

The Great Tradition

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That it should have come to this, that a primary preoccupation with our own should need defending—not in reflection, for all our activities are in want of that, but for exculpation, as of an irrelevancy! Is not America the West's very West, from the East Coast across the continent, “Western” even in its latest, pervasive piety—diversity? For diversity-preachment, in spite of all its excesses, is a recognition that this continent hosts—except for a tiny remnant of “Native” Americans—an immigrant population, who themselves, or through their recent ancestors, *chose* America, came *on purpose*. Their roots are not the anchors of sessile continuity of descent, but the concepts of modern thought. For to take root in this country is to grasp certain ideas, certain “moral principles,” as Lincoln termed them, primarily those set out in the Declaration of Independence. Their acceptance gives newcomers the

right to claim it [a family connection] as though they were blood of the blood and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are. (speech, Chicago, July 10, 1858)

To me this is the most persuasive self-understanding of our America—a nation “*conceived* in liberty and dedicated to the *proposition* that all men are created equal” (emphasis added), a people in whose lives conceptions and articulable premises are ingrained.

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It is also what makes America “the West” incarnate—that principles accessible to thought and intentions framed by people are possible grounds for political life and personal existence. To be sure, this is a controversial understanding of the West, but the contending sides both do produce *arguments*: Even the party that denies that “the West” is defined by the search for rational foundations usually has recourse to reasoned objections.

These arguments on all aspects of our tradition and its product, our modernity, are thus implicit in our ways of life. The business of study is to make them explicit, to rake up what, unturned, is a sodden midden-heap of opinion, to expose the incomparably well-formed artifacts that are buried in the grounds of our life.

Like most defenses of the obvious, this call to an inquiry into our own is fraught with antitheses. We should study “the West” because it is ours—and everybody’s; because its modes are timely—and timeless; because its concepts explain the ordinary—and model the excellent; because its understanding prognosticates global catastrophes—and provides techniques of salvation; because it spawns huge ugliness—and harbors unsurpassed beauty.

By and large, these antitheses are actually incitements to the study to be defended here, where the defense is not just a recommendation to attend to this tradition among other topics, but to make it first and central among studies, whether institutional or individual. But the last one listed, beauty, gives me pause: Mention beauty and there’s the rub, a first check to a fair defense, for if the Western tradition is preeminent for potency, it is only one among several for aesthetics.

For while the arguments about the overpowering importance of the West made in terms of its all-encompassing potency are simply supported by global facts, its superiority in matters of sensibility and the heart is highly disputable. How can a Chinese scroll bearing the branch of a flowering plum tree, a colorless shadow creeping across the paper with the artlessness of centuries of discipline, be put into competition with work from another world—or a wooden African Baule mask that fronts a particular fleshy face with its austere dignified, carved type? Each of these objects is invaluable, and its study requires empathy more than judgment.

Indeed, all the studies that cultivate “fields”—archaeology, anthropology, even sociology, and, above all, history—deal, insofar as they are not hopelessly rationalized, that is to say, concept-ridden, with incomparables. It

takes an anthropological inquirer of Herodotean stature first to choose out that feature of a people which is at once its unique and its essential property, and then to find the level on which it can be significantly contrasted with, and ultimately compared to, another. This Herodotean genius seems to me to be the ability to feel your way into otherness without going native and losing the frame of reference: Professionals of the social studies seem rarely to have the self-knowledge against which to develop such ethnographic insight.

The self-aware reacquisition of the world in which we were brought up would surely be too difficult for most of us, did this environment not have a descant rising distinct and apart above the concerted music of its way of life or so-called “culture”: the tradition. I am using the word here in a restricted but not in a novel sense. I meant *texts* such as can be, in a broad sense, *read*. These texts are artful tissues—the word is related more immediately to a woven texture and more distantly to the Greek *techne*, “artful know-how.”

Texts may be verbal reflections on the nature of things as they are or fictions telling of realms parallel to existence. They may be symbol-encoded measurements of the material moving world or sequential theorems dealing with quantities or thought-relations in abstraction from matter. They may be visual works re-presenting or re-ordering the world of appearances or compositions of sound, the qualitative mathematics both expressing and patterning the affective soul. All this is the tradition as I mean it. Whatever else it is, it is not raw experience but the world re-worked. And an education is the patient acquisition of the arts that makes us adequate to the artfulness of this second realm; it is preparation for receptivity and practice in immediacy—the wherewithal for receiving greatness directly.

