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St. Augustine's *Confessions*

Howard Zeiderman

In Book VI of the *Confessions*, Augustine describes an incident that he observed in Northern Italy. At that time, Augustine was still a professor of Rhetoric. He was in love with words; he was not yet a lover of the Word. The incident occurred in Milan. He had travelled there in order to hear the man purported to be the greatest speaker alive. That man was Ambrose, the Archbishop. Ambrose was a very busy man, who was almost constantly surrounded by people. It was during one of his rare moments of solitude that Augustine observed him. Here is Augustine's description:

For very short periods of time, when he was alone, he was either refreshing his body with food or his mind with reading. When he was reading, his eyes went over the pages and his heart looked over the sense, but his voice and tongue were resting.

This picture of a tired man reading alone is not unusual for us. We might well wonder why it is even mentioned. Is it to show that the great Ambrose is like the rest of us—tired, somewhat harassed, and in need of solitude? No. Augustine does not see the similarity. He sees difference—and it startles him. He cannot understand why the bishop, though alone, is not reading aloud. He puzzles over the sight for the next fifteen lines, but cannot come up with a convincing explanation. In the end he must

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resort to the holiness of Ambrose. As Augustine says: Whatever his reason for acting in this way, it would certainly be a good one.

This passage about Augustine’s incredulity at Ambrose’s reading silently startles me. What should I make of it? I feel that, although I understand the words, I am missing something. And a careful re-reading of the passage doesn’t bring me any closer to the sense. Such a passage—and each text that we read at St. John’s contains many of them—does not immediately occasion my approval or disapproval, my agreement or disagreement. Usually, it is so far from helping me understand something that I feel as if I understand nothing. Eventually I must move on to more familiar ground, but the passage stays with me. It is like the ghost of a text. And like a legitimate ghost, it haunts me. It is haunting because, through it, a remote, dead world momentarily becomes visible.

Let me try to explain what is so troubling for me about this passage. Reading is a fairly complicated activity. When I read, I try to understand. And I succeed when I am being thoughtful about the meaning of words. Thinking and understanding are private activities. They occur ultimately in a place I call “inside myself.” So I tend to think of serious reading as an inside activity as well. Of course there are special circumstances in which we read aloud, either with others or alone. People read aloud when they are learning to read, or when they are sharing with others what they’ve previously read. Sometimes we do in fact read aloud what we have never read before, but then, frequently, we lose track of the passage, and have to back-track for a silent re-reading. And there are remarkable passages, like Augustine’s description of Ambrose, which we read aloud to understand what, on a previous silent reading, we had not understood.

Now in this passage about Ambrose, Augustine is startled by the very opposite of what would startle me. In order to make sense out of the passage, I would like to claim that reading aloud plays the same role for him that silent reading plays for me. But I can’t do that. To do so would be to turn what is inside and private—what I think of as reading—into what is outside and public. Where would I find the place I called “inside myself”? And what would happen to the thing I call myself? What on earth could Augustine mean by the words “myself” and “me”? Our “selves” don’t seem to have the same boundaries.

The same difficulties arise if, instead of actually re-writing the text, I simply interpret the reading aloud that Augustine and Ambrose usually did while alone, as a form of what we do when we read aloud. However, this won’t work either, because all of the forms that I have described are modifications and variations of “reading-as-I-know-it”—that is, variations of silent reading. We cannot strip from what we know as reading aloud
the circumstances of its particularity and dependence, and then take what results as a general case.

You're probably beginning to feel lost. As these questions open out, I too begin to feel lost. In fact, I begin to lose myself. The categories that are implicated in these questions—reading, understanding, thinking, physical, meaning, sharing, inside, outside, public, and private—are not just peripheral to what I am. They are the crucial items in terms of which I define myself. When those categories become fluid, who and what I am becomes fluid.

What can one do in such a state? One can, of course, retreat from such a passage to recover oneself and one's sanity. But there is a kind of arrogance in retreating back into myself untried. Or one can push forward to lose oneself completely in madness and absurdity. This is the path of despair, where nothing, least of all myself, has meaning. It is at just these moments, when facing this choice, that I need others. What I can not do alone and yet must do—precisely because I am haunted—I may be able to do with others.

