How (and Why) to Use This Guide

John Zmirak

If you've picked up this book from the store shelves that groan with college guides and test-prep manuals the size of telephone books, chances are you're looking for something special. Indeed, our subtitle is a bit of a giveaway; you are holding in your hands a "niche" guide for a self-selected audience. By crafting a book for "conservatives, old-fashioned liberals, and people of faith," we are reaching out to parents and students with distinctive values and educational goals: people who see education as grounded in a particular vision of the person, or a particular notion of what it means to be a "good" and "free" man or woman. The word "liberty" and the term "liberal arts" have more than an etymological relation; the liberal arts are the proper study of someone who hopes to achieve true liberty, which consists in the capacity and inclination to *choose* the good. A liberal arts education must therefore be both formative as well as informative. It builds up one's character as well as one's resumé.

This is something on which all educated Westerners used to agree, regardless of which political party they supported. It was part of the great American consensus, which allowed for civic cooperation across the political spectrum. However, this common understanding of the meaning and purpose of education was largely abandoned in the 1960s and '70s, with the radicalization first of college campuses, then of the faculty, and finally of the classroom. Since then, the very notions of abstract truth, disinterested scholarship, and even pluralism have come under attack by professors in thrall to esoteric ideologies—making reasoned debate difficult, and turning the seminar hall into a political battlefield rather than a place where free minds meet. The task of preserving the fragile ideal of humane education thus has fallen to those intellectual conservatives, religious believers, and honorable "old-fashioned liberals" (in the tradition of John F. Kennedy, Eugene McCarthy, and George McGovern) who esteem the ideals of liberal education—and who share the egalitarian dream of offering such an education not just to an elite, but to the many.

Most of America's founders received—and advocated—just such an education, from Thomas Jefferson to John Marshall to John Adams to Benjamin Franklin. But the American tradition of liberal education predates the founding generation by centuries. Among the first initiatives undertaken by European settlers when they landed on North American shores was to found colleges and universities—the first being the University

of Mexico, which dates to 1551. Harvard College, founded in 1636, began as a seminary staffed by broadly learned theologians who had inherited the Renaissance respect for classical education and infused it with a profound spirituality. As European settlers expanded across the continent, schools and colleges served as anchors in the new communities they founded, marking their commitment to building a republic on the shoulders of educated citizens.

The publisher of this book, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, has worked for more than fifty years with students and scholars to preserve academic freedom and to introduce young people to the classic texts and great ideas that undergird American civilization; this is what ISI has meant by "educating for liberty." As a membership organization, ISI has built up a broad network of students and teachers at hundreds of American universities. It is to these scholars that we turned in preparing this volume. Their insights and advice helped us decide which institutions to include in this select guide to fifty liberal arts colleges and universities, schools that might—in the deepest, most profound sense of the term—be properly called "all-American."

In doing college research, it's easy enough to figure out which schools are the most selective, which have the most superficial prestige, and which the most impressive alumni; these are the kinds of things colleges talk up on their websites, and most guides to higher education use such factors as the primary criteria by which to select (or rank) schools. It's also true that a school which is already famous has a better chance of attracting students with native smarts from elite high schools, not to mention famous professors who will deliver weekly lectures in between researching their own books and jetting off to conferences. This keeps up a school's reputation—regardless, in many cases, of the actual quality of teaching in the classroom. This fact was noticed by author Loren Pope (an old-fashioned liberal whom we admire). In his justly beloved *Colleges That Change Lives,* Pope pointed out how students often benefit from attending less prestigious schools with smaller classes, professors more oriented to teaching than to research, and close-knit communities that encourage serious study over grade-grubbing and careerism.

In this book, we do pay attention to the esteem a college has earned, and its success in training intellectually awakened young men and women for lives of service, science, and creativity. But there is much, much more to this than simply attracting many students with high SAT scores and turning most of them away. Yet that is how a school's "selectivity" is determined by college guides that "rank" schools accordingly. In ISI's other college guide, *Choosing the Right College*, we cover the most selective schools and many more, exploring the quality of the coursework required of every student, the academic freedom found in the classroom, and the opportunities for serious study offered at each. Consulting professors and students at more than 130 schools, we offer in that book an authoritative reference guide to higher education in America—including its highest peaks and deepest valleys.

In this guide, we're doing something a little different. Instead of looking skeptically at the schools that do well in famous rankings—some of which are simply coasting on reputations won long ago—we have taken a fresh look at the field of higher education. In compiling this guide, we largely ignored our competition and the schools they were writing about every year. Instead, we looked first at the curricula offered at hundreds of schools. We checked which courses each school required of every student, regardless of major, to determine that college's philosophy of education.