All great civilizations that I know of have a tradition in this sense (and this is, I suppose, how I came to know of them). Thus, my version of “Why study the West?”—“Why study the Western tradition?”—has two aspects. One is indeed, “Why this West?” but the prior one is, “Why tradition, any tradition?” People tend, especially in hard times, to ask it in a practical vein, since such study, often and falsely regarded as a preoccupation with the past, seems costly not only in tuition paid and earning-time lost, but in time-of-life invested in alienation from contemporaneity.

That earning power increases with academic degrees achieved isn’t a reply, since there are many kinds of schooling besides the liberal education that leads into our tradition. I think there is no proper practical answer. From

way back Western liberal learning (and, at least in part, induction into the sacred or secular tradition everywhere) was understood as being for its own sake, and it is counterproductive to subvert this fact. It is better to say and to mean that the tradition, any tradition, opens a passage into that hyper-world that interprets and elaborates the so-called real world, and that without such a transit our life—any life—has one dimension less than its fulfillment requires. (By a serendipitous dispensation there *are* profitable, practical consequences to having been initiated into one's tradition, in ours the more so for being studiously unintended. It happens that all the fruits of a liberal education—making connections across times and topics, having access to a well-stocked imagination, being linguistically adroit—are negotiable acquisitions in the so-called real world.)

Which brings me to *the* question of this essay: “Why the West?” I'll enumerate reasons.

First, because it is *ours*. I have already claimed that being rooted in one's own is practically a predicate for appreciating the ways of others as other, that is, of confronting these ways not in melding surrender, but in observant receptivity.

But is the Western tradition really still “our” own? Well, most of the recent immigrants to America were born into a Christian or Islamic tradition, and both faiths are branches of the same stem, the Hebrew Bible, which, with pagan Homer, forms the double root of this tradition. Moreover, these people came here to share in the prosperity provided by constitutional democracy and science-based technology, which were born in the works of those Greek pagans. So the answer is: If that tradition is no longer considered ours *de facto*, it ought to be *de jure*, and what ought to be is what counts—and works—in education. Whether as a project of recovery or a work of maintenance, the Western tradition should be regarded as ours.

Second, because our tradition is one of accessible grandeur at once high and reachable. I am tempted to say “of incomparable greatness,” but, as I have intimated, in an aesthetic regard that would be indefensible.

Nonetheless, there are two aspects from which a reference to that source of contemporary scandal, the putative “greatness” of Western texts, can't be circumvented. One regards a feature that pervades Western texts: The duality of high and low, elevated and level, exhilarating and dreary—in short, a preoccupation and a desire for the outstanding, the extraordinary, the non-daily. There are Eastern texts that set themselves explicitly against the very

discriminations that inform the Western tradition with agonistic passions and spots of glory. So the Buddha's followers chant:

Cool am I now. Gone out all fire within.

—*Psalms of the Brethren and Sisters*

But the Western poet longs to be enkindled:

Beings of a day: What is anyone? What is he not? The dream of a shadow—
a human. But when a god-given gleam arrives,
a radiant splendor comes upon men and a gracious era.

—Pindar, *Pythian Ode 8*, “For Aristomenes of Aegina,”
a boy who won at wrestling in 446 BC

The hunger for greatness seems to achieve greatness.

The other aspect regards the originality, depth, and copiousness of the Western philosophical and theological texts, and the epics and the scriptures that underlie them. My colleagues who have immersed themselves in the Eastern traditions—well-educated in the West as they are—have shown me that there are wisdoms there not unknown to the West, to be sure, but not so persistently worked out. But the Western tradition has three pregnant properties that should give it priority in our studies: It proceeds as a dialectical sequence, it develops the premises for the sciences of physical nature, and it evolves theories of human nature that are the predicates for free and stable governance.