I hope this exploration has given you a sense of a relation between us as readers and a certain kind of passage. Such passages are to be found in every work we read here. They assert something which is not just wrong, or unusual, or distasteful, but, rather, uncanny. This kind of uncanniness I have called "haunting." And this characteristic does not only apply to passages. Entire texts can haunt. In fact every text we read here can haunt. I will explore this characteristic through the work which haunts me most—the Confessions. It is this work, too, which is my favorite of the books we read here, and the one that I judge to be the greatest. Since these are more common ways of describing books, we will look at these approaches in order to find out how a book haunts.

* * *

There are many accounts of the greatness of the texts we read. Some of these focus on the style or beauty of the work; others focus on the content and depth. Dante is a good example of the former, Descartes of the latter. Described differently, these two categories may be called rhetoric and poetry for style and beauty, and philosophy for content. A much more serious characterization of greatness breaks through the perspective of the two categories just mentioned. This third type of characterization shows the remarkably intimate connection between the how and the what. Examples of this sort of work are Platonic dialogues, and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*. These two are obvious candidates for the third approach,
which looks at style and content, the poetry and the philosophy, at the same time. This approach is, as I said, the most serious. I believe that all the works we read here, not just the Dialogues and the Phenomenology, satisfy it. In any case, one consideration is common to each of these three approaches: by calling a book great—with respect to its form, its content, or both of these combined—we are intending to describe the book itself, and not ourselves. The search for a suitable definition and characterization has objectivity as its goal.

At the other end of the spectrum is the subjective approach to a text. This, of course, has more to do with us as individuals than with the text. Each of the works is loved by some, hated by others. We frequently admit to our friends, though not in a seminar, that one or another book is our favorite. This occurs with friends because usually our friends are interested in our likes and dislikes, without demanding "proof." And in their company, I may feel encouraged to try to reveal my concerns, affections, or disaffections. That is, in talking about my "favorite" book, I may reveal important things about myself, not about the text.

So the characterization "great book" speaks ostensibly about the book, and the characterization "favorite book" speaks primarily about me. Since, in my judgment, the Confessions is the greatest program book, and since it is also my favorite program book, I will use it to illustrate these two categories. Yet neither of these two categories is what I mean by a "haunting text." That characterization is a description that is equally about me and a text. How a text haunts may be made clearer by pointed contrast to the other two categories. And here again the Confessions will illustrate what I mean, because it is the book which haunts me most. In fact, the Confessions is most haunting, and raises the question of haunting texts to starkest visibility, perhaps because in it Augustine himself is haunted.

* * *

The Confessions is probably the easiest work on the list to misread, and the way we misread it is predictable. There is nothing more common in our world than writing autobiographies. Everyone in this room has probably written at least one, even if only as a part of an application requesting an autobiographical essay. And it is very hard not to read the Confessions as autobiographical. Yet, insofar as we do so, it becomes difficult to see in what way the Confessions is great. Though we, here and in the rest of the world, expect application essays to be autobiographical, we do not expect seminar essays, lectures, and important books to be autobiographical. The autobiography is not viewed as an activity, or a part of one's on-going
life; it is viewed usually as the record of one's activity, composed at a distance from oneself.

A bit of history may be useful here, not, as we often rightly fear, to dismiss a work, but rather to help us avoid dismissing a work by misconstruing it. *The Story of My Life* by Cellini, and the *Confessions* by Rousseau, both written more than a thousand years after Augustine, define our notion of autobiography. These works help set the stage in the eighteenth century for the emergence of the form of writing which both attracts and repels us. There are very many examples of such autobiography to choose from—and yet none of them is on our reading list. And when one reads Augustine's *Confessions* as an example of this category that was, in many respects, created by Rousseau—in other words, as autobiography—then its place on our list seems suspect. Of course, we might then include Augustine's *Confessions* not because of its merits but because other texts that we consider great require this particular work. In other words, the *Confessions* is considered great by other writers, whom we consider great. A few of these writers are Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, Dante, Chaucer, Luther, Montaigne, Descartes, Rousseau, Hegel, Kirkegaard, and Wittgenstein. So we include it too. Faced with our own uneasiness about the greatness of a work, we sometimes allow this kind of evidence to count. However, this kind of approach can be dangerous, if we grow complacent, and put the book on our list *only* for the sake of reading another work. But if we regard the evidence of those other great thinkers as an incentive to exploration, then we put the book on the list because it presents a task. The task would be a hard and probing kind of questioning about ourselves and about those other thinkers, though still not necessarily about the book in question. It could lead to investigating how we and those we consider great are different on fundamental matters of judgment or thought. And this investigation, though not the same as what a haunting text makes possible, is nonetheless similar to it.