You can tell what an institution thinks is important by what it makes mandatory. Does a school require that students acquire a broad background in the liberal arts—in European and American history, politics, philosophy, laboratory science, and religion? Or are those core areas of knowledge left up to chance and consumer choice? Have they been replaced by mandated (and typically politicized) courses informed by "race," "class," and "gender"? We tried to identify those schools that were most serious about offering their students a solid grounding in the traditional disciplines, the precise kind of knowledge that universities in the West were founded to transmit. And we came up with the fifty schools profiled here, nearly all of which require their charges to take a reasonable number of foundational classes in these disciplines.

Of course, even if a school does require its students to take a wide array of classes in the traditional disciplines, that doesn't mean those courses are necessarily taught well, or fairly. Our campus contacts report that professors are often reluctant to teach introductory "survey" courses. For faculty, such classes are less entertaining to offer than seminars tracking their latest research. They also require a professor to pitch his or her teaching at nonspecialists—indeed, at students who may resent the fact that the course is required, who start off the semester with a resounding yawn. Not every historian or literary scholar is really equipped to awaken in his reluctant pupils enthusiasm for an alien discipline. Most universities make their tenure decisions based not on a professor's aptitude at transmitting general knowledge to the average student, but rather on the quality (but mostly the quantity) of specialized books and articles he or she produces for a few hundred advanced colleagues in the field. Since schools do not reward the skills of an eloquent generalist, we should not be surprised that this species of teacher is becoming endangered. But we found fifty schools where they still thrive.

In compiling this volume, we asked another question as well: Once a student selects a major, how solid is the course of study required of him to earn a degree? May an undergraduate specialize too soon, focusing narrowly on the things which interested him in high school, to emerge with a sheepskin and a case of tunnel vision? Are there enough serious courses in each discipline for a student to choose among, or have professors filled the course catalog with esoteric, politicized classes? At the schools we recommend, most departments are still serious, with requirements for majors that are intellectually thorough and well-balanced.

You might be surprised to learn that some of the best schools we have found—academically, socially, spiritually—happen to be less well-known to high school guidance counselors than the fifty "top" schools ranked by selectivity. But think of these colleges as if they were fine wines from regions not yet trumpeted by the critics, or as if

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they were important writers too long overlooked (just as Melville and Hawthorne were once all but forgotten). These schools have mostly stayed true to their founding visions, attracting scholars and students who aren't driven by fashionable trends and academic fads. By flying "under the radar," they have evaded the pressure to conform, retaining their individual characters. Here you will find schools that really are devoted to such glorious particularities as the Great Books, the Bible, Thomist philosophy, Mennonite peacemaking, Southern military traditions, or Quaker theology. But above all, you'll encounter colleges devoted to the vision of formation in the liberal arts outlined by John Henry Newman in his seminal work *The Idea of a University*. As he wrote in that book:

> Every thing has its own perfection, be it higher or lower in the scale of things; and the perfection of one is not the perfection of another. Things animate, inanimate, visible, invisible, all are good in their kind, and have a best of themselves, which is an object of pursuit. Why do you take such pains with your garden or your park? You see to your walks and turf and shrubberies; to your trees and drives; not as if you meant to make an orchard of the one, or corn or pasture land of the other, but because there is a special beauty in all that is goodly in wood, water, plain, and slope, brought all together by art into one shape, and grouped into one whole. Your cities are beautiful, your palaces, your public buildings, your territorial mansions, your churches; and their beauty leads to nothing beyond itself. There is a physical beauty and a moral: there is a beauty of person, there is a beauty of our moral being, which is natural virtue; and in like manner there is a beauty, there is a perfection, of the intellect. . . . The heroes, of whom history tells, Alexander, or Caesar, or Scipio, or Saladin, are the representatives of that magnanimity or self-mastery which is the greatness of human nature. Christianity too has its heroes, and in the supernatural order, and we call them Saints. The artist puts before him beauty of feature and form; the poet, beauty of mind; the preacher, the beauty of grace: then intellect too, I repeat, has its beauty, and it has those who aim at it. To open the mind, to correct it, to refine it, to enable it to know, and to digest, master, rule, and use its knowledge, to give it power over its own faculties, application, flexibility, method, critical exactness, sagacity, resource, address, eloquent expression. . . .

This passage sums up the goals of the great tradition of liberal (i.e., liberating) education in the West, which in one form or another guided the foundation of the first universities in the Middle Ages, the labors of the Renaissance humanists, the research of scientists from Newton to Einstein, and which should continue to govern universities today. We offer for your consideration schools where this spirit still survives.

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Now, we are not so pessimistic as to think that there are only fifty such schools remaining in the entire United States. What we present here is a *selection* of the best schools, as recommended by the students and teachers we work with and trust, and as confirmed by our own research. In whittling down our list, we concentrated on schools with solid core curricula or reasonably narrow distribution requirements. We also covered a few institutions, such as Princeton University and Deep Springs College, whose overall excellence demanded their inclusion—despite the excessive flexibility of their curricula. With mostly top-notch courses on offer, the education offered at Princeton and Deep Springs may be too much left to student choice, but it's not really left to chance.

