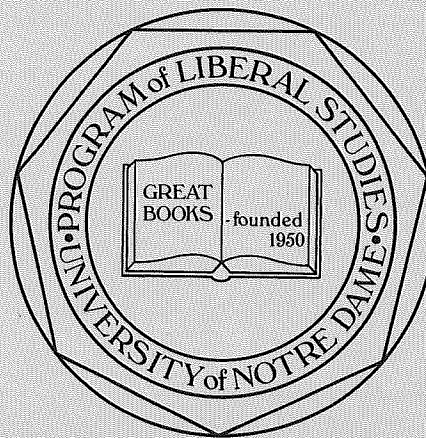


# LIBERAL LEARNING AND THE GREAT BOOKS

Twelve Presentations  
at a Conference  
Held April 4–5, 2001  
Celebrating  
the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Founding of  
the Program of Liberal Studies,  
the Great Books Program  
of the University of Notre Dame



Edited by  
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# Contents

Preface

## *Part One: Presentations by Faculty*

Frederick J. Crosson	Liberal Education: Seeing and Believing	1
Eva Brann	About the Greatness of Great Books	6
Jean Bethke Elshtain	The Humanities, Democracy, and the Question of Authority	11

## *Part Two: Presentations by Distinguished Graduates*

Robert Bowman, M.D.		19
John Breen, J.D.		22
Martha Jiménez, J.D.		24
Katherine Kersten, M.A., J.D.		26
James McDonald, C.S.C., J.D.		28
Robert McNeill, M.Litt.,	31	
Janice Peterson, M.D.		33
Michael Schierl, J.D.		35
Kenneth Taylor, Ph.D.		37



## Preface

Academic year 2000–2001 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Program of Liberal Studies, Notre Dame's Great Books program. Founded in 1950 by Rev. John J. Cavanaugh, C.S.C., then Notre Dame's President, and Professor Otto Bird, its first director, PLS has provided an academic home for many hundreds of Notre Dame students and for dozens of faculty.

Aware of the significance of this anniversary, the faculty of PLS sought to commemorate, celebrate, and reflect on this event in a number of ways. These include the preparation of a history<sup>1</sup> of the first fifty years of the program, various talks, dinners, and displays throughout the anniversary year, especially a program held in June 2000 as part of the Notre Dame's alumni/ae weekend, and above all, at the year's culmination, a conference held April 4–5, 2001. This volume makes available the twelve addresses presented at that concluding conference.

The twelve presenters invited to speak at this conference, titled "Liberal Learning and the Great Books," formed two groups—three prominent professors, who prepared formal and longer addresses, and nine distinguished graduates of PLS, who typically provided shorter and more personal statements. In the process of selecting the first group, PLS faculty suggested dozens of names of leading intellectuals, especially persons who were known for their commitment to liberal learning and for their ability to articulate a vision of that fundamental academic activity. In selecting the speakers, we hoped to include a speaker from another Great Books program, a speaker from one of the premier academic institutions in this country, and possibly someone from Notre Dame. The persons chosen were Eva Brann of St. John's College, Jean Bethke Elshtain from the University of Chicago, and Frederick Crosson, former Dean of Notre Dame's College of Arts and Letters, and a long-time PLS faculty member.

It was clear to us that a program that holds as fundamental the importance of having students actively engaged in the educational process should include various graduates of the program in such a conference. Desiring to bring back to the campus some of the most distinguished graduates of the program for this conference and thereby to benefit from their reflections, and also hoping to select a diverse and representative group, we first sought nominations from the faculty. We thereby compiled a list of nearly a hundred names. From this list, nine were invited and asked to reflect on how their education in PLS interacted during their subsequent

lives. This was done with high expectation—and a measure of trepidation!

We believe that the twelve speakers who addressed the conference presented talks that are well worth sharing and preserving. To enhance the quantity and quality of the audience, the Program of Liberal Studies and Notre Dame invited a national organization aimed at promoting liberal education to hold its annual meeting in conjunction with our conference. Thus a number of members of the Association for Core Texts and Courses came to Notre Dame a day or so early to hear our speakers. Moreover, a number of PLS alums returned for our conference. Many PLS students and also various faculty and students from around Notre Dame attended at least parts of the conference.

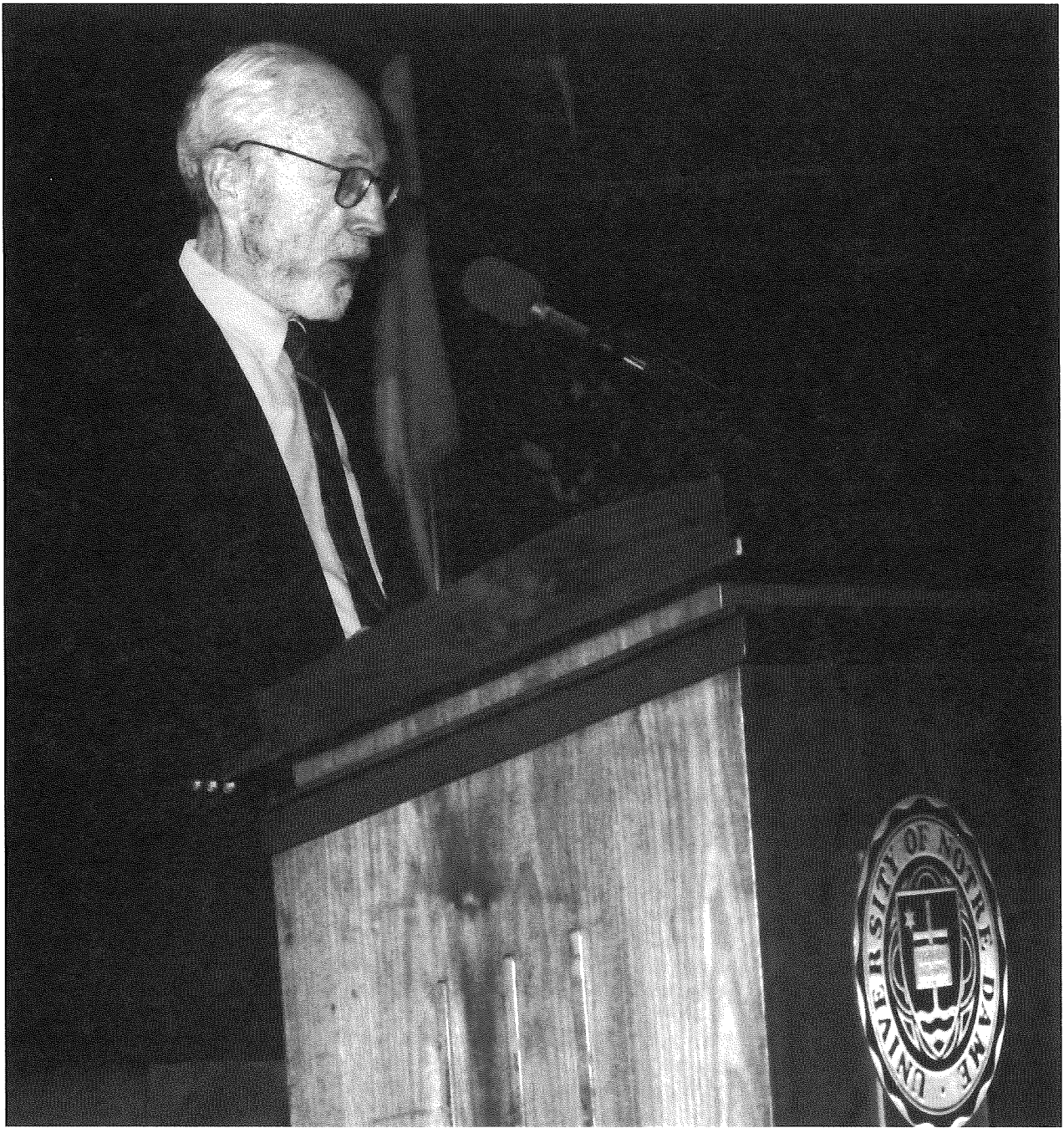
The main funding for the conference was provided by a grant from the Henkels Lecture Series Fund, administered by Notre Dame's Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts. We are deeply grateful to the Henkels Foundation and ISLA for this grant. In selecting the nine graduates to speak at the conference, we determined not to let the cost of travel prevent us from inviting the persons whom we most desired to hear. This concern was justified because the list of selected speakers included not only persons from both coasts but also graduates now living in lands as remote as Chile and Ethiopia. This and other concerns and costs made it clear that to hold the conference in the form we most desired, we would need additional funding. Fortunately, we were able to secure supplemental funds from each of the following: the Program of Liberal Studies; the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President Emeritus; the Cavanaugh Chair in the Humanities; and the Department of Medical Education of St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center. Many thanks are extended to these contributors.

We also wish to thank most warmly the presenters at the conference: the three faculty speakers and the nine graduates. We have heard many positive comments about not only the quality of the addresses, but also about how deeply faculty and students were moved and inspired by hearing the testimonies of graduates who have shown themselves to be persons of exceptional talent and intelligence. We also thank the faculty of the Program of Liberal Studies who contributed to the conference in a variety of ways.

Nicholas Ayo, C.S.C. and Michael J. Crowe  
Co-editors

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<sup>1</sup>Nicholas Ayo, Michael Crowe, and Julia Marvin (editors), *The Program of Liberal Studies: The First Fifty Years* (Notre Dame, IN, 2000).



Professor Frederick Crosson addressing the conference

# Presentations by Three Distinguished Faculty at the PLS Fiftieth Anniversary Conference April 4–5, 2001

## Liberal Education: Seeing and Believing by Frederick Crosson

Frederick J. Crosson, who holds his doctorate from Notre Dame in philosophy, is the Rev. John J. Cavanaugh Emeritus Professor in the Humanities in the Program of Liberal Studies at the University of Notre Dame. He joined the PLS faculty in 1952 and has served as Dean of Notre Dame's College of Arts and Letters. In 1998, he was chosen for that college's most distinguished teaching award and recently served as national president of Phi Beta Kappa.

(I want to reflect on this topic by developing a kind of dialogue with St. Augustine, my favorite great bookie interlocutor. I want to show first that revelation has no place in liberal education, and then that a place can be found for it.)