Let us take another step to see how the greatness of the *Confessions* may be viewed more from the inside than from the outside. Let us take three approaches to the text which we can initially describe as the perspectives of Dante, Descartes, and Hegel. These three were on the list of those who were in awe of Augustine, and their concerns may help direct our attention to aspects of the work that viewing it as autobiography makes suspect—if not impossible. In another rough characterization of these three approaches, Dante may stand for poetry, Descartes may stand for philosophy, and Hegel stands for the attempted reconciliation of the other two. This third characterization, Hegel's perspective, may be obscure. However,
if we remember that in Plato's dialogues philosophy aspires to being, while poetry is enmeshed in becoming, Plato's "ancient feud" between philosophy and poetry may be understood as the feud between being and becoming. St. John's seniors can inform their less knowing friends that in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* the two realms of being and becoming become so intimately involved with one another that they are no longer two realms.

* * *

We will look at the poet's perspective first. Virgil appears as Dante's guide in the *Inferno*, and much of the *Divine Comedy* involves the relations between Virgil's poetry and Dante's own. Virgil does not appear as a character in the *Confessions*. His *Aeneid*, however, does. Augustine states that when he was young, reading the *Aeneid* was a source of pleasure, and reciting it was a source of glory. As an older man, he views his youthful devotion to the poem as a waste of his time and talents. Yet in spite of what he claims was a waste of time, he acknowledges that he also learned to read and write from this effort. The question arises whether this boy who grew up in and around Carthage and who, like Aeneas, finally found his home in Rome, was able to turn his childhood love for the *Aeneid* into something fertile and memorable in his adult life. I will mention only a few parallels with the *Aeneid* to show the extent to which Virgil's fiction echoes in Augustine's account.

In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas meets Dido in Book I. So too in the first book of the *Confessions* Augustine meets Dido, as Virgil's character. In Book II Aeneas moves in and out of Carthage in his narrative to Dido; Augustine at the same time moves in and out of Carthage spatially. In Book III Aeneas finally finishes his account of his arrival on Dido's shore. As he speaks and Dido listens, she is increasingly captivated by his words and falls in love with him through his account. So too in Book III Augustine finally brings his wanderings to a pause in Carthage; like Dido, he too falls in love. And he says that the object of his love is the idea or the account of love.

In Book IV of the *Aeneid* we read of the seduction in the grove, and of Aeneas' reawakened desire to go to second Troy-Rome, though he only knows of it indirectly. In order to leave Carthage he must deceive Dido; she despairs and dies by her own hand. In Book IV of the *Confessions* we read that Augustine too has moved on to seduction. He writes:

So for the space of nine years [in Carthage] I lived a life in which I was seduced and seducing, deceived and deceiving, the prey of various desires.
And later in Book IV Augustine, too, is moved by the rumor of Rome:

Why was it, Lord my God, that I decided to dedicate this book to Hierem who was an orator at Rome? I had never seen the man but had come to love him because of this very great reputation.

It is at this point that Augustine’s desire to go to Rome emerges. Both he and Aeneas set out on their journeys in Book V. In Book VI, when Aeneas is in the underworld viewing shadows, Augustine is struggling to break the bonds of the Manicheans. That is, while Aeneas is seeing spirits without their bodies, Augustine is grappling with the idea of spiritual substance. These new ideas seem as insubstantial to Augustine as the shades of Hades seem to Aeneas. And as in Hades Aeneas is both alive and dead, so too Augustine in Book VI says:

My life in you I kept on putting off from one day to the next, but I did not put off the death that daily I was dying in myself.

Aeneas leaves the underworld of shadow at the end of Book VI, but it takes Augustine many more pages to be freed.

The Aeneid plays a role in the Confessions, but the Confessions are not merely a duplication of a previous book. The Aeneid had twelve books, the Confessions thirteen, and in many cases—crucial ones—the characters and incidents of the Aeneid are displaced in the Confessions. The most startling transformation is that of the story of Dido’s abandonment, lament, and death. In Book V of the Confessions, it is Augustine's mother who takes on the role of Dido, and it is there—not Book IV as in the Aeneid—that he leaves her weeping in Carthage and that he acknowledges the lie he told her. And both of these kinds of changes are the same. The increase in the number of books and the displacement of incidents occurs because there is another book which is also woven into Augustine’s text. That book is, of course, Genesis. The last books of the Confessions is Augustine’s treatment of Genesis, but again, a careful reading will show that Genesis pervades the entire work. For instance, when Augustine describes his mother in Carthage crying over his departure to Rome, he speaks using the language of Genesis:

So she wept and cried aloud showing in herself the heritage of Eve.