Many other schools not included here offer excellent programs, programs in which any student would be privileged to take part. At Yale University, for instance, students in the Directed Studies program read the Great Books in small, Socratic seminars and write a paper every week integrating their major themes. Gustavus Adolphus College offers its students the option of an integrated core that covers Western history, art, literature, and politics from a broadly biblical perspective. Marquette College's honors program offers a similar, well-crafted exploration, guided mainly by principles of Catholic philosophy. There are excellent programs of this sort at dozens of schools around the country—if a student is willing to take on the additional challenges they impose. But is such an effort worthwhile?

In her introductory essay, pioneering scholar and educator Dr. Louise Cowan provides a powerful and persuasive rationale for why every student, regardless of major, should be exposed to the great works and ideas of our civilization. For one thing, a democracy can only function if its citizens understand their own traditions and how they have been articulated, understood, changed, modified, and challenged over the centuries. Much more importantly, every human being develops himself by looking to models of greatness and goodness. For many of us, models are close at hand in the form of parents, pastors, and mentors. However, the great complexities of life and the myriad choices offered by a prosperous, postmodern society call out for something more—and present questions that may not be answered by the examples of those good people we encountered in childhood.

We need more—and it is out there, if a teacher will show us where to look for it. In the annals of history, the works of the great authors, the debates of the philosophers, and the lives of the saints we find stories of men and women like ourselves faced with the shock of the new, the temptations urged on us by our fallen nature, the pressures of public opinion, and the puzzling demands of adulthood. By studying the lives and works of those who have gone before us, we form our very selves. As Cowan writes, "To remake oneself in the image of something that calls to greatness demands a heroic tradition displaying heroic models." For the most part, the schools presented here in *All-American Colleges* understand this model of education, and carry it on.

If human models are essential to forming the young person in excellence, so is the discipline and devotion called forth by serious study of the particulars of knowledge in

various fields. No one can think responsibly about the ethical and environmental implications of science, for instance, if he has never stood in a laboratory and labored to conduct a valid experiment. The educated adult requires an intimate, hands-on engagement with each of the modes of knowledge that form our civilization and make possible our prosperity and liberty. For this reason, aspiring poets must study chemistry or physics, and future surgeons require courses in philosophy. A university education is meant both to deepen each student's understanding of a specific field and to bridge the chasms that divide the scientist from the historian and the politician from the prelate. For this reason, most colleges until the 1970s required every student to complete what was called a core curriculum—and even today, nearly all impose upon their students a much weaker set of curricular strictures under the rubric of "distribution requirements."

In "A Student's Guide to the Core Curriculum"—a short book, in fact, which ISI Books has published separately, but which is included here as a bonus to the reader—author Mark Henrie explains the rationale for a balanced liberal arts education, describing eight key areas of human inquiry to which every student should be introduced during his or her four years of college. And he explains which courses, available on most every campus, one ought to choose in order to access these intellectual treasures. The ideas presented in Henrie's guide to the core curriculum are what inspired the suggested eight-course core curriculum we offer for every school in this guide. Based on the current course offerings at the school, we suggest one specific class in each of eight critical areas of knowledge:

1. classical literature in translation;
2. introduction to ancient philosophy;
3. the Bible;
4. Christian thought before 1500;
5. modern political theory;
6. Shakespeare;
7. United States history before 1865; and
8. nineteenth-century European intellectual history.

With each profile you will also encounter a list of critical facts about the school under consideration, including the test scores you'll probably need to get in, estimated annual expenses, and the percentage of students who receive need-based aid. In addition, these "vital stats" boxes include information concerning what proportion of courses include fewer than twenty students, what percentage are conducted by graduate teaching assistants rather than professors, the percentage of students who graduate in four and six years, and how many freshmen return for their sophomore years.

In the profiles themselves we offer candid assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of major departments at each school, assessments arrived at through extensive consultation with a network of hundreds of professors and students. You'll learn which departments to seek out and which to skip, and what special programs at each school make for an unforgettable undergraduate experience—whether a semester learning theology through walking tours of Rome, a first-rate honors program, or inner-city internships devoted to putting the Gospel into action. We also explore the pros and cons

of dormitory life at each campus, the range of social activities provided (or, in some cases, forbidden) at each school, and the state of religious life at those schools associated with particular faiths.

This point is important. If you're a member of a faith community, chances are you know the four or five most venerable schools sponsored by your denomination—though you may not know how faithful (or faithless) each has proved to the traditions which founded them. Dozens of colleges created by devout religious communities have shed all but the most meaningless traces of their original missions; at such institutions, clergy and creed are only emphasized in fundraising materials sent to alumni—if then. These schools could now best be described as Catholic- or Baptist- or Methodist-*themed* institutions, reminiscent of cheddar-flavored "cheese food." Some are scant steps away from becoming entirely secular, and a few (such as Marist College in New York) have already been defrocked, so to speak. Expect that to happen more often during the next few years, as churches try to retain or regain control over the colleges they founded and funded—and as secular-minded administrators and faculty push back.