I think of the education offered by the Program of Liberal Studies as a conversation in the seminars with the authors of our core texts — and with each other in the seminars. And a large part of liberal education is developing, in the course of that conversation, the skills of reading and listening carefully, generating interpretations, articulating those in speech and writing, and defending and criticizing our respective positions. The conversation is first of all with the texts, to make out exactly what the authors intend, and then the conversation is with their meaning, with its truth or validity and its implications. Once we think we understand them, we want to decide (if we can) how what they have helped us to *see* should change the way we think and perhaps the way we live. The first part is crucial, because if we don't understand what they're saying we can't really *either* agree or disagree with them.

The image of a conversation is not a rhetorical adornment — it derives from my own experience in questioning a text and its author. "Why did you do this here? Why did you say this, have this happen?" (*Scribere est agere*) The image was confirmed for me by Machiavelli, in a famous and wonderful passage of a letter to his friend Vettori, shortly after finishing *The Prince*. He was living on a farm, in exile, and describes how at the end of the day's labor he withdraws to read the Greek and Roman writers.

I enter the ancient courts of ancient men...where I am not ashamed to ask them the reasons for their actions, and they in their kindness answer me, and for four hours I feel no boredom, I forget every trouble.... I pass over completely into their world.

After we *see*, understand, what is being said, and also the reasons given for saying it, we can agree or disagree — provided, in the latter case, we have better reasons. Sometimes Socrates shows his interlocutor — and us — that some position we have adopted

without much thought about, say, virtue (what dispositions it is good to have) or knowledge (how is it different from *thinking* something is so?), is really untenable: we *see* that we have to give that up, or at least that we can't hold both that and other convictions we have. I remember a seminar some years ago on the *Republic* when a student undertook to defend Thrasymachus' claim that what is called right or just is simply whatever the stronger decide it is they want to do. The student prudently declined Thrasymachus' concession to Socrates that the strong might be wrong in what they decide (because that implies there is a standard for what's good apart from their will). So I remarked that if that were the case — that they couldn't be wrong — then people should never regret anything that they have done. The student found that hard to imagine, and decided to think about it. (Nietzsche would have encouraged him to stand firm.)

A famous example of seeing after denying is of course that of Thomas Hobbes. Running across a copy of Euclid's *Elements* opened to the last proposition of the first book and exclaiming, "By God, that's impossible!", he worked his way back through the premises and saw that it had to be so.

This example also exhibits indirectly something that is one of the great pedagogical advantages of our discussion seminars, and that is that frequently in them, seeing is intensified by discovery, instead of being brought about simply by someone showing what is the case. To discover is to uncover, to have something come into view that was not seen before. I still remember the student, who when I was a beginner at reading and discussing, pointed out the curious improbability, in *Oedipus Rex*, of having the only witness to the killing of Laius return to Thebes after Oedipus had *already* become king (where was he all that time?). And often, as in the examples of Hobbes and my Thrasymachus defender, the discovery is heightened in its memorability by the fact that one held the opposite view before the seeing.

I've been giving examples of seeing, but a good deal of what we learn in college and elsewhere is learned through *believing* what has come to be known by others. In studying astronomy, for example, we can do some of the calculations about orbits and eclipses and

see something of the consistency of heliocentrism, and even make some of the observations that Galileo made (e.g. of the moons of Jupiter or of the shadows of the mountains on the moon at first quarter, with a pair of binoculars). But most of us remain, as far as observations crucial to heliocentrism go, close to the position of Galileo: no observation was accessible to him (e.g. of a stellar parallax) that could have confirmed Copernicus' theory. Nonetheless, we all "know" (I hope you do!) that the earth rotates on its axis and orbits around the sun.

As long as what we are asked to believe isn't just the views of the teacher, but rather the consensus of investigators about what it is that the preponderance of the evidence confirms, we're comfortable with saying that we "know" that. Even Saint Augustine, who has high standards for knowing, agrees that it's okay to use that term under certain circumstances as long as we're aware of the difference between believing and knowing. But, he cautions, the last thing parents should send their offspring to school for is to learn the opinions of the instructor.

For Augustine, the teacher — strictly speaking — is one who *shows* us what is so, or at least helps us to *see* by directing our attention (for example, by asking questions) toward what is there to see but which we haven't noticed, paid attention to.

Of course, as Augustine insists in the *Confessions* and elsewhere, there are many things important to our lives that we can *only* believe others about, because those things are not or are no longer directly accessible to us. So, we believe our parents when they tell us they're our parents, we believe people about what happened where we weren't present, in the distant or recent past, and so forth. Still, if we could, it would seem, it would be better to know than to believe.

But one of the most fundamental differences between classical and early Christian thought is the role allotted to belief in the pursuit of understanding. Not only do thinkers such as St. Augustine reconceptualize the relation of belief to understanding in that pursuit, but there are significant consequences for the human community in the reevaluation.

Classical love of wisdom sought understanding through what showed itself to be true or false, what was evident, or was evidently implied by what is known. In the pursuit of that goal, all opinions, traditions, hearsay, conventional beliefs and values are bracketed, to be subjected to examination. Although there are opinions that are de facto true opinions, they are not anchored by insight and so, for those capable of it, they are always to be replaced by knowledge, where possible. As Socrates says in the *Phaedrus* when he's asked a question about what actions are pleasing to the gods,

I can tell you what I've heard from our ancestors. Whether it's true or not, I don't know. But if we could find out the truth for ourselves, should we still bother about human opinions?

"A ridiculous question!" Phaedrus responds.

Belief is what rhetoric aims to produce, because many are not able, for various reasons, to pursue such knowledge, and so need, for their own sake as well as for that of the community, to be persuaded to right beliefs. It is appropriate for a *learner* to believe, as Aristotle said, but the aim of those able to learn is to replace beliefs by insight, where this is possible.

Christianity confronts this conception of the way to wisdom with the assertion that "the folly of God is wiser than human wisdom." (I Cor. 1:25) (Erasmus will later write *In Praise of Folly*, at almost the same time that Machiavelli is writing *The Prince*, that searing critique of the folly of ideals in the real world). It is necessary, in order to be a follower of Christian religiousness, to believe things that have been hidden since the foundation of the world, but are now revealed by the life and doctrine of Jesus. Flesh and blood, i.e. human wisdom, cannot discover the whole truth, although it may be able to come to know of the invisible God. So although some steps toward the whole truth can be taken by reason, ultimately faith — belief in God and what He has revealed — is the only means of accessing the critical truths and the Tao, the right Way. (Jesus said, "I am the Way", I am the Tao.)

Please note that we now have two species of believing. One is believing another human being about something that is knowable by human beings — and the other (call it faith) is believing God about something that is beyond our human capacity to come to know. Early Christian thinkers pretty much agreed with the ancient philosophers in their conception and evaluation of the first kind of believing.

One may adopt for faith, as Aquinas does, Aristotle's comment about the appropriateness of a learner's believing and defer the knowing until we are face to face with God. But Aquinas is also insistent that the content of revelation is in principle beyond our capacity to reason to in this life (or the next, for that matter). In fact we could define the content of revelation in just that way, as truths that are inaccessible to human reason except by believing.

I want to explore this issue a bit by thinking about an early work of Augustine, called *On the Advantages of Believing* written to a friend who had been, together with him, a hearer in the Manichean sect, but who had remained a Manichee. It is five years or so since Augustine's conversion to Catholic Christianity, and he wants to remove possible philosophical obstacles to his friend's reasonably considering the claims of the Church in his search for true religiousness. So the work is not theological or religious in the sense of utilizing premises from Scripture, it doesn't argue for the truth of Catholic Christianity, but rather considers from a philosophical angle the subjects of reading and of believing in the context of searching for true wisdom, which may be true religiousness. However the work also bears the character of personal testimony, of a person who has traveled the road of thought that he maps out.



The first half of the discussion is about reading texts, of all kinds, but especially those which may embody true wisdom, and the need to have a teacher who can *show* us how to read texts (including religious texts), *show* us the different ways in which texts may have to be read in order to be rightly understood. But the second half is about finding a wise person who can be our guide on the path to true wisdom. In the first part, the terms “believing” and “authority” play no part, because it is about a teacher *showing* us the different ways of construing texts. But the second part *is* about believing an authority, a guru. The historical Christ is discussed, but He is never referred to there (or elsewhere in Augustine’s writings) as a teacher, and is never described as teaching. Rather He is called a *preceptor*, who instructs us concerning true religiousness. (At the close of Augustine’s presenting of his case to his friend, he urges him to commit himself in faith and charity to “good preceptors of Catholic Christianity.”)

In Augustine’s view the historical human being Christ is *not* a teacher, because He does not *show* us that what He says is true — because He cannot. We have to simply believe Him.

You may remember from the *Confessions* that the Manichees ridiculed the superstitious Christian position that belief comes first, and they promised instead to provide reasons for all of their teaching. They didn’t, and that’s one of the things that finally turned Augustine away from their sect. He wants his friend to think about the difference between believing God — faith — and *seeing* the reasons for something being so.

But isn’t it desirable, we might ask, to be given reasons why it is so when asked to assent to some proposition? Generally yes, Augustine responds, but in some cases no. Nor is this necessarily unreasonable. As he writes later to a friend,

Let no one think that God hates in us that faculty by which he made us superior to all other living things. Let no one think that we should believe in such a way as not to accept or to seek a reason for our belief, since we could not even believe if we did not have rational souls. (Ep. 120.3)

There can be at least two simple grounds for believing something without being given reasons for it. One is Aristotle’s, the pedagogical ground that we may have to accept a number of things on the authority of our teachers for some time before we come to see the reasons for ourselves. In this case, *what* we believe is presented as humanly knowable — and known — and it is reasonable to believe the one who tells us. Perhaps some of us will never be in a position to see for ourselves. Indeed, all of us believe things our teachers told us that we either couldn’t demonstrate or that would take years of training and observation for us to verify for ourselves, see for ourselves.

The other case is logically simple: we must believe without reasons being given when what we are asked to believe is in principle beyond any human capacity to demonstrate, to come to know. In such

circumstances, what makes faith the valuable thing that Augustine thinks it is is that it can enable us to go beyond all possible proof. That doesn’t mean we can’t still ask whether it is reasonable so to believe. For example, we can ask whether there is some contradiction in what is proposed for belief, or why we should believe this person who is the guru, the preceptor.

