years to fill America with farmers from coast to shining coast, but the Revolution he helped to write and the Constitution that flowed from it opened the West rapidly; it did so by giving hope to all, land to many, and opportunity to each. Europe responded; lured by freedom, the discontented, the poor, the adventurous, the enterprising, the pious and the persecuted crossed the ocean, some staying in the cities of the East, others heading West. Meanwhile, many born in the East, second sons seeking their fortune, or spirited first sons, and others, all resolute to prosper, became pioneers. For five or six generations young men went West, worked hard, driving cattle, busting sod, clearing forest, and then brought young women West after them.

Stand at the Cumberland Gap and watch the buffalo pass through, the Indian, the trapper, the trader, the cattle raiser, and the farmer— all but the first two, pioneers— or watch the same procession at South Pass a hundred years later. Where did they come from, who were they, and what were they seeking? The answer may be read in the names the pioneers gave to the remarkable rock formations they encountered in the West: Independence Rock, Courthouse Rock, Steeple Rock, and Chimney Rock, that is —self-government, justice, worship, and home. These are at once: where they came from, what they brought, and what they sought. The frontier very nearly is American history, and it very nearly is European history, too.

America was always a story of the West being turned into the East. Given how much Locke's account of the state of nature shaped the self-understanding of the people who made a Revolution for the sake of self-government, one might describe this story as a continuous transformation of the state of nature into the civil state. However, neither the West nor the East, the state of American nature or the American civil state, was ever entirely Lockean. More than property, the pleasures of acquiring, and holding onto it, were attractive. The West was always for America the place of the unalienable rights of man, but in the Declaration these rights are included in, expanded to, and ennobled by the pursuit of happiness. Even more important, these rights are in the Declaration understood as gifts; men are "endowed" with them "by their Creator" so that they might govern themselves and prosper; and in the Constitution, liberty is understood as a precious "blessing," to be used well, to be defended, and to be passed on to one's "posterity." The Declaration knows of the importance of Prudence, the duty to resist tyranny, and the

dignity of Honor. None of these is very Lockean. True, there in the West you will find the acquisitive Lockean man and there in the West you will also find the man of blood, who makes Hobbes so timorous, but you will also find the prudent man, the honorable man, and the virtuous man. And the prudent, thrifty, and virtuous woman.

Such a virtuous man is the cowboy. Although he appeared last in the pageant of pioneers and in any numbers lasted only as long as the great trail drives from Texas to Montana, thirty years or so, he is the epitome of the West. His adoption as the one mythical hero shared by all Americans shows you cannot understand America without understanding him.

The best place to seek him out, other than to go West and seek the real thing, as he still exists here and there, is to open the pages of the most originating account: *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* by Owen Wister. Several real persons, many experiences, sketches, campfire tales, and much afterthought went into the making of this story, and from it thousands have been made. Here first in *The Virginian* the Cowboy leapt into immortality. The thundering hoof beats of his horse recall knights in armor; in his eyes burns a light that through the ages lifted the souls of strong men who fought for justice, for God, and for country. Now the sons of this nameless American hero are so numberless they might as well be masked.

## **IX. THE VIRGINIAN**

Always in *The Virginian* there are the high plains and the clear air, with the lofty mountains beyond. "The sun shone warmly down, the tall red cliff was warm, the pines were a warm film and filter of green; outside the shade across the creek rose the steep, soft, open yellow hill warm and high to the blue, and the creek tumbled upon its sun-sparkling stones." Night follows day. "Coolness filled the air, and the silence, which in this deep valley of invading shadow seemed too silent, was relieved by the birds." As the narrator convalesces in the healthy Western air, so do we. We feel elevated and yet more aware of the heavens above us. Things are more beautiful, more dangerous, and more precious. Water becomes precious again as it is not in the East, where it is abundant. "Often he had added several needless miles to his journey that he might finish the day at this point, might catch the trout for his supper beside a certain rock upon its edge, and fall asleep hearing the stream on either side of him." It is to this sequestered pool high in the mountains that the Virginian will bring his beloved Molly for their honeymoon. In this refreshing West, we also meet a fine gallery of secondary characters: an intolerably upright preacher, a mortal rustler, a docile horse, and a memorable chicken. Although there is little cow herding and no trail drive in this archetypal story of the cowboy, there is just enough dust, discomfort, and hunger so that we won't be too disappointed by our first visit West. Many a reader since, boy or girl, man or woman, has finished the book resolved to "go West" because, heart and soul, they are already there.

Against this invigorating background, *The Virginian* provides a story of adventure, romance, and sagacity. For adventure, you have the strenuous labors of ranch life, "fighting words," a vigilante lynching, an Indian ambush, a gun fight, and a long

courtship. For romance, we have that courtship, one of matched minds and hearts —a long courtship, not because of mistakes or shifts, but because both do not want to settle for less than the best, in the other or in themselves. To promote sagacity, the novel gives us episodic instruction; first we meet the situation, we wonder what to do, and then we see exactly what a practically wise man, the hero, does do. Finally, by doing all this, the *Virginian* reflects seriously on the place of a natural aristocracy in a democracy of opportunity.