It's worth recalling that schools such as Harvard and Yale were founded as Congregationalist seminaries. What happened to them can happen to the college your pastor or parents attended; in fact, it may have happened already. That is why in choosing schools for this guide we looked for those which carry on the creeds of their founders, and thus help students deepen the faith of their mothers and fathers. To achieve that, a school needn't be a seminary, nor need it relentlessly drive home the lessons of faith in subjects where reason rightly prevails. Academic freedom also needs to be honored—in fact, we can think of several religiously affiliated institutions we declined to include in these pages for failing to understand that point sufficiently.

Rather, it means that where these schools do teach theology, they accurately present the broadly accepted tenets of a given faith, presenting dissenting opinions *as* dissent. It also implies that the vision of human dignity enshrined in the religious beliefs treasured by the college's founders guides how the school manages student life. It may mean that certain student organizations are not permitted on campus, that intervisitation between the sexes is restricted, that an honor code governs grading and questions of academic honesty, or even that chapel attendance is mandatory. Various religious traditions will make different demands of a student. We lay out what they are, so that parents and prospective undergrads can choose for themselves. Where religious services offered on campus leave something lacking, or do not accommodate every faith tradition, we suggest local alternatives.

It's an open secret among the largely secular intellectual class that men and women of faith are responsible for many of the achievements that made the West great and good. From the preservation of ancient learning after the fall of Rome to the abolition of slavery and the end of segregation, the power of faith in a life after life has transfigured and ennobled earthly existence. Men and women of faith peopled the first American colonies, fought for the nation's independence—and founded most of the best colleges in the country. *All-American Colleges* includes those schools which best carry on this great tradition.

But this guide also includes many secular institutions that share in the old consensus about the purpose of education and demonstrate it through their solid curricula, devotion to teaching, and commitment to academic freedom. This last point is important to students of a conservative bent, who report to us that they do not feel welcome or free to express their beliefs at a number of this country's elite universities. In the worst cases, they report being publicly rebuked (not simply challenged) by faculty, or else given poor grades as a result of their beliefs—rather than as a consequence of how well or badly they are able to defend them. Speaking one's mind in such circumstances takes great courage and, sometimes, a willingness to accept four years of relative ostracism—which is asking too much of most students. In this book, you'll find fifty schools where free debate prevails, from the most left-leaning campus covered in these pages (probably Whitman College) to the most conservative (perhaps the Citadel). At none of these schools have our contacts reported a suffocating orthodoxy, pressure to conform, or abusive grading. Instead, they are characterized by the presence of lively, free-wheeling, and passionate search for the truth conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect. And that should make old-fashioned liberals happy, too.

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The Necessity of the Classics

Louise Cowan

In *Kagemusha*, the Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa portrays a beggar called upon to impersonate a powerful warlord. About to be put to death for thievery, this lowly figure is snatched from execution by royal officers who detect in him an uncanny physical resemblance to their chief. They hide him in the palace to understudy the great man and to master the ways of the court. On the death of the warlord, the officers pass this double off as the ruler himself, hoping by this deception to conceal from their enemies their vulnerability. The beggar learns to act the part of a noble and fearless leader and, as he grows in his understanding of his role, acquires its internal as well as external dignity. He successfully continues the impersonation until—after the monarch's death has been discovered and the ruse is no longer useful—he is driven away from the palace, a beggar once more.

But a strange thing has happened: this pretender has developed a genuine sense of responsibility that cannot so lightly be dismissed. The burden of leadership, with its peculiar blend of selflessness and pride, has become his own. Despite his low station, he follows along after the troops in battle and stands at the last defending the banner of his defeated people, exposing himself to the enemy's onslaughts when all others have fallen. The film makes us question: Is this heroic gesture still part of the act? Where does it come from, this apparent greatness of soul that finally requires in a counterfeit role an authentic death? Kurosawa implies that it issues from the depths of human nature itself. But if so, as the film makes clear, it hardly arises naturally. On the contrary, its realization has come about through schooling in a tradition. Such magnanimity, we are shown, requires *mimesis*—imitation. To remake oneself in the image of something that calls to greatness demands a heroic tradition displaying heroic models. *Kagemusha* is, in fact, despite its Japanese subject matter, in the line of the Western and Roman epics, an extension of the Greek heroic code. Like these classics, it uncovers the innate nobility of the soul as a driving force that issues in noble action. *Kagemusha*, a modern classic, speaks to us with a peculiar power in a time when all energies seem to be devoted to self-preservation and to bodily comfort.