Belief (as distinguished from opinion) requires someone to be believed, and faith requires a preceptor in whom we believe. So the question reappears of how to look for such an authority, and Augustine argues that unless the providence of God presides over human affairs, religiousness is otiose, and if there is such providence one can reasonably hope that God will provide or has already provided such an authoritative way to true wisdom. If God doesn’t know that we are searching, or is unable to help us, then that is not the God we seek.

But if this is a kind of conversation, we should listen to some voices raising questions about what Augustine and I have agreed on so far.

So let me raise three questions. The first derives from Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments*, written by an assumed persona-author (Johannes Climacus). The non-religious author proposes an anti-Socratic thought experiment. Suppose — this is his hypothesis — that there were some truths that were, in principle, inaccessible to human inquiry — no matter how many grants we won or how many generations pursued them. And suppose those truths were important, crucial for understanding our lives. How could we come to learn them? Well, only by believing, believing someone who told us about those truths. The time, the moment, when that opportunity opened up to us would be crucial, because our hypothesis is that those truths were eternally, in principle, inaccessible to the human mind’s powers. Kierkegaard draws out several other interesting implications of the thought experiment, but I will mention only one. Suppose we hear that some man, long ago, announced such truths, proclaimed them on his own authority, and we’re invited to believe these truths, to believe him. Isn’t that contrary to our hypothesis — which is that such truths are, in principle, inaccessible to the human mind, so no human being *could* know them?

Well, there is a way to remain consistent with the hypothesis, but it adds to what we have to believe — we would have to believe something about the identity of that human being, of who that human being really was in order to be able to tell us about those truths, without his having heard them from someone else. You would have to believe something really paradoxical, Kierkegaard says — a kind of absolute paradox.

The second question derives from Thomas Hobbes, who says in *Leviathan* that when someone believes that the Scriptures are the word of God, unless they have some special revelation from God, they in fact believe human beings, believe the ones from whom they learned of the Scriptures, namely parents and pastors. So when we say we believe the preceptor,

but have never seen Him or heard Him preach, we in fact believe those human beings who are intermediaries in telling us of Him. They are the object of our belief, of our faith.

Indeed, when he wrote *On the Advantages of Believing* Augustine accepted something close to that analysis, although with the proviso that what he believed was the Church, which Christ had instituted to be the vehicle of that revelation. But ten years later, when he wrote the *Confessions*, he was able, on the basis of his reflections over those years about the course of his life, to add a foundation to that analysis. For now he had come to see that God could — and did — speak directly to him through the words of His creatures, that God could speak to him in the voice of a child playing, could speak directly to him in real time, on line, in the words of Scripture. So the hearing through which his faith came was indeed a hearkening to *God's* calling him.

What makes that position distinctive can be seen by contrasting it with the practice he discusses earlier in the *Confessions*, of some people, in Augustine's time and in our own, who open up randomly the pages of some ancient book (Vergil's *Aeneid* was popular in Augustine's time, perhaps Nostradamus in ours) and finding sentences that seem to have current import for us. Augustine's mentor at the time told him that that is just chance, like the predictions of astrology occasionally being relevant. His experience in the garden of picking up and opening the Scriptures seemingly at random and finding a passage aimed straight to his heart, right to his situation, may seem like the practice with Vergil or Nostradamus. But Augustine does not understand it to be chance, not only because the book he seizes is one that presents itself as the word of God, but because he has learned that God causes the existence of all events, that all is under His providence. It's not chance that he read those words at that point in his life. God speaks to us in what befalls us, and we answer by what we do.

And the third question is, at least here, my own, because it comes out of what I have said earlier. If what has been said about revelation is correct — that it announces things beyond the scope of human reason, beyond our ability to see for ourselves that they are true, that we can affirm only by faith — then what does revelation have to do with liberal education? There is, admittedly, a part of education that includes believing — but *that* believing is of things able to be discovered by human inquiry, things for which reasons can be given, though students may not yet be in a position to assess them. We seem to have left liberal education behind, because the content of revelation *can't* be taught, it seems, but only imparted, set forth — and believed.

In William James' book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (which I introduce here only because I think Augustine employs these same metrics), James says that there are three questions to ask when examining a religion. First, is its doctrine

illuminating, does it help us to understand our lives and the human condition, does it offer accounts that explain things? Second, is it consistent with what we *know* to be the case about the way things are, do we have to surrender any of what we know in order to believe? And third, what are its fruits, what kinds of changes does it effect in the lives of its adherents? Augustine (it seems to me) uses all three of these standards in his reflections on finding true religiousness. Indeed the second — consistency with what we otherwise know — was one of the major factors in his abandonment of Manicheism, namely its incompatibility with what he knew about astronomy.

As for the third — the changes in the life-style of believers — in his little work *On True Religion* he points to the similarity between the teachings of the philosophers and the lives of ordinary Christians, who do not seek temporal and transient goods, people who like Socrates have the courage for martyrdom, who shun covetousness, superstition, and wantonness, without ever having studied with philosophers.

But I want to go back to James' first criterion, whether the doctrine is illuminating. I want to look at this issue in terms of a maxim that runs through Augustine's writings from the beginning to the end. It is the maxim from the Septuagint version of Isaiah, "Unless you believe, you will not understand." The maxim may sound alright at first, but if you think about it, it can seem puzzling. Does it mean that if you do believe, you will understand? Wouldn't that be paradoxical, if faith means believing something that no human being can see to be true? Does it mean that if you believe a proposition, you will come to understand its meaning?

Norman Kretzman, a scholar of medieval philosophy, has argued that it would be ridiculous to take the maxim to mean that you have to believe a proposition in order to understand it. Surely we can understand what a proposition means without having to believe it. So it can't mean that. But nor does it seem that "understanding" could mean that gaining some kind of evidence for a proposition requires already believing it, and then continuing to *believe* it. So Kretzman suggested construing "believe" as referring to the "way of faith," a way of life, and "understand" as the heavenly reward of that way of life, the vision of God. Unless you live according to that belief, you will not achieve the understanding that comes in heaven. (A sort of variant of Thomas Aquinas' adaptation of Aristotle's comment about it being appropriate for a learner to believe.)

I think that part of the problem here is that Kretzman takes "understanding" a proposition as supplanting, rather than supplementing, belief, so if you have understanding you no longer have to — indeed no longer can — simply believe it. And another part of his problem is that he takes both "belief" and "understanding" to refer to *a* proposition. That's one reason why he has to find another construal of the maxim. But the puzzle raises broader issues about the

sense of “believe” and “understand” in Augustine’s thought.

In his dialogue *On The Teacher* and elsewhere, Augustine argues that understanding is not having some single thing — a Form, a proposition, an idea — in the mind’s eye, it is rather a “gestalting” of elements of knowledge, it is making connections, seeing how things fit together and affect each other’s meaning. He says in the *Confessions*:

...to learn such things...is just this: by acts of thought to gather together and collect, as it were, things that memory contained here and there without any order.... they must be brought together [*cogenda*] so that they may be known. That is, they must be collected together [*colligenda*] as it were out of a scattered state. (10.11.18)

There are the elements and there is the gestalting, and only as these come together do we approach a fuller *understanding* of the elements that we already know. If we have only the elements, then we “know” only in a weak sense of the term. The British philosopher Miles Burnyeat has a nice example of the relationship between these terms:

[If someone says] “The only part of modern physics I *understand* is the formula  $E=mc^2$ ”, [that] is nonsense. [But if someone says] “The only part of modern physics I *know* is the formula  $E=mc^2$ ”, that is merely sad.

If we have a connected set of propositions we can begin to understand their relationship to each other. Although in the case of revelation the elements are believed, rather than given as evident or known, gestalting them, bringing them into the right kind of interconnection, can articulate their meaning in ways that elemental contemplation never could. One might say unless you believe a number of related propositions, you will not understand this proposition.

That is a first intimation that there can be something involved in faith more than *simply* the assent to truths beyond reason’s power to know, something that can possibly validate a role for human understanding, and so possibly for a role in education. I want, in the last part of these reflections, to identify three ways in which the maxim we are discussing with Augustine — unless you believe, you will not understand — can be understood.

The first way is its personal dimension, the one that is embodied in the *Confessions* and intensely felt by Augustine. He says to his friend (as I have mentioned before), that “if the providence of God does not preside over human things, then there is no purpose in bothering about religion.” But if we believe that God cares about whether we find the Tao, the Way home, then we might expect to find signs of that care in the events of our lives — if we look for them. Looking back over his life until now, Augustine discovers the hand of God in what befell him. The quest for understanding can be directed not only upward,

toward the eternal Truth and truths, but it can also be directed, through memory, toward the narrative that our life enacts.

John Paul II — to introduce another interlocutor — says in his encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio*, (On Faith and Reason), that “by knowing and loving God, men and women may ... come to know the fullness of truth about themselves.” “Know thyself” acquires here a new dimension.

The second way in which “unless you believe you will not understand” can be understood has already been indicated — namely that reflection on the content of revelation as a whole can elucidate the meaning of particular propositions, sayings, narratives, by the mutual light they can cast on each other. And philosophy, human wisdom, plays an important part here, as John Paul underlines. First, with respect to the *hearing* of what is proposed to faith, the understanding of what is being declared, philosophy’s treasure-trove of reflections on language and meaning and logic and on what there is, is indispensable in unfolding the proper meaning of the words of Scripture and tradition. And second, with respect to the elaboration of those proper meanings into a coherent doctrine, a coherent understanding of the faith — which takes the name of theology — human reason is indispensable.

And so at every step of this way, of this *fides quaerens intellectum*, this faith seeking understanding, there are human inferences to be justified, human arguments to be made, texts to be interpreted. I’ll remind you of the first half of Augustine’s work *On the Advantages of Believing*, which is devoted to finding a *teacher* to *show* us how to read texts. And my reason for reminding you is to draw to your attention to the fact that there is something in this enterprise that can be taught. So theology is like the hypothetical method of the *Phaedo*, or like what Aristotle calls dialectic, it tries to find out what reasonably follows from or is implied by the premises we begin from. And that’s to say that there is something there that can have a place in liberal education, if we bring reason and revelation together.