The *Virginian* is not only a type and, through adoption, an archetype, but an individual, with thoughts no one else ever expressed. His opinions on life and everything he meets in it are striking. Molly gives him Shakespeare to read; of Romeo he says, "I have read *Romeo and Juliet*. That is beautiful language but Romeo is no man. I like his friend Mercutio that gets killed. He is a man. If he had got Juliet there would have been no foolishness and trouble." According to him, if Shakespeare had known poker, Falstaff would have played a lot of it, and yet the Prince would have beat him. *Othello*, he tells Molly, should not have been written: "such things should not be put down in fine language for the public." Marriage and lightning the *Virginian* regards as the truly surprising things in life. That he himself is as truly surprising, he does not suspect. Although he must know his given name, we never learn it.

Reticent, dignified, and strong, the *Virginian* treats good men with respect, bad men with justice, and fools with charity. In him a rancher will find a good foreman; the hands, a good boss; the animals, a gentle master; and in him a friend gone bad will find sadness and firmness, in equal portions. Time and time again we wonder how the *Virginian* will get out of a jam, or how he will get the best from a tricky and often risky situation. How will he treat this fool? How will he oppose this knave? How will he remain true to several duties? Again and again he proves equal. The *Virginian* knows when to oppose evil with guile, when to undo it with laughter, when to endure it with fortitude, and when to wipe it out with a weapon. He knows how to protect fools, how to foil knaves, and how to woo stubborn virtue. Even in bliss he remains "responsible." One has to go back to Odysseus for a pattern of like sagacity.

Yet the bent of his sagacity is democratic; situations a born and bred aristocrat might intervene in, he holds back from, observing the limit set by self-government. The fundamental democratic assumption, that each man knows enough to choose for himself, is the rule he honors, even when he breaks it, for better reason, as with Shorty and Balaam. Democracy according to the *Virginian* is not anarchy. It values the individual, choice, and liberty, but not utterly. Thus when Balaam abuses a horse, to the point of gouging out its eye, the *Virginian* doesn't stand by and watch; he thrashes him. The horse is Balaam's property, but there is a higher law, the breaking of which justifies violent intervention. The aim of statesmanship in a democracy is to keep together the choice of the people and justice. Thus no majority acting unjustly can satisfy the soul, and to resist such a majority would be just, as the big ranchers may have been doing in the Johnson County War (which Wister alludes to). It should surprise no one that Wister thought the United States derelict in its moral duty for not entering World War I after Germany gouged out the eyes of Edith Cavell and Belgium.

The Virginian's sagacity is seen in the way he brings the men entrusted to him back from a cattle drive East. They would go off for gold, a kind of wealth that extracts futile effort from most, and the few it rewards, it usually destroys, since the passionate desire that drew them, the desire for easy, quick wealth, is the same desire that makes the rewards pass through their hands like water. Had no one but the Virginian been there, these cowboys would make it back to the ranch and enjoy the steady benefits a hard-working life for a good master provides them with, but since an evil man, Trampas, is also along, it is a contest as to whose teaching will prevail. By telling a taller tall tale, of the wealth to be made from raising frogs (to be sold for frogs' legs, much as cattle are raised for beef, to Easterners), and then letting his men see the passion that had made them believe his story, the Virginian wins. It is a testimony to the Virginian's sagacity that he gets the idea of a tall tale from his rival and enemy, Trampas, who has just sucked in his friend, the narrator, with one. It is as Foch said, "Great battles are won late in the afternoon, with reserves." Even better, this battle is won by imitating with improvements a stratagem the enemy sprang on one of your wing commanders in the morning. Washington and Grant, about whom Wister wrote compact biographies, would approve of the Virginian's statesmanship.

The book is also about what constitutes America; in it both the Declaration and the Constitution come under discussion. To the narrator from the East, the equality declared self-evident in the Declaration is no more than the fairness that allows all men to start the run of life without artificial impediments blocking their course to happiness. Such equality at the start is the precondition of their later distinction; some will win and some will lose and, the narrator implies, it would be unfair to interfere with the results of the game. The Virginian, who as a gambler knows this, also knows more. Life is not only a game, it is a school, and teachers such as the Molly he courts should treat their pupils proportionately to their gifts; it is pity not justice in Molly to bestow more time on the slowest, least gifted child, than on others more gifted. But equality is not only fairness and not only proportion, it is "responsibility" as well. America allows men equal opportunity and it encourages them according to their natural gifts, and in addition it asks the more accomplished to look after the less. The narrator from the East forgets that there is evil in the world; one bright morning, as the sun rises, he praises the Western climate, its salubrity, its clarity, its wonderful sun; meanwhile, the Virginian, paying little attention, aims at a rattler right behind him, and plugs it. Remember, oh mortal, the sun that gladdens you, warms the serpent too.