The word *classics*, if used with strict accuracy, refers to academic studies in Greek and Latin, though it is frequently applied to a list of great books, largely philosophical, that have been assembled for their ability to promote dialectic. Further, *classics* is some-

times employed in reference to a curricular syllabus, under whose auspices works such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Catcher in the Rye* come to assume inordinate importance. These meanings are related of course, and even somewhat overlapping—though they also have clearly different implications. But one use of the word *classic* in our society is often considered to be a kind of idealistic pretentiousness, despite the truth, the reality, that it conveys. I am speaking of the meaning Matthew Arnold ascribed to the term in his effort to identify poetic works of unquestioned quality that deserve a place in what is simply "the class of the best." Despite any appearance to the contrary, these masterpieces, Arnold thought, would never lose "currency."

Some forty years after Arnold, from a position of high modernism, T. S. Eliot further extended the idea of the "best" in literature when he spoke of an identifiable ideal body of texts from Homer to the present, having what he called a "simultaneous existence" and a "simultaneous order," and making up a tradition that can be acquired only through hard labor. Eliot was speaking within and to a world in which, as he well knew, this tradition *had* lost currency. Hence, addressing himself to poets, he reminded them of their need for its retrieval.

What Eliot wrote at that crucial moment we should now be ready to acknowledge as applicable to us all. We have begun to see a world in which the classics have virtually disappeared—though they have been woven so tightly into the patterns of our culture that *meaning*, for us, is hardly separable from them. For a while we may be able to get by on the echoes of their past glory; but when they finally have become perfectly silent, what sort of world shall we inhabit? To lose the classics is to lose a long heritage of wisdom concerning human nature, something not likely to be acquired again. Yet most college curricula now remain sadly untouched by their august presence, or at best make a gesture in their direction with a few samplings for select students. Such neglect is one of the most serious threats our society faces today.

In speaking of the classics as the primary curricular need in our time, then, I prefer to designate them not as *literature* but as *poetry,* the generic term used by the ancients for mimetic (fictional) writing. Since the advent of Renaissance humanism this kind of writing has been thought of as *belles lettres*, or in English as *literature,* and given until fairly recently a privileged if narrow position—along with proper speech and table manners—in the education of the few. But since the Enlightenment, *literature* has been increasingly marginalized as the "real work" of the university came to be dominated by analysis, measurement, factuality, competition: the sciences.

But when the Greeks spoke of *poetry*, they meant not so much a graceful polish of style, an artful use of language, as an entire cast of mind. *Poiesis* was considered to be a making process governed by *mimesis*, the envisioning, or imagining, of fictional analogies, a kind of *knowing* different from philosophy or history and yet occupying an irreplaceable position in the quest for wisdom. "Poetry is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history," Aristotle tells us in his *Poetics*. "For poetry tends to express the

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universal, history the particular." Hence, "it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what ought to happen."

Poetry appeals to the imagination, that faculty of the mind which enables the intellect to know the things of the senses *from the inside*—in other words, to experience by empathy things other than ourselves and to make of that experience a new form. This is the action that Coleridge calls the primary imagination ("the repetition in the finite mind of the infinite I AM"). In contrast, the rational intellect, musing on things from above, sees the structure of a phenomenon with a certain detachment that prevents any knowledge of objects on their own terms. It must abstract from them, reason about them, analyze them in order to reach its conclusions. Only through the agency of the imagination, which begins always with cherishing the things of sense—with finding a fullness of being in such lowly acts as seeing and touching—can the intellect know what John Crowe Ransom has called "the true *dinglichkeit*, the thinginess of things." This active functioning of the imagination is not the act of a child, a kind of make believe; nor is it fantasy; nor is it fancy. It is a mature and vigorous act of the mind and heart, oriented toward reality, expanding the cosmos within which the knowing mind dwells.

Yet this mode of knowledge—poetry ordering the passions so as to make them "philosophical" and hence matters for reflection—is increasingly dismissed in higher education. Consequently, American colleges and universities have ceased performing one of their most important functions: not to be simply a repository of past thought or a sponsor of the new, but to serve as a guide for the otherwise wayward poetic impulse always present in the human community. For if this energy is unchanneled, it tends to flow in one of two directions: toward a dionysiac frenzy or toward the banality of *kitsch*. *Poiesis* is part of the human make-up, ineradicable and yet vulnerable to debasement in the absence of tradition. We rightly sense that this wildly creative faculty, if ungoverned, will end by making golden calves or bronze serpents—or, as in Dostoevsky's *Possessed,* burning down the city.

Thus, if we could imaginably discover the *telos* of liberal education, the underlying purpose for which communities sponsor so impractical and expensive an endeavor as a university, we might find, surprisingly, that it is not so much to further individual success or to produce "new knowledge" or even to preserve the monuments of the past. Rather, it is to give form to this creative impulse in human culture. As we have always secretly suspected, democracy has imposed upon us from the beginning an obligation to provide a liberal education for every citizen—a charge that implies not simply literacy but an ability to judge the high from the low, the genuine from the shoddy. We are now failing to perform this task, largely because our schools have discarded the great staple of our education, the poetic mode of thought.