And a third way of understanding our Augustinian maxim is the opposite of the second: it’s about what revelation can do for philosophy. It certainly cannot replace it, as is already evident. But perhaps faith can cast a light on the problems of philosophy that can point philosophers toward insights that might otherwise be overlooked. I like to call this, tongue in cheek, the Galileo principle, because Salviati, in the *Dialogue on the Two World Systems*, asserts that “[knowing] that a conclusion is certain assists not a little in the discovery of its proof.”

Faith cannot enter into the *reasons* for affirming a philosophical thesis, but it can lead — and I think historically has led — philosophers to look at the data in a certain way, to gestalt the problem being explored in a different way, even to discover a problem. So the concept of “person” entered philosophy through the theological attempts to clarify the notions of the

Trinity and of the Incarnation. Just one other example. Human beings are made in the image of God. In what does that image consist? The Biblical tradition is that that image of God becomes visible “in the communion of persons,” and that God is near to each of us, is *with* us. I think it is not accidental that Gabriel Marcel and Martin Buber (and other so-called “personalist” philosophers) have been influential in drawing attention to the issues involved in the notion of “I and Thou,” of the “Absolute Thou” and to the essentially interpersonal character of personhood.

Those are particular historical examples of the influence of revelation on philosophy. But I think that a dialogue about our reading of religious and secular authors can illuminate the issues they discuss in a very helpful way. I mentioned before the implicit exchange between Erasmus and Machiavelli over the relevance of religious ideals in the “real world.” I would add the contemporaneous effort of Thomas More in *Utopia* to grapple with the problem — not to mention another kind of praise of folly in *Don Quixote*.

Augustine has a statement in the *De Trinitate* that “faith seeks and understanding finds.” (15.2.2) Some

have expressed reservations about that, on the not unreasonable grounds that seeking of that sort more often goes “not with believing but with being in doubt about a proposition.” As Charles Sanders Peirce says, it is the “irritation of doubt” that tends to give rise to inquiry. I think that is true, but it is also true that belief or faith is not a terminally satisfying state either, just because it affirms a proposition in the absence of evidence, of *seeing* that what is affirmed is true. So it is not odd that theology should have been characterized as *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding, or that faith should be defined by Augustine as “thinking and assenting” or perhaps “thinking while assenting.” “To believe,” Augustine said toward the end of his life, “is nothing other than to think, to ponder, while assenting. One can think without believing, and often people think in order not to believe. But whoever believes, thinks — both thinks in believing and believes in thinking.... If faith does not think, it is nothing” (“De Praedestinatione Sanctorum,” 5). Part of liberal education, for believers, incorporates that pondering by having a conversation with those who have pondered before us.

## About the Greatness of Great Books

by  
Eva Brann

Eva Brann, who has her doctorate from Yale University in archaeology, holds the Addison E. Mullikin Tutorship at St. John’s College of Annapolis and Santa Fe, the most prestigious college devoted to Great Books education. Having joined the St. John’s faculty in 1957, she served as Dean from 1990 to 1997. She has taught at Stanford, has been a member of Princeton’s Institute for Advanced Studies, and is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Among her five books, the most recent is *The Study of Time: Philosophical Truth and Human Consequences*.

There is cause for much celebration at this fiftieth anniversary of the Program of Liberal Studies at the University of Notre Dame, and cause also for some anxiety and some mourning. There is something incantatory in the title of our celebration: “The First Fifty Years of the Program of Liberal Studies at the University of Notre Dame,” as if it were meant to incline the heavens to grant another half century to its not altogether sanguine supporters. And there is something unwittingly sad about the title itself of the program whose longevity we are here to celebrate; “the Program of Liberal Studies at the University of Notre Dame,” as if a great university were not in itself supposed to be a program of liberal learning and all the professions taught there free professions.

Well, let us make the most of the hard fact our celebratory title expresses, the fact that liberal education has fallen on hard times. Making the best of a hard fact for those of us whose proper work it is to learn and teach always involves this: seizing the occasion to think ourselves into the depth of the matter, to try to reach bottom. As you will see, I am not arguing for reviewing programs, adjusting to the times, considering clientele, or any of those foolishly prudential calculations to which we all occasionally feel ourselves

driven. It is because, I have to confess to you, I have an almost unshakable faith in that one great book that first considered the relation of learning to its political conditions: Plato’s *Republic*.

In my seven years as dean of the Annapolis campus of St. John’s College I had three heroes, a local hero, a national hero, and a supra-spatial hero. As we all know, to the young, a hero is someone to *be* like, but to an adult a hero is someone to *consult* in the privacy of one’s soul—a vivid image that answers in an hour of interior reflection. My local hero was Jacob Klein, a dean of my college who was to our program somewhat as your Otto Bird was to yours, a stabilizing second founder. My national hero was Abraham Lincoln, who, I like to think, would, in his humane wisdom, have been a wily and appreciative protector of our programs. And the supra-spatial hero was the Socrates of Plato’s *Republic*, who, I thought, taught me an invaluable practical lesson. Most of the celebrants here today will have read this book of which Rousseau discerningly said in the *Émile* that “Those who judge books by their titles take this for a treatise on politics, but it is the finest treatise on [public] education ever written.”

Well, I would amend this dictum: it is a book that tells how practical judgment flows from high learning. And the way it tells us about that is to say nothing. Consider how the governors of the best city are educated. They study what we now call the liberal arts, first the quadrivium, that is, mathematics and physics, and then the trivium, comprised in dialectic. All that is in preparation for what we now call ontology, the study of Being, the "greatest study." And after that, do these leaders-to-be of the best thinkable community study public administration, educational programming, dean-soothing and student-attracting? No such thing. They go down from the heights of learning and guide their city—just like that. For Socrates thinks that wise managing flows directly from some period of sojourn with the highest—or deepest—matters, depending on the way you imagine the architecture of the world.

Of course, a skeptic might object, Socrates' model of the unintermediated application of metaphysics to management takes place in a city built to the specifications of philosopher kings. To which I would answer that we too in fact live in a republic that is not inhospitable to spots where intellectual substance is directly at work, and that the communities of learning are the very places where such learning could and should inform administration. Another skeptic might now worry that I am advocating the rule of ideology. I recognize and appreciate this worry: things farthest apart often appear to be identical, and so it is with ideology and philosophy. Yet the latter is, actually, in admittedly uneasy conjunction with a healthy pragmatism, the best cure for ideology. I even think I know how to tell them apart and how to keep ideology at bay while making the world safe for philosophy, but perhaps that is a problem best saved for our conversation after this talk. For the moment my long digression had only one aim: to persuade you that it is good for us to be driven from time to time to rake up the roots of our activity—good intellectually and very practical for a long and happy survival, partly because we will know better how to maintain our programs within and partly because we will have more convincing rejoinders to our opponents.

From the beginning the central activity for both our programs, yours at Notre Dame and ours at St. John's, has been the reading and discussion of *Great Books*, in capitals. We live, I think, in a remarkable and, in its harsh way, an invigorating time—the first time, to my knowledge, when the pedagogical value and even the existence of such books have been impugned as a kind. Surely through the two and a half millennia of public education people—students out loud and the public in its heart—have mumbled and murmured about those stuffy, dry-as-dust classics and their administering jailers, the schoolmasters. But that the intellectuals themselves should engage in a learned and sophisticated betrayal, the treason of the interpreters, that is surely a new thing upon the face of the earth. Whatever else it might do, it gives urgency and complexity to what would otherwise be a flabby

question with a formulaic answer: What about the greatness of great books?

I want to unpack that question, to attack it in parts and to try my answers on you, to talk about later on. I must tell you that I've never believed much in the kind of feckless question-asking that curls up like blue smoke dissipating into the illimitable sky; I think that whoever says Q should also begin on A, since the framing of a truly-meant question involves the outline of a possible answer.

These then are the elements of the question that I discern:

1. Are great books a *kind*, and if they are a kind, is it a natural or a conventional class?
2. Why do these books exercise a kind of *repulsion*? If greatness is a term of approbation, why does not the whole world love these books and prefer to be with them over any available amusement? And don't even think of smiling—it's a humanly revelatory enigma.
3. Are there determinate *criteria* for recognizing a member of the class? Are these criteria such as to establish an affinity among great books, or are they that strange sort of mark which makes all the members of the kind mutually incomparable?
4. Do great books have a natural *connection to programmatic liberal studies*, and is there a peculiar *pedagogy* that goes with them naturally?

Let me now try out my answers on you.

1. First, I am persuaded that great books are a kind, and even a natural kind. To put my claim in the most assertive way: I think you can separate out a great book from that huge and wonderful class of very, very good books without which literate life would be too grandly simple for us moderns to bear—too grandly simple and hence also too unstimulating for our fast-paced intellects. Believe me, we *ought* to reflect on what it does to us to live amidst scores of good books on any conceivable topic, which, if we absorb them, endanger our ability for quiet, independent thought and if we ignore them put us in peril of inexcusable ignorance.

How do I come to think that great books form a natural kind? It goes way back to my junior year, I think, at Brooklyn College. We had certain requirements to work off, and I hated them. I'd put off my classics-in-translation credits far too late, and never was a more unreceptive student dragooned into what proved to be her fate. What a sign from heaven that I, who have spent my teaching life in an all-required program, should have been dragged into its beginning by a routine fulfillment of one such requirement!

We began with the *Iliad*, in the old translation by Lang, Leaf and Myers, as I recollect, a version stately or stuffy, according to one's taste. I was full of rebellion and recalcitrance and I flunked—a first in my life—the early examination the professor gave us. Goaded by pride I set myself to studying for the next one. And so I woke up to two things at once: the book called the *Odyssey* and my teacher called Professor Alice Kober. I saw a dumpy, dowdy, uncharismatic person with bottle-bottom glasses and a charmless demeanor. I heard a teacher of quiet undramatic

intensity, and I have never forgotten what she said to us once: "How do you tell a great book? Your hair stands on end and the back of your neck tingles." I fell in love with Homer, with my teacher, with those classics all at once. I don't think I've ever again floated in such clouds of glory. In those days you didn't just go and talk to a professor, but she must have noticed something, because she offered to teach me Greek. She died that year before she could make good her promise, and I only discovered recently, when Simon Singh published his book on code-breaking, that she had been a pathbreaker in the decoding of the so-called Linear B tablets which were the palace records of the Homeric kings.