As the story progresses, the Virginian is given more and more "responsibility," and he rises to it. Elevated to the position of foreman on the ranch, he forgoes the just revenge he could have enjoyed by dismissing Trampas. He does so partly because it is virtuous, partly to enjoy the respect such magnanimity will win him, and partly so that he can hinder the evil that springs from this evil man, something that will be easier to do if he is in sight. He does so especially because he sees that an innocent man, Shorty, will be more easily protected from Trampas. It is the Virginian who first sees the good in Shorty; any man who, despite the rough treatment he must give animals, retains his love of them and even cultivates it, so he can gentle a wild horse and train a good one up to the best in him— such a man has good in him. However, the Virginian also sees that Shorty is a



fool, easily misled, and not capable of self-government. Shorty is something like Bob Carmody, the ungifted child Molly heaps disproportionate time on, but the novel teaches that the right relation of those who know about life to those who do not is for the former to watch out for the latter, not hope they will become like you. He who cannot be educated must be left to himself, in all but the direst of straits.

The word "responsibility" appears often in *The Virginian*; I count about thirteen places where it is attended to. Not so long ago, Leo Strauss observed that whereas previous generations in the West spoke of virtue, we now tend to speak of "responsibility"; a responsible man used to mean a man not crazed, now it means a man we are too shy to call virtuous; thus a word once used to name the condition of free acts (either good or bad) now substitutes for the good acts of a free man. Of course that would be a loss; a people no longer able to speak of virtue and the virtues will discern them less sharply and soon practice them less vigorously. However, need we worry about the word "responsible"? In *The Virginian*, first published in 1902, long before the introduction of the word "values" depleted our moral aquifer, the word "responsibility" means the sagacious care a good man will exercise over his own affairs, over those of whomever he serves, and even over those of some merely within his possible care. It is the virtue of the good steward, the good foreman, the good rancher, the good father and the good husband; and should the man seek higher office, "responsibility" as we see it so abundantly in the *Virginian* would be the virtue of the Statesman. When the *Virginian* tells Judge Henry, who has just asked him to be his foreman, "I'll try to please you," it is as good as a pledge of sacred honor. James Madison, who coined the word "responsibility," would be pleased.

When the *Virginian* courts a good, independent woman, he treats her with patience, improvement, and self-reliance. Locked in courtship, they prove the match of each other: in wit, in resolution, in love and in virtue. He prefers Shakespeare and an unnamed Russian novelist she gives him; she prefers Jane Austen whom she has read and reread. Their courtship is a strife in virtue; both must win the other; both must be patient and strong, even to the point of renunciation. He would not seek her unless he could assure himself that he can promote her happiness. Each, by recognizing something noble in the other, becomes the reason for the other becoming more noble. Although before the story begins the *Virginian* has known a number of women and although as it begins he "adulterates" with one, reading the letter Molly writes to seek the schoolmarm's position at Bear Creek stirs him to defend her honor, at some risk to his standing, since he cannot be sure others will line up on the side of chastity, and at sure risk to his life, because the moment Trampas is forced to retract his calumny, he hates the *Virginian*. Something in her letter makes him feel that there are better things in life than what he has yet known. When she signs herself "Sincere Spinster," he divines that she is twenty and not forty. More important, he is impressed by someone who knows chastity means waiting for the best. The Eternal Virtuous draws him on.

Molly, too, must become nobler to be a match for her cowboy suitor. She is noble enough to have rejected the suit of a good man, for the good reason that she does not love him. Sam Bannett, back East, proves he is good, but not noble, when he obeys Molly's order

not to mount her departing train; the Virginian would have disobeyed and won her. In Bennington Molly stands out as genuinely independent, but out West her independence is marred by airs and willfulness. Molly must put aside some of her false manners (about how one should be introduced, for example), some of her foolish conduct (dancing with married men while refusing to dance with eligible ones, for example), and her false opinions, for example, about the relation of the law and justice (for not everything outside the law is unjust). On the way to doing so, she must break with her past, not only with her foolish mother, but with all in Bennington that is genteel, calumnious, and mediocre. Bennington abhors the Virginian because he carries a gun; Bennington has forgotten its origin in a revolution; mediocre, it knows only of mediocre evils, ones not strong enough to need a gun to destroy. It is significant that when Molly saves her man, she draws his six-shooter from its holster and is ready to defend their lives from the Indians that have wounded him. She must "leave" all that was her home, before she can "cleave," and become "one flesh." She gets some help from a great aunt who has some of the old family virtue that once animated it, founded the independent Republic of Vermont, and shone in Molly Stark. She alone of Vermonters takes some Eastern pride in "making this country." This great aunt is everything younger members in a family might wish for. She alone asks genuine questions of Molly's man. Every time she reappears in the novel, we cheer.