THE TWO FOUNTAINHEADS OF poetic wisdom for the West have been the Greek and Hebrew writings. One speaks of nobility; the other of humility. Both are necessary. And in

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both it is primarily in poetry that they communicate their hearts and enable us to find our own. The Hebrew heritage looks inward, seeking the hidden God; the Greek heritage looks outward, aspiring to divinity. Greek poetry thus shows forth—in symbol, in *mimesis*, in the *eikon*—what it is that lies behind appearances. I have written at another time [*Intercollegiate Review*, vol. 36, nos. 1–2] of the splendor of our Hebrew legacy and the necessity of including it in today's curriculum. What I want to emphasize now is the importance of the Greek *paideia*, the leading out of the soul and directing it upward.

For it was unmistakably the Greeks who discovered *eros*, desire and aspiration, as the path toward the highest good. It was the Greeks who saw both the poverty and the profundity of the soul, and who proclaimed, as Aeschylus put it, that we must "suffer into wisdom." It was the Greeks who intuited the underlying generic patterns of poetry: who gave us epic, tragedy, and comedy. Homer, in inventing the epic, invented an entire civilization; and Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides produced the most profound tragedies in existence at the moment of that civilization's greatness, just before the decline. It was an encounter with the Greeks (through Rome, and later, Constantinople) that led diverse European peoples to know themselves and that taught the American founders the meaning of the *polis*. It is a return to the Greeks from time to time in history that reanimates those same peoples and allows them to remember who they are.

And the poetic process goes on. The sublime Greek writings have attracted to themselves others from various places and epochs and in response to new additions reveal fresh insights, transforming all sorts of heterogeneous texts into an organic, if polyphonic, whole. Diverse works from various cultures, such as *The Divine Comedy*, *Hamlet*, *Paradise Lost*, *Faust*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Go Down Moses*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *Beloved*, among many others, strike sparks from the earlier works, revealing nuances hitherto concealed. Then these later texts themselves, after they have settled into the community of immortals, select their associates and invite them in, continuing to unlock within themselves meanings inaccessible without their fellows. This body of writing, until recently considered the very center of European and American education, has stood guard over the march of Western civilization, preserving its ideals of truth and justice, whatever its lapses may have been. And the later writers included in this remarkable group of texts have continued the unsparing examination of conscience that the Greeks inaugurated three thousand years ago. Hence, the Greeks make up the unmistakable foundation of our body of classics. To be ignorant of Homer, Aeschylus, and Sophocles is to be ignorant of the range and depth of human possibility.

In *The Oldest Dead White European Males,* Bernard Knox, one of our foremost classical scholars, recounts the story of how the Greek texts survived for the Western world: "When in the third and second centuries B.C. after the great age of Greek literary achievement, the scholars and critics of the Alexandrian library set to work to establish the

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texts of the classical authors and equip them with commentaries," he writes, "they also established select lists." They did not use the word *canon,* though it is a Greek word, meaning a carpenter's rule; rather, they spoke of the writings they chose as *hoi enkrithentes*, "the admitted," or "the included." Knox goes on to say, "In the final, desperate centuries of classical civilization, the years of civil wars and massive foreign invasions, the vast bulk of ancient Greek literature [vanished], including, to our everlasting loss, most of the work of the nine lyric poets. . . . Only those works transferred to the more durable (and expensive) material of parchment could survive . . . Homer, Hesiod, Herodotus, Thucydides, seven tragedies each for Aeschylus and Sophocles, ten for Euripides, eleven comedies of Aristophanes; . . . all of Plato and much of his successor Aristotle."

It is strange, Knox comments, to find these works today attacked as reactionary and to hear the charge that they dominate the curriculum by "enforced conformity." For as he points out, their role in the history of the West has always been "innovative, sometimes indeed subversive, even revolutionary." Surely this is so. The list of rebels is long: the lonely hero Achilles, challenging the authority of the warlord Agamemnon; the swineherd Eumaeus, whose wisdom and honor the poet respects so greatly as to address him directly in the *Odyssey*; Antigone, defying the tyrant Creon; Dionysus, destroying the narrowminded Pentheus; the Titan Prometheus ignoring the prohibitions of Zeus himself for love of the human race. One thinks, also, of the comic takeover by women in *Lysistrata* when they deny their beds to their husbands and put a stop to war—and of the lonely little old men—the *poneroi*—who are the heroes of Aristophanes' comedies. All of these instances represent something like putting the bottom rail on top, hardly a vindication of some conservative establishment.

This is most plain in comedy. In contrast to only seven plays each from the tragedians, eleven of Aristophanes' comedies survive—all naughty and all subversive (and all much beloved by the early Church Fathers). We sometimes tend to underplay the importance of Aristophanes' remarkable comic genius, primarily, one supposes, because the genre of comedy seems inherently less important and—of course, mistakenly—less serious. It is the distinguishing mark of comedy that, as Aristophanes argued in his choruses, it sifts the truly degrading from the merely shocking and protects the health of the city. Obscene, bawdy, risqué matters have their rightful place in the purifying heart of the comic; pornography dwells only in deadpan seriousness.