I am not being funny in citing Miss Kober's indices for telling greatness in books. This physiological reader response is not a criterion, an internal mark of such books, but rather an external index, an effect. But if such books do produce such arousals, and only certain books do it in just the way she meant, then here is something natural about that kind and its relation to us, for it is hard to argue that convention can produce these reactions, particularly in the post-adolescent barbarian that I was then and that most American students are now. (I should interject here that I *like*, even love, our post-adolescent barbarians much better than the over-trained transatlantic scholars of former days.)

The going academic opinion of our day is double-tongued. It says on the one hand that the tradition that hands down to us the class of great books is a convention established by the powers-that-be to enforce their own dominance. And it says on the other hand that there are no great books anyway, because all books are equally testimonials to the social circumstances of their times, and the oral testimony of an illiterate peasant may in fact tell us more than the high-flown propaganda of the classics. All texts are covert documents; all documents are serious texts.

The first argument, that great books are stealthy instruments of domination, might have weight if these books were really a class of one. As it happens, they form a quarrelsome, or more politely, a dialectic tradition, within which no position stands unopposed: who should rule, who should own, even who should read and what—on nothing do these books agree, and ever-renewed radicalism is their *modus operandi*. The claim of inherent conservatism is so patently absurd that it is not easy—though necessary—to discover the grain of truth embedded in this as in every notion.

But the other argument, that among texts there obtains the same equality that, as we egalitarians of humanity agree, exists in certain respects among human souls—that argument is even harder to grapple with. There is truth in the claim that every human expression is of interest and seriously interpretable. There is truth in the claim that the citizens of a democracy particularly ought to interest themselves in the discourse of ordinary life. And it appears to be a truth as well that our fellow citizens are not always naturally aroused by good books, that they do not always see their concerns represented by them.

2. And so arises the second question: Why *doesn't* all the world cherish them as we do? Why have they been for ages the bane of students and now the butt of intellectuals? Well, I think I'll leave the intellectuals alone—it is their bread and butter to be against things. But there is still the evidence of ordinary people.

Or is there? Do recall that this is not only a Bible-thumping, it is also a Bible-studying land. In fact those not altogether unjustly maligned T.V. preachers do stay true to their fundamentalism in knowing their Bible, both parts, inside out, so that their exegesis often has an intelligent freshness. And all over the country people go to the Bible, Hebrew and Greek, in privacy and in study groups, with that sense of approaching something at once high yet welcoming which is the very effect of greatness in a book, though admittedly of a unique sort in the Book of books. All over the country, too, people spend Sunday afternoons in those equally maligned chain bookstores and Wednesday evenings in book club meetings—maybe not many people, but not a negligible number either.

But in the universities it's not so good. This is now, and has always been, partly the fault of the teachers, and so, at the end of this talk I want to say something about teaching the great books—or better about the inadvisability of trying to do anything so stultifying. But for the moment I want to put the other half of the blame where it seems to me to belong: on these books themselves.

For they often show a repellent outside. Most of my surviving family lives in Israel, where they use the word *sabra* for a native-born Israeli. *Sabra* is a desert cactus, prickly outside and sweet inside. Great books are often like *sabras*, repellent at a first approach and subtly sweet upon entry. Who on opening the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the most worn-down volume in my library, doesn't experience a pressing desire to close it again, because Kant writes from the first page as for a reader who has already reached the last page? Who having the meritorious intention of completing the 1400 pages of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* doesn't want to give up after that opening soirée in St. Petersburg in which dozens of repulsive people with unpronounceable names make trivial conversation? And yet the one book turns out to be a grand edifice of stupendous clarity of design, and the second a stage displaying the most humanly engaging of characters ever depicted in words, and that tedious soirée looks in retrospect like the perfect portal to it.

Why are the great books so often difficult of access, bad teaching aside? I think it is for reasons such as this: These books end in being an education, but they also require some education for a beginning. You have to know something to enter; you have to be preliminarily literate. They teach about life but they require some previous experience; you have to have lived some to learn more. They often initiate a new way of thinking and emphasize their radical originality by employing a new way of talking; you have to know the language to learn the language. And above all, though they mean to touch you where you live, they have no intention of doing what mediocre teachers so

often preach, namely to start where the student is. On the contrary, they require going cold turkey on old habits and a leap into the unrecognizable unknown. In other words, there's nothing warm and fuzzy about great books, and people need a good shove for a first immersion, anything as long as it isn't an advertising preachment, a background lecture or an introductory interpretation. Not the most elegant of these shoves but perhaps the most efficient is the programmatic assignment: "You read this tonight and tomorrow we'll talk about it. Never mind whether it speaks to you right off. Just do it."

3. That brings me to the third and central element of the inquiry into the greatness of great books. I seem to have claimed that programmatic assignments may not be the worst way to penetrate the prickly exterior of great books. On the face of it this is an absurdity: Why should civilization's greatest gift be made into a scheduled chore and a measured-out imposition? Well, for the reasons I've just laid out: I remember in my college years carrying this or that great book around for weeks, wishing I'd read it. A kindly-meant compulsion was usually the catalyst, some due date or deadline. In fact, it strikes me now as the definition of benign teaching: to compel students to do what they long to do.

But having assumed that awesome responsibility, teachers are now faced with telling students what to read for tomorrow. Not to mince words: you have to make lists of books that you think everyone should read. And it doesn't matter if only a few people do actually read them. They have to be the books that you think are necessary to the best life—for that is another way of saying: great books. I have claimed, and argued very sketchily, that there are some such books, books in quality pretty nearly discontinuous with the many very good books. (Let me here interject that the multitudinous mediocre books and the myriads of bad books are also recognizable classes, with their own charms and dangers, their genres and their mavericks, but these are not my subject for today.)

My implied point is that, as pretty good books are quite often related to a fairly good life, so great books have a natural affinity to the best kind of life, or maybe more modestly and more plausibly, to the possibility of an occasional elevation of people's life to a level beyond the ordinary. In enrolling our students in a great books program we implicitly invite them to a split and yet well-integrated existence—a life of solid, ordinary human continuity and a parallel life of extraordinary discontinuous hours of panoramic contemplation, each informing the other. For it seems to me that the acknowledgment of greatness has this unavoidable concomitant: that we are invited to live now and then above ourselves. That, of course, is the root of the difficulty we have with these books: they achieve human centrality through human distance, and we have to help our students to live these lives in tandem and to bring the distant near without bringing it down.

So now to the point. Can I produce intrinsic marks by which to recognize them? Are there criteria

and are they fulfilled? I believe the answer is yes and yes. Of course, I should acknowledge here that I have many illustrious predecessors in this effort; just in the past century Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, Dorothy Sayers, Jorge Borges, and Italo Calvino come to mind. But here is my own.

My first criterion is *inexhaustibility*. I have loved many a book or piece of music or work of art in my life, and I love them still (for there is no such thing as love totally lost) though in the nostalgic mode; when I go back to them I can, it seems to me, see right through them: they are ghostly loves that have lost their vivifying mystery. But then there are some that are always, on each reading, new. Partly this effect comes from the blessing of forgetfulness; there was simply too much artful detail in these texts for remembrance. Partly it comes from the boon of a matured attention; there are aspects that stand forth now that I was not prepared to notice in an earlier reading. In any case, the book is its own teacher, the teacher of itself: each reading is a preparation for a subsequent reading.

Nonetheless, the first reading, the student's and the amateur's reading, is not a defective reading. This is the time when a great book makes its grand impact and leaves its indelible impression, wins us to lasting admiration and often to fascinated revulsion. But almost always the sense of depths or abysses that we have not begun to exhaust is part of the first and for some people the only reading. And since it is the beginning of intellectual virtue to acknowledge to oneself that one has only just begun to understand a work of great human gravity, even so incomplete an experience often has a lifelong effect.

A second criterion in *solidity*. Inexhaustible as the text may be, there is a solid core of the book that becomes more solidly shapely with each reading. In such books answers coagulate and bring with them a comet's tail of questions that are so nearly ultimate as to demand acknowledgment as mysteries—questions that can neither be avoided nor satisfied. I know no great book of philosophy or of fiction that does not reveal, on an appreciatively critical reading, these limits, or to put it more dramatically, which is not eschatological, that is to say, concerned with the outer margins of what it is humanly possible to understand.

But just because they do go to the limits, great books have a solid core, a bread-and-butter solidity. I mean that the teaching of the book, mind-boggling though it may be at first reading, when somehow grasped, seats itself in the mind as a well-cut mortise receives the tenon to make a neat joint. And I also mean that the doctrine, once assimilated, seems at the same time truly amazing and utterly sensible, so that, if it's philosophy, you say to yourself in turn: "How could the author have thought of this?" and "I've always known it." And if it's fiction you ask yourself while in the middle: "How will the author ever bring off this denouement?" and when you've finished, "However else?" In short, great books rarely seem contrived or sophisticated. In our conversation I can

give specific examples of their uncontrived subtlety and unsophisticated perspicacity.

Of course, in their very tendency to click into the mind they make life strenuous for the trustfully critical reader of a series of such books, since their intellectual doctrines mostly countermand each other just as their imaginative realms displace each other. To read more than one great book is to learn that not everything the mind accepts gladly as its own can be *the* inexpugnable truth or *the* sovereign fiction. And to face that fact is another intellectual virtue worthy acquiring.

The last criterion I will mention (though I could think of several more that are less vivid in my experience) is the *perfect fit of word and matter*. I know books that have much elegant language and minimal matter, but I can't think of more than a handful that have great matter and inadequate words. I think that is because in great texts the substance shapes the expression; it is balled up where the matter is knotty, obscure where it is dark, neological where it is radically novel, and luminous when the matter shines. The style of a great text is entirely absorbed in adequacy; the author thinks and imagines, and the thoughts and images attract the language that brings them out, that utters them, with the least possible deformation—or so it seems. There is, incidentally, a lesson to writing teachers in this criterion, if it is correctly observed: A writing *exercise*, writing for the sake of having written, is an offense against the end of language which is to be *about* something. But that's another talk.

These three criteria, then, inexhaustibility of detail and aspect, well-seatedness in intellect and imagination, tight fit of matter and style, have seemed to me intrinsic marks of the kind of book to be called great. To be sure, they require receptive attention on the part of the reader to show themselves, but they seem to be effects arising from the nature of the books themselves. In fact, the ability of these books to captivate and reward close attention might be the summary description of their quality.