The courtship of the Virginian and the Vermonter is a long one. Many of my students criticize Molly for holding her chivalrous man off for so long, I think wrongly. The wayward habits of his youth were not to be perfectly purged but by a long time of self-denial and a long practice of an ardor uncertain of ever attaining its wish. It may even be that this time should be prolonged, as it is with him, to the point where he must renounce her and even to the point where it will be clear that if his hope for her proves futile he will not return to the loose habits of his youth, which we see in the first chapters. That he says if he lost her he would bury his sorrow in lots of work, plus the fact that we believe he would, is a sign that he is worthy of Molly and ready to marry her. Then again, marriage is a more fateful, comprehensive thing for a woman than a man; married, she will lose many of the temporary advantages of courtship; her husband will never again be her courter. It is right then that she err in the direction of caution. Neither hero nor heroine in this novel is the worse for the delay. Indeed, both are the better, the more worthy of each other, for the length of their courtship.

When the Virginian must hunt down Steve and see him lynched, justly lynched for cattle stealing. and then mourn that he must, we realize that his life could have gone a different way. On the desolate trail after the lynching, we learn that Steve and he used to be two rogue males together when they hit town. Together they enjoyed the fornication of beasts, and, so the narrator tells us, the Virginian recalled these scenes in the language of elks and tigers. Leaving out that language, a more mature Virginian will later admit the facts to Molly's mother in a letter. In speaking of the justice of hanging Steve, the Virginian says that it is unjust for one man to put his iron on another man's calf. That remark also convicts him, for the adultery he commits in an early chapter of the novel could be described just so. Once the Virginian and Steve were friends. The Virginian might have gone the way of Steve. In life choice is decisive.

Speaking of the Virginian, Hemingway told Fitzgerald that there could be no scaling back of such illicit pleasures as the Virginian had enjoyed before Molly. Hemingway and St. Paul seem to agree: the natural man cannot reform; Wister and Aristotle also agree, but on the other side. The reform without conversion that Wister portrays does include guilt, such that it provokes the Virginian's only imprudence; consciousness of the repellent character of his earlier unchastity prompts the Virginian to write Molly's mother about it; this was a lapse of sagacity in him, for that silly woman broadcasts the story about Bennington, but it is strong evidence of the genuineness of his reform. And it is shame about those deeds that inhibits the Virginian from mentioning them to Molly.

Being real man and real woman, the Virginian and the Vermonter have the kind of chaste courtship that will lead to a marriage of royal rule, as Aristotle says it should and as St. Paul seems to have advised in a letter. Yet what Tocqueville says about the "deep, regular, and peaceful affection" that democratic marriages, freely contracted by both parties, provide Americans, and thus provide America with the "domestic tranquillity" that supports political stability - all this is amply shown here. All the miscreants, rustlers, and murderers are unmarried; of the good only Scipio is single. Only in democratic American will one find many such royal marriages says Tocqueville. Indeed, no novel could be more different from *Madame Bovary* than *The Virginian*.

The honeymoon these two inaugurate their domestic happiness with is perfectly described, that is, modestly, without any of the details craved by corrupt imaginations; such details would prevent adult readers from thinking of whatever details from a similar happiness they have experienced and such details would be no help to young readers in discovering such details at the proper time and place, namely later, wedded and in the flesh. Of their honeymoon, in the mountains, beside the still waters of a high lake, the author merely says that they liked it so much there the first night they lingered for a week. A more chaste and also a more ardent line does not exist in literature.

The novel tells the story of how this natural diamond of a man loses his roughness, including some waywardness, through manly dedication to a lady. No knight of the *gaya scienza* was more courtly or gentle than this hired horseman. It also tells how he stays the man he is. Friendship can test a man as well as love. Out of justice a man might have to hang another who was once his closest friend, and right though he be, he will, nevertheless, suffer the pangs of despised friendship. The Virginian could have bowed out of the lynching of Steve, he could probably have arranged for Steve to escape, or he could, on the other side, have hanged him with sangfroid righteousness. He errs to neither side. He does what is naturally right and he suffers from it, nearly losing his moral balance in the lonely ride west to the Tetons after the lynching, and helped by chance bringing him a message from Steve himself. Wister and Roosevelt were not wrong to consider this the best chapter in the book.

Molly, the beloved lady, must also learn this about justice: that sometimes nature and duty suspend convention and due process. Suspensions of liberty are justified if they are for the sake of the regime that defends liberty. Lose Liberty and you are not likely to have Virtue spring up in your midst. Yet the case, one of a sober hunt and lynching, is a

difficult one, because the offense is only theft and because, it might be argued, that it is not what the Constitution recognizes as a time of civil rebellion. Still, this is but another instance of the way the novel is about the American regime and also the kind of American discussions it stimulates.

Finally, Molly, and we, must also learn another civic lesson: that sometimes all must be risked or nothing will be left to love or be loved. Lose Virtue and you will lose Liberty too. There can be no homes and families without a country to surround them. The lesson is difficult because it is tied to another. Honor pursued is often a bauble, an airy nothing, and honor defended often but pride luring to stupidities. Nevertheless, the Virginian cannot let Trampas' direct challenge to his honor go unanswered. If he does, he will lose the good that comes from reputation, the power to threaten bad men and reassure good ones, for if he ignores Trampas's challenge, he will invite every swaggart to take a shot at him. This Molly learns on their wedding day, and it would have been no wedding day if she had not learned it. From this episode spins off that fine movie *High Noon*. Not all good things are the cause of the increase of goodness, but some are, and *The Virginian* is one such good procreator of good.