The primacy of the Greeks in the Western curriculum, then, as Knox insists, is not a result of any decree by a higher authority; neither Church nor State has imposed them, nor even men of money and power. The Greek texts hardly compose a "master narrative" enforced by conservative tradition. Nor has any ethnic group gained power or prestige from their study. They have had their effect, quite simply, from their intrinsic quality: and it is that quality—to which the classics call us all—that makes them immortal.

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The late Professor Cedric Whitman of Harvard maintained that it is from the ancient classics that our culture inherited its idea of the heroic. "The notion of the hero," he writes, is "the center of one of the most powerful clusters of ideas that ancient culture has bequeathed to Western literature and art." We could probably with justice maintain that without poetry, we would have no real notion of the heroic. Admittedly, in America we are heirs to multiple traditions of the hero. Every group of people migrating to this continent brings with it legends and myths of heroes; and these imported stories and ideals have combined with the myths and tales of the native Americans to make up a complex mixture perhaps unique in human culture. But two major strands of heroic ideals composed the founding fathers' heritage when our nation came into being, the Greek and the Roman, and these, along with the biblical view, have shaped the fabric of our society for more than three centuries.

A recent poet, Robert Creeley, in a work entitled "Heroes" replies to the challenge of the Latin poet Virgil across the centuries:

> In all those stories the hero
> is beyond himself into the next
> thing, be it those labors
> of Hercules, or Aeneas going into death.
> I thought the instant of the one humanness
> in Virgil's plan of it
> was that it was of course human enough to die,
> yet to come back, as he sai*d, hoc opus, hic labor*
> *est* [here the work, here is the labor]
> That was the Cumaean sibyl speaking
> This is Robert Creeley, and Virgil
> is dead now two thousand years, yet Hercules
> and the *Aeneid*, yet all that industrious wisdom
> lives in the way the mountain
> and the desert are waiting
> for the heroes, and death also
> can still propose the old labors.

Creeley is referring to the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, when the sibyl tells Aeneas that to go to the underworld is fairly easy (everyone has to do so eventually), but "to retrace your steps and return to the upper air, this is work, this is labor." And, the poem implies, this is as difficult in the twentieth century as in the first. Yet the *Aeneid* calls us to it; and "the mountain and the desert" are still waiting for the heroic action. All the "industrious wisdom" of the *Aeneid* reminds us that we are destined to something beyond death, harder than death, requiring heroic labor.

We might call this the Roman view of the heroic life, one that had immense influence on the West. The *Aeneid* was for centuries the most popular book in Europe, the book for the formation of Europe during the development of Christian culture. T. S.

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Eliot considered it "our classic"; it has been woven into western thought and institutions. The *Aeneid*'s two great features are *pietas* and *fatum*, duty and mission, as we might translate the Latin. No two words could more accurately describe America's deepest sense of what some have pejoratively called "manifest destiny," but which others have believed to be a true mission.

In America, as in Europe, the *Aeneid* has been our dominant classic; until the 1920s it was taught to every schoolboy and schoolgirl. It offers us the image of the person of duty, of *pietas,* who lives not for his own self-fulfillment but for others: for the gods, for the city, for family. Aeneas loses city, wife, father, and the beautiful Queen Dido in his quest to do the will of the gods—to found a new Troy, which will be the great Rome. Virgil does not spare us Dido's suffering; she is a noble queen, with her own city, tricked by the cruel goddess Aphrodite into an infatuation with Aeneas. Yet Aeneas is a man of duty and responsibility who cannot relinquish his god-given task of founding Rome. Part of the poem's power lies in its ability to own up to the dreadful cost of civilization: the damage that has to be done to the family and to women in order to move on to the new: "Such hard work it was to found the Roman city." As his father's shade tells him in the underworld, his is a demanding calling: "Remember, Roman, these will be your arts/ To teach the ways of peace to those you conquer/ to spare defeated peoples, tame the proud."

Hence, as Thomas Greene wrote in *The Descent from Heaven*: "The loss of Virgil to the modern world is an immeasurable cultural tragedy. . . . [F]ar more than Homer, Virgil has been the classic of Western civilization. This has been true partly because he is more fitly a poet of maturity than of youth, because his work continues to educate as the understanding ripens. Fully to know him one must know him long. If he teaches the schoolboy style, to the man he imparts nobility." Western man has found his ideal of the public virtues in "pious Aeneas," the man of destiny chosen for a great task: strong, brave, generous. He is resolute enough to turn his back on personal happiness; he fights skillfully and bravely; he is in fact a great hero. But he is a hero for a cause, for others, having accepted his role in life, his duty. Virgil taught the Western world the civilizing arts and incorporates the softness of our hearts (our Trojan ancestry) into the dynamism of civilization. As T. S. Eliot has reminded us, the prophecy of the *Aeneid* has not failed; we are still in a sense citizens of that city, the eternal Rome. But many current readers cannot accept the poem's ambiguity; perhaps the loss of the ability to bear subtle distinctions stems from the loss of the poem itself in our culture.