But such books are like human souls in this—that their species nature, which makes them recognizable in kind, is always realized in individuals that are incomparable in their particularity. Each great book requires its own fresh reading, unobscured by general theories prejudicing its interpretation. The kind of book I am speaking of will not fail to meet these criteria, but how in particular it will do it is unspecifiable in advance. And why would one read these demanding books at all if they did not reward one always and again with unforetellable marvels? Perhaps this very *originality* should be a summary criterion, except that it marks no really articulable characteristic—perhaps we are back here to the bristling hair and the tingling neck. Nonetheless, it is just this ungeneralizable particularity which inspires the most companionable conversations and forges the fellowship of readers.

4. And that brings me to my fourth and final answer, about the role of the great books in liberal studies and the pedagogy peculiarly appropriate to them. To take

the latter, the pedagogy, first, since I have already broached it: Teachers should not obscure greatness with additive talk, but let the student come directly and immediately face to face with it in its unadulterated form and only then be discreetly helpful. That's about the sum total of it: No getting in the way—you cannot “teach a great book.” While, as I said earlier, it seems to me a sadly self-imposed kind of mediocrity to temper assigned reading to the students' perceived preoccupation and preparation, the time to be where the students are comes when they have been set to grappling with these books; then attention-directing questions and clarifying responses are in order. The teacher's responsibility is to be, in the spiral of learning, at the same spot that the student is, but perhaps at a higher turn of technical clarity and complexity of interpretation. But why am I preaching to you, who know from your long experience as teachers and students what your books require!

Let me now end with a word about the relation, a close one as it seems to me, of Great Books to Liberal Studies. I could, of course, point to the old medieval tradition linking arts and authors. One of the great medieval texts on the liberal arts, Hugo of St. Victor's *Didascalicon* of c. 1120 A.D., is subtitled “On the Study of Reading.” For Hugo the arts and the authors are reciprocally related: the arts are the skills of reading and the authors to be read are themselves the originators of the arts. This relation makes perfectly good contemporary sense and is in fact reflected in the Program of Liberal Studies whose semicentennial we are celebrating. Liberal study is inherently a preparation for interpretation, that activity in which freedom and discipline are most closely conjoined—a claim you might wish to challenge in a minute—and the Great Books are the most suitable texts on which to exercise the skills of interpretation, the arts of finding significance. But these books are themselves in turn artful works of interpretation that originate at one and the same time a view of the way things are and of the way to construe the way things are. The free arts and original books do indeed stand in close reciprocal relation.

Here is a concluding coda. I said early on that it seemed to me that devotion to great books was more alive in the land at large than survey of the universities might show. There is also a small but vigorous resurgence of interest in the liberal arts, a revival of which programs like yours and mine are the beneficiaries. But since the host institution to this Program of Liberal Studies is a Catholic university, I want to recall yet another bright spot in the prospects of liberal studies. It is Pope John Paul's rousing call to philosophy set out in his encyclical of 1998, called *Faith and Reason*, which is addressed to clergy and laity alike. It is not to dogmatic metaphysics or to systematic rationality that he calls Catholics and their teaching institutions but to genuine, freely inquiring reflection, in a word to philosophy. I have not so far made the argument; nonetheless I want now at the end to advance another claim that might run into opposition: that philosophy so understood and liberal



study are convertible terms. If that is true and if I may be forgiven for a friendly trespass into concerns not strictly my own, I would say that the Program of Liberal Studies at the University of Notre Dame has received marching orders for its next fifty years far

grandier than the mere maintenance of its present excellence.

I and my college hope that you may flourish, for all our sakes.

## The Humanities, Democracy, and the Question of Authority

by  
Jean Bethke Elshtain

Jean Bethke Elshtain, who holds her doctorate from Brandeis University, teaches at the University of Chicago as the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Social and Political Ethics in the Divinity School, the Department of Political Science, and the Committee on International Relations. With nearly two dozen books to her credit, she also serves as a member of the Board of Trustees of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University, of the National Humanities Center, and of Notre Dame's Erasmus Institute.

A few years ago the academy was roiled by a debate over 'the canon,' referring to lists of basic texts that had, over the years, been construed as fundamental and constitutive of a specific tradition of books that might reasonably be said to be great books, or classic works, or somehow essential and inescapable were one to be considered well-educated. The charge was mounted that this canon was little more than the excrescence of historic patriarchy, the work of 'dead, white European males' whose influence had been more or less arbitrarily imposed in order to hold intact a tradition that doomed women to second class citizenship, certain races to social inferiority, and whole nations to third-rate status. Defenders of 'the canon' fired back that there was nothing arbitrary in the selection of these works; that they had stood the test of time; and that an unreasoning populism that would throw out the canon in favor of works deemed 'relevant' according to current political trends would only result, over time, in maleducation and the creation of men and women who were ideologically supercharged but woefully ignorant of the most profound productions of their own tradition.

It would be dreary, to say the least, to engage in a reprise of this controversy, one that generated far more heat than light. But lurking within the interstices of the canon wars were a number of interesting questions that were not adequately addressed by either side to the debate and that, if addressed, could not help but challenge defenders and deconstructors of the traditional 'great books' approach to liberal education. By challenge here I mean compel each side to think carefully and in nuanced ways about the question of authority and what is taken to be authoritative in any field of human endeavor—religion, education, politics, art. Questions about the status of texts and traditions are questions that prod us to think about the difference between forms of authority necessary in order to secure traditions and to promote a perduring sense of stewardship in those entrusted with transmitting traditions over time by contrast to authoritarian or arbitrary modes that secure the dominance of one group, or nation, or gender over another.

The deconstructors in the canon debate failed to make this distinction by assuming that authoritarian and authoritative were synonyms and that *any* list of required readings, so to speak, being equally arbitrary, should be arbitrary in the direction of dismantling all forms of privilege (gender, race, class, etc.) The defenders failed to make this distinction—or failed too frequently—and thus their defense of the idea of a 'great book' lacked nuance and an awareness that, indeed, a great books approach must be flexible, attuned to changing historic emphases, and thus subject to revision.

In one of her typically complex and convoluted arguments, the political theorist, Hannah Arendt, put the crisis of authority on the table as a question—"What is Authority?"—rather than as a conclusion—"What was Authority?"—her original title for the piece.<sup>1</sup> She discussed the authority that comes into being in certain founding moments like those in which citizens, or would-be citizens, make pledges and promises—a social contract or covenant—that brings a polity of a certain sort into being. Democratic authority is of this sort. A constitutional order emerges through an authoritative process that overthrows one sort of authority (monarchical, oligarchical) in favor of another. The revolt of constitutionalists historically was not in the direction of destroying authority altogether but of constituting a political order in and through an alternative understanding of what brings an authoritative polity into being and holds its legitimacy over-time intact. Because constitutionalists fretted that the people's sovereignty, too, might become a tyranny in practice, that form of sovereignty had to be checked and limited. The authority that lay behind a presupposition of the people's authority was one heavily reliant on the capacity of persons for "right reason" and on the legitimating force behind appeals to nature or "nature's God." This is a complex story, to say the least, and one I cannot go into here. But it is backdrop to a consideration of the question of authoritative texts.

Arendt insisted that the problem that emerges if we no longer distinguish authority from impositional power is that we see brute force behind any and all

appeals to authority. The most infamous example of this view is Mao's declamation, "Power grows out of the barrel of a gun." No niceities about authority here. Just brute force. Arendt blasted this view, insisting that in failing to distinguish between authority and violence, or power as arbitrary coercion, we fall into an abyss conceptually. We lose the past as "the permanence and durability" of the world melts away and we find ourselves "living and struggling with a Protean universe where everything at any moment can become almost anything else."<sup>2</sup> This view of the immanent arbitrariness of, and in, all things Arendt found hopeless and dangerous: it in fact opens the door to the very arbitrariness it claims lies behind everything. For legitimate authoritative political rulers historically (to use but one example) were always bound in particular ways: bound by law, bound by tradition, and bound by the force of past example and experience. Being bound helped to make possible the creation of frameworks for action; helped to sustain certain spaces—whether of church, political, or other institutions of social life. The bound authority figure was not free to do just anything. *That* was the lawlessness of the tyrant, whether the king who, having become arbitrary, is no longer a legitimate king or, most horribly, the twentieth-century tyrant, a Hitler or Stalin, who neither knows nor recognizes the laws of God, or nature, or "common sense" (in Arendt's formulation) and can do nothing but lay waste.

Arendt was most concerned with a political world constituted by authority, a world, therefore, that rejected despots as unfit to rule. For the power to coerce is incompatible with the freedom of others and wherever a tyrant ruled there is only a master-slave relationship. Authority, by contrast, is a means whereby citizens (or subjects) and rulers hold one another accountable. It is the means whereby power-as-authority means a right to speak. Democratic and constitutional struggles historically were about extending this authority to those arbitrarily cut-off from *auctoritas* by accident of birth. Legitimate authority, then, is a way to reduce arbitrariness, not to generate and extend it. There is a form of dogmatic skepticism—skepticism skeptical about everything save its own skepticism—that cannot see this and, hence, cannot sustain itself over time. This brand of skepticism not only undermines authoritative traditions and institutions, it is constantly self-undermining. Somehow this is taken to be the ironic mode appropriate to our post-modern condition.