We sometimes hear that the Founders of America built on nothing more elevated than the pursuit of comfortable self-preservation taught by the clever John Locke. Admitting that, as Washington affirmed (in 1783), America is built on a new understanding of the rights of man, or what Publius Hamilton calls a new science of politics (*Federalist* 9), and hence on a new relation of rights and duties, and admitting that, as Tocqueville said, American democratic man strives to identify virtue and interest, still, did the Founding Fathers really bring forth something so low and wholly modern? Did they perceive the knavishness of Locke and imitate it? And if they did not, were they Locke's fools, or did they simply take the evident good in him and ignore the esoteric evil? And when Americans think back to their foundation in the state of nature, do they become poor timorous Hobbeses, cautious cupidinous Lockes, or sentimental Rousseaus, or, just as often, brave, virtuous Virginians and Lone Rangers, ready to protect life and property from designing Machiavels, and to institute self-government based on God-given rights? The account of America given in *The Virginian* affirms the latter.

The novel also tells the story of another Easterner, a wealthy New Yorker in fact. Like Molly, the narrator also becomes who he is by going West; there he, too, loses a certain softness. Both are tenderfoots, but he a tenderer one. She arrives in Medicine Bow healthy, he arrives suffering from some unnamed debility of spirit. There he convalesces, and as he does so, matures. His growth in the virtues goes along with his growing friendship with the natural aristocrat, the Virginian. Thus, during the middle of the novel, in the tall-tale contest with Trampas, the character of Scipio must be introduced so that we can appreciate the statesmanship of the Virginian through a knowing observer, but by the time Steve must be hanged, it is the narrator who is close to the Virginian, and in the ride afterwards he is at times actually superior to his troubled friend, and beneficially so. Still, there remains a difference between them; during the night before the hanging the narrator feels more for Ed, who fears death and does not die bravely, while the Virginian feels more for Steve, who though fearing death does die bravely, which the Virginian

admires and hopes he will equal. Nevertheless, although the narrator acts very little in the story, only he could have told it. The Virginian and the Vermonter are perfectly matched for courtship and marriage, but neither could have told the other's part of the story well enough. Perhaps they could not even tell their own side as well as the narrator. And only the narrator has the breadth of experience that knows America contains Medicine Bow and Fifth Avenue. There is a difference between hero and heroine, on the one hand and on the other, the poet, but there need not be enmity between them.

## **X. THE MOST AMERICAN NOVEL?**

The narrator's comprehensive appreciation of what makes up America brings us to the author, Owen Wister, and what he comprehends. Wister had an eye for all that is beautiful in nature, splendid in man and woman, and good in our nation. *The Virginian* is the most American novel I know of. Other American novels may be greater, perhaps one of them is the Great American Novel, but they seem less American. As an American, I am proud of them, but if someone asked me, "Which one gives the best account of America?" or "Which one should I read before visiting?" I would have to say *The Virginian*. If Tocqueville were alive and preparing to revisit America, this is the story I would want him to read.

Let us consider the other candidates, ones which would surely be candidates as well for inclusion in a Great Books curriculum. Like *Faust*, *Moby Dick* treats the Baconian project of mastering nature; it is American because Melville places that project in America; and it is great because the monomaniacal character of that project is well brought out by Melville not only in his account of the first oil industry, but in the passionate hatred of nature and nature's God that beats in the flinty frame of Captain Ahab. Melville understands that it is antitheological ire that drives the modern project; his modern captain takes the question with which God answers Job: "Can you put a hook in Leviathan?" as a dare, and answers, "Damn right, and a harpoon in You, too." Unfortunately, Melville seems to share his injured hero's hatred of God. Cetology is really theology; so while Ahab fumes and harpoons, Melville cackles. Melville is right to place his Baconian drama in America where, without the accumulated lets and hindrances to innovation present in Europe, the project has been carried on with a commercial fury, and Melville may be right, long before Weber and his greater teacher, Nietzsche, to link Protestantism with the spirit of this imperial capitalism, but Melville stands outside America. Maybe he understands America better than Americans understand themselves, but he does not first understand them as they understand themselves.

Not so Wister. The religion of his West is that recommended by Washington, lauded by Tocqueville, most deeply meditated by Lincoln: firm, unceremonious, believing in the Creator, emphasizing conduct in this world more than salvation in the next, rejecting wickedness as much as those preachers who say we are all wicked, and not very established. For the Virginian, the most important of God's attributes is Justice: "If I can't do nothing long enough and good enough to earn eternal happiness, I can't do nothing long enough and bad enough to be damned. I reckon He plays a square game with us if He plays at all, and I ain't bothering my haid about other worlds." This is not the faith of

Pascal, nor his persuasive Wager, or the faith of Lincoln, with its acknowledgment of painful mysteries, but it is the faith of the land of Lincoln. The God who presides (I select this word deliberately) over this spacious land is much like the man the Virginian says he has gained the most from, the man who says more by his noble example and few words, which make one ashamed, than by garrulous threats. The God of the Virginian is a God who prefers to instruct gentlemen than to command servants. The democratic consequence of this aristocratic disposition is well spelled out by Judge Henry: "As soon as you treat men as your brothers, they are ready to acknowledge you as—if you deserve it—as their superior. That's the whole body of Christianity, and that's what our missionary [McBride] will never acknowledge." McBride is a Christian moralist. Since he is righteous, he does not include himself in his account of human nature; the standards he appeals to, he identifies with himself, instead of seeing them above himself, judging him as well. Being punishments of others, his speeches do not persuade.