With respect to the last, it is a remarkable fact that, from early modernity on, works devoted to dignifying ordinary people and to legitimating common passions can be composed not only with refined subtlety but can display quiet nobility. I am thinking particularly of the modern prose fictions that replace the epics of the ancients—novels. But greatness marks the foundational texts of physics and political philosophy as well. I omit comment, from incompetence, on the great musical tradition of the West, which of all the tradition probably attracts the most passionate love in those on whom it has once burst, be it early or late in life.

Third, we should appropriate the Western tradition *as* a tradition, because it has such potently characteristic modes of self-motion. There are outliers, but the philosophical tradition is largely *dialectical*. In this context, “dialectical” means “in the mode of engaged conversation, even sharply

critical response.” Each author asserts riper truths, grafted onto or transforming or negating the texts of a principal predecessor. In fact, the word “author” means an originating “augmenter.” So there is personal pride involved and intentional destruction; an old wordplay speaks of the tradition as traducing, as betraying itself. And yet, this absorptive betrayal insures that the predecessors remain alive and necessary to the reading of the successors: All the authors are avatars.

Nonetheless—and this is one practical test for the greatness of a text—each book is a self-sufficient and autonomous work, written to be independent of context or chronology. And though the prior tradition is the best background for reading the book in hand, we can insert ourselves into the sequence anywhere and orient ourselves through the work from within the work. This isn’t true of every great book, but of most.

On the other hand, the tradition of science and mathematics (for these too have foundational works) is not dialectical but *progressive*. The notion that this tradition advances by superseding the earlier hypotheses is not generally borne out by the authors’ own views. Einstein, for instance, admired Newton tremendously and forestalled, partly at least, the idea that he had “refuted” Newton’s dynamics by speaking of his laws of motion as retaining their validity, albeit only as “limiting laws valid for small velocities.” As it happens, these are the speeds we live with. Something similar holds for Euclidean geometry; it is not invalidated by Lobachevsky’s Non-Euclidean geometry, but is assigned a small local region. These are the places we live in. The tradition of progressive science, as laid out in its finest texts, usually does not relegate earlier theories to the dustbin of history but to the small niche of our human life.

Regarding works of art (“art” simply meaning the fine arts; *die schönen Künste*, as distinct from the practical crafts or the liberal arts, is a usage introduced in the eighteenth century), the tradition is neither dialectical—moving on through the back-and-forth of reflection—nor progressive—driven forward by the trial-and-error of discovery. It is, rather, *innovative*—running the unpredictable course of personal invention or, as we say, “creativity.” Of the three modes of preservation-through-change, innovation seems at once the most kinetic and the least articulably directed, because tradition and creativity make a problematic pair.

This primitive schematism of tradition-unfolding is a questionable *ex post facto* generalization, but a creditable argument for the occasional attention to

the tradition *as* tradition—though it is nothing like so essential as is absorbed attention to its individual members, that is, the texts themselves, taken not as mere links in a chronological line but as ends in themselves. The tradition is valuable as a paradigm. Three millennia, roughly a hundred generations, are an exemplar writ large of the human conversation and yet a limited specimen less unwieldy for the inquiry into temporal passage than the infinite field of history.

And fourth, the Western tradition compels study because it is, for better or for worse, all-potent. Insofar as our locale has gone global it is either unabashedly Western—our chief competition for world leadership was originally inspired by the inverted Hegelianism of a German Jew and does much of its business by the avid piracy of the applications of Western pure science—or it lives in deadly unease about the dissonance of its religious law with its own Westernized modernity. Our chief security preoccupation is with the marginal reactionaries of a Bible-based faith whose theology has not yet come into alignment with the consequences of its Westernization.¹ In fact, our own situation isn't so dissimilar: We are losing our grounding in modernity to desuetude, while they are forestalling their foothold out of recalcitrance. The West had the good fortune to undergo its first crisis of modernity half a millennium ago, and it emerged practically omnipotent—not least because its version of the Judeo-Christian religion, which appeared as the enemy of natural science and human freedom, was actually serendipitously one of its roots. For its creator-god had made each human being equally in his image and had created all nature subject to dependable regularities (which miracles only confirmed in the breaching).