Now: what is fascinating for our purposes about all this is the fact Alexis de Tocqueville, in his acknowledged classic, *Democracy in America*, argued that democracy was, if anything, uniquely dependent upon certain authoritative institutions but also upon a type of formation—the creation of certain dispositions in citizens—that enabled those citizens to reach for a form of self-interest rightly understood rather than to be dominated by a lower and lower mean on the level of culture ("bad egoism") that would, in turn, entangle persons in webs of control aimed at muffling at least somewhat the disintegrative effects of narrow egoism.<sup>3</sup> Shared and self-imposed moral restraint liberates

persons for participation in a constitutional republic. For Tocqueville, religious belief is central to this project of moral restraint in part because it draws people out of bad egoism and into stewardship within their communities. As well, authoritative religious traditions (in the plural) depend upon and nurture trust. And it is vital that we take certain things on trust—not blind faith but a form of knowing trust. Should we shun trust altogether we would be in a world of mistrust that fuels the creation of fissionable sects rather than free, democratic institutions with a capacious understanding of what it means to sustain a world of 'publics.' Here, in Tocqueville's words, are some thoughts on the question of trust and skepticism:

"If a man had to prove for himself all the truths of which he makes use every day, he would never come to an end of it. He would wear himself out proving preliminary points and make no progress....[S]ome beliefs must be accepted without discussion so that it is possible to go deeply into a few selected ones for examination. It is true that any man accepting any opinion on trust from another puts his mind in bondage. But it is a salutary bondage, which allows him to make good use of freedom. So somewhere and somehow authority is always bound to play a part in intellectual and moral life."<sup>4</sup>

If authority collapses altogether the upshot is not more freedom but, rather, democratic despotism, a world in which authority has been replaced by a flattened context absent distinctive political, religious, and pedagogical institutions that form us as free citizens and well-educated persons. It seems that we have arrived at a point where our options tend to be cast as either an attempt to reaffirm and reassert traditional modes of authoritative determination of the sort Hannah Arendt argued that modernity had shattered, on the one hand; or, on the other, we are invited to participate in a kind of epistemological free-for-all. Because we place so little confidence in received norms and claims, nearly everything at every moment is up for grabs. By Arendt's reckoning we are not doing a very good job of confronting the dilemma of authority, including the epistemological features of that dilemma. The often tedious canon debate was in some sense a debate about knowledge and the warrant for truth claims, by which I refer to claims to quality in a text, claims in behalf of the perduring value of a text, and so on. Let's deepen our consideration of this matter.

#### *The authority of texts: sic et non.*

Here is one piece of the puzzle—by which I refer to our current difficulty in taking anything on trust and in giving credence to what has been deemed to us by powerful traditions. I draw from Martin Luther on translation. In this essay, we find Luther insisting upon the authority of Holy Writ but equally insistent that not just anything goes by way of interpretation; this despite the fact that in his "Preface to the Revelation of Saint John," he writes, "About this book on the revelation of John, I leave everyone free to hold his own ideas, and I would bind no man to my opinion or

judgement; I say what I feel.”<sup>5</sup> Luther pitted *his* interpretation and the authority of Scripture itself against the Church, whose emissary, Cajetan, was in sympathy with critics of Church corruption but insistent that the Church’s authoritative traditions must be upheld. Luther’s dramatic challenge was that of a single individual against an authoritative tradition and institution.

We have all been educated to cheer Luther’s “Here I Stand” and the spectacle of the lone man of conscience defying the powerful and dominant institution. And we are not wrong to do this. But it should be with one hand clapping. For what drops out of Luther’s deconstruction of Church authority—become arbitrary on his view and thus a form of authoritarianism—is a recognition that it is only through the mediation of institutions that certain warrants and claims and, yes, texts, become normative for members of a social body. What authority inheres in a text if one can read it and say that one “feels”? Luther indicated that he had translated the New Testament “to the best of my ability and according to my conscience....No one is forbidden to do a better piece of work.” He claimed he knew better than the Papists how to translate, “how much knowledge, work, reason and understanding is required in a good translator; they have never tried it,” being too slavishly tied to received readings.<sup>6</sup> For help in translating authoritatively one must look to daily use, to the linguistic field in which one is immersed. One asks the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the market.

But matters are never so simple. Who has the interpretive right or freedom? Despite Luther’s apparent interpretive pluralism, authority remains—the authority of internal textual evidence. But that authority must be revealed through the interpretive voice of another: it does not simply speak for itself. You cannot turn a text to any purpose. You cannot make it do anything you want. You are bound to the Word or the words. Luther had unleashed more than he knew or wanted. Authoritative teachings are necessary to the creation and the sustaining of a tradition. A radically skeptical epistemology—if everyone is permitted to do what he or she pleases or feels—cannot sustain anything beyond an immediate sensate moment.

A world in which all that is solid melts into air cannot even solidify a point of protest, *particularly* if that point of protest claims that the experiences of different classes and categories of persons are so divergent as to be incommensurable. You claim first person privilege for yourself and argue that others “don’t get it.” They—the others who don’t get it—are trying to impose something arbitrarily on you in the false belief (or just via a knowing nefarious claim) that certain texts transcend the moments of their historic origin and can speak truths to us across centuries and differences in culture and language. You make no universal claim in behalf of your text or texts. Instead, you lodge an ideological plaint that the interests of this group or that must be served and as that is what the bottom line has always been about in any case, now the time has come for those who were masters to be

reduced to a different status; those who were slaves to be lifted up. Something more or less along these lines.

This is taken to be a democratic quest. But, in fact, it is not. You cannot sustain a democratic society if you presume that experiences are so different for distinct categories and groups of people that the gulf between them is, in principle, unbridgeable. A likely scenario in such a situation is that, first, any possibility of a rough-and-ready sharing of moral norms and aspirations goes out the window. Some might argue that this isn’t necessarily devastating because it leaves political authority, including the legitimacy of certain procedural norms, intact. But that isn’t a viable option over the long run. Procedures are themselves substantive and reflect a moral vision. We must have enough trust and confidence in the propositions that ground a democratic experiment and that give rise to legal and political procedures and regularizes that we know we can repair to these, whether in solidarity or in opposition. The matter can be cast rather starkly: unless citizens or would-be citizens have recourse to a shared political and normative vocabulary, a democratic society cannot sustain itself over time. Indeed, Arendt argues in her masterwork, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, that:

The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought), no longer exist.<sup>7</sup>

*Upholding authoritative traditions through protest.*

There is a form of protest that undermines itself in proclaiming the arbitrariness of all authoritative claims: this form of protest—whether against a political institution, a religious belief, an epistemological claim, or a text called great—does not further and deepen the democratic project but weakens it. There is another form of protest that strengthens the authoritative claims of democracy by insisting that those claims be deepened rather than abandoned in practice. Texts often lie at the very heart of this process. The example I have in mind is Frederick Douglass’s oration “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” delivered at Rochester, New York, July 5, 1852. Douglass begins by asking: “Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in the Declaration of Independence, extended to us? And am I, therefore, called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar...?” His answer is not in the affirmative. “I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you this day rejoice, are not enjoyed in common.” You cannot drag a man forward in fetters before the temple of liberty and call upon him to join you in a “joyous anthem.” God does not take such mockery lightly. He will smite the nation that does.

Note that Douglass draws upon a shared religious and civic idiom to drive home his point to his listeners.

Above the joy of celebration, Douglass hears the "mournful wail of millions." He will not forget these bleeding "children of sorrow." His subject is American Slavery. When you see things from the point of view of the slave, they look different. What you see is an America "false to the past, false to the present" and in danger of binding herself to be "false to the future." Following this thundering expose and denunciation, Douglass builds toward common understanding for, he insists, there is already a base to build on. Slaves do not have to prove that they are human beings. "That point is conceded already. Nobody doubts it. The slaveholders themselves acknowledge it in the enactment of laws for their government. They acknowledge it when they punish disobedience on the part of the slave."

This is a brilliant move on Douglass's part, for he shows the ways in which, through their incorporation into a legal and constitutional system in important ways, the status of the slave here affirmed runs counter to the degraded status slavery presupposes. "What is this but the acknowledgment that the slave is a moral, intellectual, and responsible being." So, affirming the equal "manhood of the Negro race," looking at the hundreds of tasks Negroes are called upon to do and are doing in slavery and in freedom, those in bondage have nothing more to prove. And because America's founding documents—her great civic texts—argue "that man is entitled to liberty" and that he is the "rightful owner of his own body," there is nothing to repair to in order to justify slavery other than a bad theology that is blasphemous on its face. So: "What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer, a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim." In "revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival."<sup>8</sup> Douglass can make this argument because he has access to certain texts, norms, truth claims, constitutional and sacred, that his own countrymen and women are flouting. In so doing, they violate their own civic temple. Douglass bridges the gap that separates the experiences of slave and free by appealing to an understanding available to all, including the slaveholder. Authority is alive and well in his account because certain norms and idioms are sturdy and reliable. From vastly different beginning points, we can reach for common understanding because there is, in fact, something we share: a capacity for reason, a language of civic protest and affirmation, and a set of basic texts.

To insist, against Douglass, that one cannot bridge certain experiential gaps; that there is no such thing as common understanding and no such thing as an essential, constitutive text or texts not only negates authority, it negates democratic possibility. A complex tradition is many things. Douglass speaks to and from a political tradition that he would deepen and extend—make more, not less, authoritative. Is there any rough analogue to this civic process in the world of

education and pedagogy? If there is, what do the 'great books' have to do with it?

*Education as dialogues, past and present.*

We need to shatter a particular mirror, the one that features those I shall tag the hagiographer and the negator attempting to stare one another down. The hagiographer, pedagogically speaking, is one who believes there is a settled and fixed cannon of great works that speaks to the essence of the wisdom of the ages, good for all times and places. To mess with that is tantamount to blasphemy. The negator holds that nothing good ever came from the hands of dead, white European males. They were sexists, racists, blatant oppressors who hid behind fine-sounding words and who embodied their hegemonic triumphalism within cultural artifacts of all sorts, including books deemed great. We neither need nor want their tainted words any longer. I exaggerate, of course, but not by much. Both of these positions are off-kilter and both undermine the supple claims of textual authority necessary to sustain critique and affirmation over time. Genuine education in and for a democratic culture helps us to engage in a debate with interlocutors long dead or protagonists who never lived save on the page and, through that engagement, to elaborate conceptions through which we understand, interpret, and debate our shared world.

I often reflect on my own education in the rural village of Timnath (pop. 182) on northern Colorado's high plains in which I grew up, especially in the Timnath Public School, District No. 62. The public school was one building that housed grades one through twelve. Our text for freshman high school English class was *Adventures in Reading* published by Harcourt, Brace. The Table of Contents lists "Good Stories Old and New" with such bracing subsections as "Winning Against the Odds," "Meeting the Unusual," and "Facing Problems." We read "Lyrics from Many Lands" and "American Songs and Sketches." By no means was this text dominated by a single point of view. We read Mary O'Hara, Dorothy Canfield, Margaret Weymouth Jackson, Elsie Singmaster, Selma Lagerlof, Rosemary Vincent Benet, Kathryn Forbes, Sarojini Naidu, Willa Cather, and Emily Dickson. We read Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. We read Leo Tolstoy and Pedro de Alarcon. We read translations of Native American warrior songs. This reading was undertaken on the assumption that life was filled with many wonders. Through *Adventures in Reading*, we could make the lives and thoughts of others our own in some way.