In *The Virginian* McBride is directly countered (by the Judge) and narratively surrounded by the story, when the Virginian mimics the reformation of a sinner, keeping McBride up all night, and making him such a laughing stock that he departs in haste and indignation. Does McBride show how evil it is to believe in good and evil, in anything based in metaphysics, in Platonism, and in Christian morality? No. The answer to moralism is not relativism, but morality. And pity, "toleration," and state welfare would be no replacement for the charity that morality also calls for.

It is significant that the first thing the new community at Bear Creek sets about establishing is a school; in the country constituted by the Constitution and its First Amendment it is no surprise that respect for Washington is taught explicitly and the common tenets of Christianity tacitly. All preachers are welcome at all good ranches and homes, and denominational differences belong in the homes and the various churches. And perhaps it is significant that Judge Henry's understanding of the reason the Virginian must face Trampas is better than the Bishop's advice on the question. Of course, the same question, When should I fight? will be the one Jimmy Dean will face in *Rebel Without a Cause*, without Bishop, Judge, or parents.

Yet in Wister's judgment the moralism of the preachers is less dangerous to the Republic than the moralism of the democrats, their resentment of distinction, their substitution of pity for charity, and their inclination to think no majority wrong. This *The Virginian*, like the *Federalist*, leans against. Not yet in Wister's time had the democrats extended the scope of their equalizing passion to truth, first holding all views equally true (relativism) and then equally untrue (nihilism).

The two other candidates for most American novel concern slavery. The first, Faulkner's novella, really a brief epic, "The Bear," shows how the education in the wilderness Ike receives from the Bear must be supplemented by reading, especially the ledgers whose scrawls, when deciphered by imagination and experience, tell the tangled story of slavery. However, the lesson Ike and the author draw from these two books, of nature and history, leads Ike to imitate the Bear, to refuse responsibility and live "childless, kinless, hearthless," not unlike Polyphemus. True, Ike is gentle, but he is no statesman, and

maybe not a man. Man may endure and even prevail, as Faulkner disappointed his dour, avante, Existential French admirers by saying in Stockholm, and even endure through the virtues he named, but not through the reason, the practical wisdom, and the sagacious unification of natural right and consent of the governed that America in crisis will require of its saving statesman, which Faulkner did not mention and nowhere portrays in the dark country of Yoknapatawpha. What is great about Faulkner, his attention to suffering, constitutes a criticism of all Southern nostalgia, whether magnolia or wounded, all racism, and all commercial optimism. It is based on the principles of America but does not share its confidence or dedication.

The other candidate would seem to be *Huckleberry Finn*. Its treatment of slavery is surely part of its claim. The way Huck comes to see Jim as his benefactor, his protector, his friend, and therefore deserving of justice, and even sacrifice, is worthy. But Twain makes this discovery of natural right and its opposition to conventional right (for slavery is lawful) coincide not with a criticism of Christian hypocrisy, but a puerile ridicule of Christianity itself. Huck will help Jim even if it means going to hell. 'Greater love hath no boy but that he risk the fires of Christian hell for his friend,' is Twain's derisive teaching. Thus does Twain place just love of others and love of God in opposition. Twain's hero is a boy, an orphan, who is happy to remain an orphan. Civilization and everything that is connected with it seems to be the target. Civilizations can benefit from such an attack as a smart man like Twain can supply; democracies need to license a Fool to sting their complacency; but they can be excused for not electing them to represent them. The prototype of Huck, we hear, became a sheriff out West —perhaps he became the Virginian, but Huck never does; Twain never has him grow up, and there is little room in *Huck Finn* for the founding principles of America, or the virtues it requires of its leaders.

Intelligent, gifted, and even great as Twain and Faulkner and Melville are, none would make a fine president, governor, or senator. Are their principles the principles of the country? Only partly, I think. If not, that leaves The Virginian as the only candidate that deals with the character of democracy and human nature, hence with an aristocracy of virtue, with nature, and with nature's God, all in a way that accords with the founding, with its perpetuation by Lincoln (both of which are mentioned), and with the common sense of most Americans, however uncommon the reach of the author's understanding. Thus, it should not surprise one that it is easy to imagine the Virginian as president of the United States and therefore also possible to imagine the author of The Virginian as president. Wister was a friend of Theodore Roosevelt; the book is dedicated, and then in 1911 rededicated, to our twenty-sixth president, who was soon to run, as a Bull Moose, to become the twenty-eighth. Later Wister wrote *Roosevelt: The Story of a Friendship*.