But there is another strain of the heroic that we inherit from antiquity, the one that I quoted Cedric Whitman as commending: the Greek, which, as Whitman writes, gives us that "inviolable lonely singleness, half repellent because of its almost inhuman austerity, but irresistible in its passion and perfected selfhood." Another twentieth-century poet, William Butler Yeats, captures this quality in a poem written about Major Robert Gregory, "The Irish Airman Foresees his Death":

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I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before
Nor law or duty bade me fight,
Nor public men nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.

This choice of a short life lived in pursuit of heroic achievement is a twentieth-century parallel to the classic decision of Achilles, chief protagonist in Homer's *Iliad*, to enter the Trojan war and risk everything on a short but glorious life. It is this tragic choice that makes his situation so unendurable when, at the beginning of the poem, Agamemnon insults him and engenders the famous "wrath of Achilles" which is the focus of our horrified admiration. Achilles becomes so merciless in his wrath that many readers cannot forgive him; in fact, they find it hard to consider him noble when he puts his own honor above the good of his fellow men. But it is an interior quality above all else that concerns Achilles: that *arete*, excellence of soul, which is the mark of the Greek hero—a heroic achievement sought not for mortals but for the gods. And readers are led into enduring the almost unbearable contradiction in Achilles' choice, the "terrible beauty" of his monstrous wrath.

Despite whatever inordinate deeds the hero commits, the poet knows that true heroism is the most glorious thing that can be passed down in memory through poetry. The novelist Caroline Gordon has commented that the writer has his eyes fixed on the hero, sees him when he is about to take that fatal step—the step that will hurl him into the abyss. For the hero as Homer conceived of him (and then the later Greek dramatists) is too large to be contained by the civic order; he is excessive, must go beyond codes. The other warriors in the *Iliad* fight bravely and nobly, but they do not enter into that realm of heroic paradox that is the true abode of the hero. Nor will they, we feel, enter into *kleos*, heroic memory, the only immortality known to Homer's readers. The basis of the Greek heroic paradox is that human beings must aspire to divinity and yet because of their mortality fail to achieve it. "No Greek ever became a god, and no true Greek ever gave up trying," Professor Whitman observed.

Heroism is one of the fundamental patterns built into all of us, a universal potentiality that must, however, be ignited to be realized. America has been steeped in the

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classical heroic tradition. But it can easily remain merely latent if each generation simply starts over again without the guidance of the classics. Admiration for the heroic principle will surface from time to time in surprising ways; but without a tradition of reverence it is likely to be deformed and misplaced. A godlike aspiration, a selfless desire for a commitment to a calling, a sense that honor is far more valuable than life—these are aspects of the soul that must be awakened by a vision of the high and the noble.

And herein lies one of the great values of studying the classics: our poetic heritage gives imperishable form to the heroic aspiration. Shakespeare's *Henry V,* Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Conrad's *Lord Jim*, Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage,* Faulkner's *The Unvanquished,* Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*—these and other works enter into a dialogue with the Greek and Roman classics to kindle the image of the hero within the individual soul. The heroic thus become not a set of rules but a living ideal, incarnated in the lives of us all.

A RECENT BOOK ENTITLED *Who Killed Homer?* takes up this very topic. Written by two classics professors, Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath, this book gives a clear and unequivocal answer to their question: the professors have killed Homer. Their argument is that the academic world has finally "killed" the body of ancient poetic knowledge that had survived sturdily if somewhat precariously for centuries. By fostering a detached and impersonal scholarship, adopting a methodological sophistication, and marking off the territory as fit solely for specialists, the professors have sought to triumph over the texts they teach and write about, without witnessing to the wisdom and vitality of their contents.

What Hanson and Heath say about the demise of the Greek and Roman writings may be declared as well about all the classics—all those works that have depth, that avoid the simple recitation of what people think they already know, that manifest such difficulty that readers, left to their own devices, avoid them. In this way, all the genuine classics, all poetry, is being "killed." By detaching themselves from the texts and yet mastering their every detail, by avoiding assertions, generalizations, and affirmations, by scorning anyone who dares to speak of one of these works without himself being an expert—and, more recently, by purporting to find in these works exclusions, stereotypes, and subterranean messages of dominance—scholars have turned the classics into philological and semiotic quarry. The classics are thus hunted down by specialists who can kill from a great distance by a single shot—kill, that is, by negating their intrinsic meaning, quibbling about esoteric details, rendering it impossible for anyone but fellow specialists to read the texts in question. These masterpieces are thus off limits for the general reader. And certainly the ordinary college student cannot even obtain the license to hunt.

Our loss of the Greeks and Romans is symptomatic of our loss of the idea of *quality* and of *aspiration*, our loss of the heroic which is known in poetry. Yet we need the classics as never before in our history. For what is happening in our time is the making