There seem to be two views of this compelling potency. One is that the West's sheer triumphant power is ugly and its study at best a painful duty, sometimes terminating in rejection and flight, often to the East. The other view is that this practical global potency is grounded in a certain world-adequacy of this tradition of inquiry, for example, that its participants' indefeasible propensity for universals is true to the way things and humans *are*.

In preparing to write this essay I made a list of “becausees” in answer to “Why study the West?” I reached eighteen when I ran out for the moment, so the four above are nothing near exhaustive.

¹Koran, Sura 3:84: “We have believed in Allah and in what was revealed to us and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Descendants, and in what was given to Moses and Jesus and to the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we are Muslims [submitting] to Him.”

But what is the good of producing ever so many reasons for a study that is, if joyful also arduous, if rewarding also time-consuming, if locating also segregating, and of proposing these reasons to a public harried by career anxieties, addicted to virtual socializing, distracted by the multitudinous options of current life? What is the best practical rhetoric?

One view is to accommodate the invitation and the matter to current modes, the other is to concede nothing. I'm for the latter, for I think that in pedagogical matters, safety *is* in daring: Don't top the crest of conviction to drop into the slippery slope of dilution; you'll win few converts and retain no distinct offering. Here is a sample of what I am urging: Call what you are offering to prospective students what it is—*liberal education*—and don't be mealy-mouthed about its primary non-utility. Be straight about its central activity, reading (and its enabling arts) in a wide sense of "texts" but chiefly in the narrow sense of books—whatever their manner of delivery. Speak of liberal learning as requiring extended bouts of undistracted attention to works of magnitude that are not crunchable or byte-amenable, for such learning in *not* information-storage. Say unabashedly that an educated adult can usually tell great (timeless) works from mediocre (tendentious) ones, and that, while all products of human know-how are grist to the mental mill, easing learners into the real reader's love of the best is what teachers live to do. And make sure that this gist-telling has articulable reflection to back it up.

What really stands in the way of "the West" as still our common acquisition? It is, I think, that our minds have a curious capability. Close to the West's beginning, Socrates articulated this disabling ability and called it *opinion*. In his sense, opinion is our impractical practicality that permits us to live busily and gainfully in the thought-constituted and reason-informed Western world without much thinking at all. Thus we become effective in the world and incompetent in soul.

We *all* use technologies that are as the proverbial "black boxes" to us—from screwdrivers to computers. To delve into the depths of the notion of "mechanical advantage" whenever I reposition a door-lock or of the digitalization of information when I go online (I am speaking generically; I don't, in fact, go online) or of the numerous rights I indignantly claim to have—that would be the end of efficiently practical daily life, which is a tissue of half-conscious practice. But that is *precisely* why Western life requires a non-efficient, a-practical interlude of schooling, in particular the four years of liberal learning available to lucky late adolescents.

It is a time freed from the surface rationality and routinized sensibility demanded by the day-by-day, to be devoted to ever-timely, timeless thoughtfulness and to that spot of splendor that irradiates Pindar's "beings of the day." Our ancients called this time-mode "leisure," *scholé* in Greek, and we should not tire of pointing out that it became our word for school. Its proper aim is to convert our (continual) opining into (occasional) thinking, to ground the unthinking commerce with thinkables in the thought that the originating authors of our tradition set out—not always first, but nearly always best.

To be sure, were we all ourselves original (not inventors of novelties but discoverers of origins) we wouldn't need those texts. But we aren't.

Is this education for everyone; is it universal? Yes, insofar as the freedoms and comforts of Western life are if not universally then *very* widely desired. Here's a thought-experiment: Imagine a plaza filled by a crowd of thousands turned towards a fiery mullah vociferating against the infidel and corrupt West. At the other end, let a quiet little person put up a booth with a sign: "Visas and Passage to America, Free and Fast." Then ask yourself, "Which way will much of that crowd be turned within the hour?"

I'll end with an anecdotal coda in the intransigent vein. I was recently visiting the home of a colleague on our other campus. His wife, who is a consultant to a nonprofit organization that effectively alleviates the isolation of a certain rural population in New Mexico, was listening in across the room as we talked about the books that we help our students and each other to read. "Great books aren't the cure for everything," she called to us. I *thought*, "But they are!" I should have *said* it, and a modified truth would have emerged in the conversation.

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