The great rival of Wister, for the title "the American novelist who wrote best of America," is seldom considered with the rivals I have mentioned. Yet no one has written so well and so much of the frontier and the pioneers of America as Willa Cather. Alexandra, Tom Outland, Antonia, and Archbishop Latour are pioneers. Their stories are the story of America. And so are Cather's stories of the lost pioneers, Claude Wheeler and Mrs. Forrester, persons who are lost without the frontier but who have also lost it, through nature or choice. Of Willa Cather it might be said that she was so good, such a

vital fountain of good— gusher, arc, splash, and basin—that she was great. It must be conceded, however, that none of her pioneers, even Archbishop Latour, would make quite as good a president as Wister's Virginian.

In *The Virginian* the West unites the old South and the old North by returning to their natural origins. The vantage point from which the flaws, vices and defects of America are seen by Wister is not a Southern farm (as with the Agrarians), a Chartres Cathedral (Henry Adams), a café in Paris (the very lost generation), or a future never-never land (Marxist or Sci-fi-ian), but a high range in Wyoming, or anywhere there are men and women. The vantage point is not history, either some historical epoch or some future historical state, but the virtues, and especially the natural right that shines in nature and must shine in the Republic founded in nature and in nature's God, if we are to keep it.

In conclusion, let me share with fellow teachers of American literature and government, thinking of teaching *The Virginian*, the reports of two students. Intelligent, yet struggling, sometimes even displeased-to-be-pleased, but gutsy, this Honors student at North Texas wrote in one of her journals, "I didn't get it when we read Plato in the fall, or the *Federalist* this spring, but I do now; yes, I confess it, I have lost two nights sleep since I deigned to pick it [*The Virginian*] up and have only now finished it, so that my life may continue." Another Honors student tells me that she insists that before he proceed further any suitor must read *The Virginian*. Since the maiden does the insisting, I think this is even better than the three caskets the father of Portia set in her suitors' way.

## **XI. THE UNION OF THE GREAT AND THE GOOD**

So far, I have said, you will have noticed, nothing about the criticism that this book, *The Virginian*, and the America for which it stands might be subjected to. The best criticism would come from the point of view of the body or Marx, of the soul or Plato, humanity or Goethe, technology or Heidegger, and nobility or Nietzsche.

Brief let me be. To the first, it might be said that the envy of the great and desire for ease in the Shortys of America may always be exploited by the Trampases unless the Virginians watch out. To the second, it might be pointed out that the protection of property in America and the right to inherit it will always allow a few sons of the wealthy the leisure to survey the whole American scene, as the narrator does, and thus might one day support a philosopher. To the third, one must concede that anxiety about natural death could indeed bankrupt America and, on the way to it, make Americans into nothing but patients, litigants, and tourists. Thanks for the warning, faint advance clouds of which were only on the horizon of *The Virginian*, Herr Goethe. As to technology, the novel shows that the people who first change the face of nature in the West, wasting much, are pretty much the same ones who come to appreciate it, in the next generation, of which Wister's Western-and-Eastern friend, Teddy Roosevelt, was the leader, who saved the West, its lands, its flora, and its fauna, especially the buffalo. "Clean up your own mess" is a good maxim, which all business men once heard their mother say; Nature, too, is a blessing to be passed on to your posterity; and the causes now called environmental are



fundamentally conservative. Conservation of nature is conservative. So, when you see a business gouge out nature's eye, hit it as hard as the *Virginian* does Balaam.

And toward the fifth, let one riposte suffice for now. At a dinner in the White House of Teddy Roosevelt, which Wister attended, the question arose, "How many of the people are knaves and fools?" and after many had spoken upping the percentage, Roosevelt or'lept all by declaring "eighty percent." The judgment, which is surely also present in *The Virginian*, is nearly as critical as Nietzsche's might be, yet it did not mean for a minute that Roosevelt was not dedicated to a government of fools and against knaves, and thus for the good of persons who were all pretty much his inferiors. We find the same appreciation of human nature democratically arranged and yet cheerfully served in the *Virginian's* service to Shorty, his foiling of Trampas, and his wooing of Molly.

In sum then, Owen Wister's *The Virginian* gives an elevated account of the American regime, its appreciation of liberty, the importance of property in it, its understanding of justice, of equality, of race, of marriage, and its encouragement of some peculiar virtues, without which none of the blessings of liberty can ever be bequeathed to our posterity. The elevation of this account encourages a reasonable patriotism, condemns whatever then or now falls below the mark, and also inspires good young men and women, like the *Virginian* and Molly, to grow worthy of each other. Even to a generation suborned to promiscuity, this book has the power to present the pleasures of courtship. *The Virginian* is the most American novel I know of. The most about America, by an American, for Americans, about Americans, and the most likely to promote the good of America and Americans.