The Preface taught me that: "Reading is your passport to adventure and faraway places. In books the world lies before you, as paths radiating from great cities to distant lands, to scenes forever new, forever changing....Reading knows no barrier, neither time nor space nor bounds of prejudice—it admits us all to the community of democratic experience." As a child, then, I learned that education is not simply about acquiring information but encountering complex forms of human self and cultural understanding.

Given its widespread use as a public school textbook, *Adventures in Reading* entwined formation—those Tocquevillian habits of the heart—with democratic possibility. America is a country that is based on certain premises embodied in certain texts. The democratic project is carried forward through plural modes and idioms that can and must be shared—not shared perfectly or transparently, but shared—in order that they become part of the authoritative backdrop that is so much a part of any culture’s taken-for-granted. The Gettysburg Address is taken for granted, or once was. The writings of our great writers are taken-for-granted.

The debates will be about who can or should be lifted into such a category rather than the destruction of the category altogether. The process I here note is one of inclusion more than exclusion. It is plural, not monolithic. But, then, it has never been such. Because the United States is a western culture, there are texts that form a backdrop to our cultural self-understanding that are simply inescapable. You cannot appreciate our constitution unless you know something about social contract theory and constitutionalism. You cannot understand constitutionalism unless you know something about the tradition of natural law and natural right. You cannot understand natural law and natural right unless you know something about certain ontological claims about human being itself imbedded in Western Christianity. You cannot understand Western Christianity unless you have some familiarity with both Athens and Jerusalem, on and on.

To be sure, not everyone has to be equally familiar with all of this. But to assume that no one need be familiar for the entire edifice is one giant, misbegotten altar to forms of historic privilege and impositional power is to embrace the crudest possible forms of reductionism and radical nominalism that cannot sustain either persons or cultures. Many of our great democratic reformers, those who built up what they believed a democratic culture was all about—both equality and excellence—understood this.

*The humanities, the democracy of everyday life, and the creation of a social institution.*

There is a powerful story about the humanities and democracy that is too little known. It is also a story of one of our great public citizens, Jane Addams of Hull-House. Hull-House, the settlement founded by Jane Addams and her friend, Ellen Gates Starr, opened its doors in Chicago’s teeming 19<sup>th</sup> ward in September, 1889. Usually thought of as a kind of proto-welfare institution, Hull-House instead was, as Addams put it, a site for the mutual interpretation of the classes one to the other. Chicago was a city of immigrants in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Predominant in the 19<sup>th</sup> ward were Italians, Greeks, Irish, Germans, Bohemians, and Russian Jews. But the languages and dialects spoken were many more. Surely this was a paradigm situation of mutual unintelligibility! But, for Addams, the humanities—literature, art, music, theater, and social

debate—could bring people together across the vast distances that separated them in the interest of citizenship.

From her student days, Addams had been on a quest for a form of female authority, *auctoritas*, and it involved the right to speak *and* to be heard. The effort was not to silence those who had previously spoken, but to add new voices to the dialogue. She would help everyone to find his or her tongue. To this end, Hull-House created a 750-capacity theater for drama and lectures. It provided clubs and spaces of all sorts for the exchange of ideas in a nonprofessional setting, one not bound by the jargon that too often besets the academy. Some have described this communal approach to the life of the mind as a mode symbolizing not only neighborhood democracy but an organic, by contrast to mechanical or merely instrumental, approach to intellect. What is meant is that the connection of thought to the circumstances of its creation is assumed but thought is not diminished thereby. Leo Tolstoy, one of Jane Addams’ favorites, was a Russian nobleman but he helped her to understand something about pacifism and an alternative definition of what it means to be noble—a form of nobility tied to character and a capacity for self-sacrifice rather than inherited privilege.

For Addams, the notion that George Eliot, say, should be relegated to the backwaters and something more politically and ideologically ‘relevant’ be substituted in the interest of a political claim rather than an enlargement of human perspective and understanding would be astounding. Eliot enlarges our capacity for understanding and, in so doing, animates the moral sensibilities and helps to make possible a more decent politics. This is a complex process. There are no short-cuts to understanding.

Addams would be dismayed at the short attention spans our culture now seems to treat as normative, fueled by television and the internet but reflected increasingly in the books we read. Reading now is dominated by the therapeutic and self-help genre, all focused on an obsession with the self. We seem little inspired by the best our own tradition has to offer—and by that I mean not just past works but those in the present written by authors who understand, in the words of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, that they “stand on the shoulders of giants.”

For Addams, much of the challenge of creating a democratic culture is that such a culture must simultaneously create space for all to speak and to be heard but also educate people in such a way that they can distinguish between the shoddy, the cruel, the venal, the dull, and the simplistic by contrast to the distinguished, the generous, the capacious, the lively, and the complex. One must find ways to lift up the dignity of the quotidian and dramatize the everyday. Many of the great stories of our past—and they are great stories—are of conflicts unto death: here one thinks of the Greek and Shakespearean tragedies much beloved by Miss Addams. But a peaceful civil society is the heart and soul of a democratic culture. There is dignity and nobility in the everyday, in the provision

made for tending to the bodies of young and old, in sowing and sewing, planting and harvesting, bread for stomachs, cool hands on fevered brows. But it is hard to muster art around this. Still one must try for that it the way to build up an authoritative tradition around the democracy of everyday life.

If tragedy as invented by the Greeks was a form of public discourse that aimed to inculcate civic virtue and enhance the capacity of citizens to act with foresight and to judge with insight, then Jane Addams would form daily life in a democratic civil society into a narrative that invited us into similar forms of recognition apt to the moment in which we live now. Here is one of her own attempts along these lines, one that mingles stark terror and human dignity, that fuses the small with the great, that opens up into a world as complex and terrifying and conflicted in its redemptive power as a Sophoclean drama. The story is drawn from Addams' masterwork of American autobiography, *Twenty Years at Hull-House*:

...some frightened women had bidden me come quickly to the house of an old German woman, whom two men from the county agent's office were attempting to remove to the County Infirmary. The poor old creature had thrown herself upon a small and battered chest of drawers and clung there, clutching it so firmly that it would have been impossible to remove her without also taking the piece of furniture. She did not weep nor moan nor indeed make any human sound but between her broken gasps for breath she squealed shrilly like a frightened animal caught in a trap. The little group of women and children gathered at her door stood aghast at this realization of the black dread which always clouds the lives of the very poor. The neighborhood women and I hastened to make all sorts of promises as to the support of the old woman, and the county officials, only too glad to be rid of their unhappy duty, left her to our ministrations. This dread of the poorhouse, the result of centuries of deterrent "poor law" administration, seemed to me not without some justification one summer when I found myself perpetually distressed by the unnecessary idleness and forlornness of the old women at the Cook County Infirmary, many of whom I had known in the years when activity was still a necessity, and when they felt bustlingly important. To take away from an old woman whose life has been spent in household cares all the foolish little belongings to which her affections cling and to which her very fingers have become accustomed, is to take away her last incentive to activity, almost to life itself. To give an old woman only a chair and a bed, to leave her no cupboard in which her treasures may be stowed, not only that she may take them out when she desires occupation, but that her mind may dwell upon them in moments of reverie, is to reduce living almost beyond the limits of human endurance.

In this potent small gem, Addams grips us with a story of old age and loss, reminds us that an entire life may be decocted to the pinpoint of a cupboard, a chest

of drawers, all the neatly wound balls of thread and rickrack and small containers of buttons sorted by size, color, and shape, the tiny pieces of cloth that might yet become a patch for a torn pant or a patch in a colorful quilt. These my own grandmother went over again and again in her twilight years, reminding you that she had built the drawers herself, for she was a carpenter as well as a seamstress. I imagine her, when finally her wits had deserted her altogether, dreaming of thread in tiny rows and bold pieces of cloth and all those quilts she had lovingly made and given away over all those years. From such recognition, open to the lessons of pity, Addams calls us into large-heartedness of a sort prepared to travel into shabby rooms in decrepit buildings on a mission of discovery where what is learned is empathy and humility, where the tears shed join an ever-flowing underground stream that gives life its inexorable sadness and makes of some lives a tale of ill-dignity. Addams was fond of recalling George Eliot, who tells us at the conclusion of *Middlemarch* that "the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts."

In many vital ways, Jane Addams' was a literary life, one shaped by texts we call great and others that were current in her time but are not read so much now. The point is all these texts were complex, distinctive, a stereopticon giving depth and texture to ways of seeing. In *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, the references are not cited so much as displayed, they flow forth having been absorbed, having become second nature to her. These include Ruskin, Carlyle, deQuincey, Browning, Plutarch, Irving, Green, Gibbons, Emerson, Bronson Alcott, Homer, Plato, Sombart, Maeterlinck, Darwin, Mazzini, H.G. Wells, Sophocles, Comte, Tolstoy, George Eliot, Hawthorne, Victor Hugo, John Locke, Pestalozzi, Beatrice Potter, J.S. Mill, Schopenhauer, Engels, Dewey, Goethe, Kier Hardie, G.B. Shaw, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Luther, Graham Taylor, William Dean Howells, William James, Wordsworth, Whitman, Galsworthy, Harnack, Ibsen, Yeats, Dante, Bakunin, Spenser, Shakespeare, Spencer, Gorki [sic], St. Francis, on and on. These were part of the air she breathed; these molded the dreams she dreamt—from Cedarville, Illinois (pop. 750) and out into the wide world she made her own.

Jane Addams' mind was densely populated; her canon generous; her knowledge extensive; her devotion to mind unwavering. She embodies the humanities and the democracy of everyday life. She believed it was a citizen's obligation to deepen and to enhance a tradition; it was necessary to train citizens to recognize that the right to speak and to be heard bears within it a responsibility, namely, a commitment to dialogue.

In his eulogy for Jane Addams, Walter Lippman captured this distinctive democratic style: compassion without condescension, pity without vulgarity, sympathy for the common without forgetting the uncommon. He spoke of her blend of sympathy with distinction, of common humanity with a noble style. One doesn't arrive at this blend unless one moves in a medium that makes possible these twinned categories which, to the extent that they are driven apart, leads