Still, it must be conceded that good as it is and good for orphans as it is, *The Virginian* is not great. Its hero bears some resemblance to Shakespeare's Henry V, but not to those of his heroes who suffer greatly, Hamlet and Lear. In addition, the way Wister has the *Virginian* come into some property, through a grant from the Judge, avoids the thorny issue that erupted in the Johnson County War, which Jack Schaefer in *Shane* faces so finely. Neither the *Virginian* nor Wister thirst for supernatural truth as Pascal did, reach for a greater stage to test their virtue as Sophocles does, or write as sweetly as Keats. Wister is not Stendhal, Halifax, or Leopardi. *The Virginian's* deliberate rejection of such greatness is indicated by its hero's strictures against the public exhibition of a story such as *Othello*. These are appropriate to his virtue and the book's goodness, but also a confession of its inferiority to greatness. One might say that when he reaches thirty, the *Virginian* would benefit from a Great Books program, that he is one of the good students unlikely to be hurt by one, and also that he probably would not choose one. Neither Socrates nor Christ are on his must-read-soon list. This, of course, the author knew. They weren't on Wister's list either.

So far there has been only one great American story. The Declaration is, as I said before, the foundation of our pursuit (our practice) of happiness, but it also contains, as the opening of a tragedy, the makings of our greatest suffering. The generous abstraction "All men are created equal," so rightly "all praised" by Lincoln, might have led to a withering away of slavery, which the Constitution so prudently never names. Instead it led to

compromises that, while staving off, also led to, a civil war, longer and more terrible, and yet just if it had lasted two hundred and fifty years rather than five, a mighty sacrifice on the altar of freedom, made greater still by the assassination of Lincoln, the greatest blow to the Confederacy according to Jeff Davis, since it substituted a vengeful reconstruction for the merciful peace magnanimous Lincoln alone might have secured.

Wister did not go on to write a novel about the Civil War. The contrast that the Judge in *The Virginian* draws between the lynching of an innocent Negro in the South and the stringing up of a known rustler in the West suggests that he understood the gravity of the issues. To write that novel one would have to treat Lincoln. Perhaps Wister thought himself unequal to the task or perhaps he reflected on the fact that Lincoln himself had done it already. What man ever had greater gifts of expression, narration, and comprehension than Lincoln? Who but a Shakespeare would essay to add to his words? That Lincoln wrote no drama should not hide the great role in our Globe's pageant he played; that he wrote no novel should not distract us from the story he told in the hearts and minds of his countrymen forever. No other novelist has had his words memorized by schoolboys and a temple erected to him in Washington. Lincoln is one of the few great men who was also good.

His, then, is one of the stories that the novel mutant of our time, the Teenager, an orphan in his own land, an outcast in his own country, ignorant of both his Western and his human heritage, might take heart from. After all, when you consider Lincoln's life, he was a kind of orphan; in narrow circumstances and with meager means, he took responsibility for his own growing up. In that education he gave himself we find both the great, Shakespeare, the Bible and Euclid, and the good, Parson Weems's *Life of Washington*. Lincoln thought about heaven and found in the Founding a kind of home. Something like this discovery, we may finally reflect, was also true of Wister's unnamed Virginian, the story of whose life bears some distant resemblance to Lincoln's. He too was a kind of orphan, he too educated himself, and chose Shakespeare as his teacher. Perhaps the Virginian's name was Lincoln, one who got his Ann Rutledge, who had to be a natural right lawyer, and yet needed to oppose no Trampas on the national scene because after Lincoln the House was no longer divided.

## **XII. TRUTH, REFORMATION, AND POLITICS**

America and the West it leads are not in good shape today. Divided in a hundred ways, bitterly contentious on ten profound moral questions, which many deny are moral questions, living on the moral credit of its ancestors and the financial credit of its own grandchildren, and blind even to its own survival, or where not blind, as with terrorism, unwilling to carry the punishment of it to the governments that support it, far worse than Trampas, and thus soon likely to experience plagues, famines, and devastations on a scale not seen even with the Black Death, or if yielding to the treats of such, soon occupied and enslaved, today the West is in deep trouble. Yet it is well to remember that the West has rallied before, both to external danger and to internal, which today is more threatening than the external, and whose recognition must come first. Thus, a century and a half ago, just before it rid itself of slavery, America was spreading it to every territory, soon would

have spread it to every state, and was near to declaring it a matter of indifference. Yet America rallied; it refused to regard slavery as other than a moral evil; it would not acquiesce to the spread of it, and when slave holders, defeated in ballots, drew swords, America rid itself of slavery, as no other nation has: by shedding its own blood.

Perhaps America will rally now. A salty remnant has refused to yield to the complacent slaughter of innocent life, whose protection was once the pride of liberalism and remains one of the three things Christ says He is ("the way, the truth, and the life"); a growing number of fathers and mothers have chosen, despite the subtracted income, to fulfill at home the natural duty of all parents to raise their children up right; and citizens of America's most populous state have reaffirmed the self-evident truths of the Declaration, so bloodily secured in the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. Honesty, moral reformation, and political courage are possible. The people who practice them might wax mighty again, God, the Supreme Judge of the world, willing.