Having begun to look at the Confessions in this way, we see that it could not conceivably be an autobiography. The events are artfully recounted,
following patterns provided by the *Aeneid* and glosses provided by Genesis. And although the end of Book IX seems to mark the end of the domination by the *Aeneid* and the beginning of the movement toward Genesis, there is in fact at each moment an interplay between the two texts. The *Aeneid* supplies the external circumstances of the account, the outer facts, and Genesis fills what is internal. Now the *Confessions* begins to take on the shape of a fiction, or even a poem—in Latin or Greek, something made. We could continue in this way, admiring the subtlety of composition and the attention to detail in this beautiful piece of rhetoric. At the end of it, we could be vindicated in not viewing it as autobiography. We might then feel inclined to include the *Confessions* on the reading list as a work great in itself, not just as a work admired by those whom we take as great.

* * *

This little account was a sample of the lecture you might have heard on the *Confessions* as a great poem. If we now adopt the perspective of Descartes, we can both take what we've seen further and also see the *Confessions* from yet another angle. This perspective would have us focus on the role of philosophy. Philosophy appears prominently in three books of the *Confessions*. These are, first, Book VII, and then Books X and XI. In Book VII, where Augustine has just entered his final struggle with the Manicheans, he discovers books of philosophy. Reading them is what first leads him to the possibility of immaterial substance, not just as the negation of matter, or as a shadow in Hades, but as something positive and distinct: as soul. Yet even the notion of soul is treated as merely theoretical. At this time, both the books and their ideas are represented as things interesting but external. And in Book VII Augustine keeps his distance from these books for another reason. He realizes there is one thing he could not learn from them. He could not learn humility. In Book X philosophy reappears, no longer as a study but as a way of life. Philosophy is now Augustine's own activity. And the living philosophy effects a movement similar to, but greater than, the movement effected by the reading of the books. The activity of philosophy leads Augustine from the outside to the inside. He begins to investigate his own soul, to search for traces of his being.

The activity of philosophy in Books X and XI marks the transition from the narrative of external circumstances, patterned on the *Aeneid*, to the investigation into spiritual considerations, as seen in the treatment of Genesis. So we see that for Augustine philosophy plays the role of the in-between. It is the in-between of inside and outside, of flesh and spirit. The
role of philosophy for Augustine—as the movement from outside to inside—dictates its form. For, of all our faculties, it is not reason nor imagination nor sensation that first presents itself as taking the outside into the inside. Rather, it is memory. And memory becomes the focus of Augustine's investigation, which in turn opens the question of past, present, and future. This focus on time in Book X sets the stage for the treatment of how to construe the account of beginning—that is, Genesis—in Books XII and XIII. The activity of philosophy in the *Confessions* thus plays a role which is the re-enactment of the role that his passive dependence on the books of the Platonists played in Book VII.

Such would be the sketch of another lecture on the *Confessions* as a great book. This time the concern was with the content of the work itself rather than with the way the work echoes other great works. And the content—philosophy—is not in conflict with the poetry but has a definite relation with it. For now, looking back on his use of the *Aeneid*, we can see that Augustine, like Virgil, created a memory, or a kind of story. Poetry has set the stage for philosophy and the philosophical pursuit of Book X. What poetry presented, through books, for a passive audience, philosophy makes one's own, through activity.

* * *

I have presented two sketches for lectures on the greatness of the *Confessions*; the first took greatness to be something in the style or poetry; the second took it to be something in the content or philosophy. These two sketches together form a prelude for yet a third lecture, which takes the third approach to greatness. It would begin with the status of the reader—how should the reader read the *Confessions*? Is the reader passive, as Augustine was in the *Aeneid* section, or active, as he was in the philosophical exploration of memory and time? It is this aspect which probably most interested Hegel. It is his *Phenomenology of Mind*, of all the books we read, that most requires the reader to supply, in response to one section of the text, the transition to the next. The role of the reader of the *Confessions* is comparable, though as different as the Hegelian dialectic is from sin. An example may bring out the course a reader undertakes in the *Confessions*.

At the end of Book II, Augustine describes an incident which no reader of the text ever forgets. When he was a boy, Augustine and a few friends stole some pears from a neighbor's tree. The fruit—unlike that fated fruit in the Garden—was neither pleasing to the eye nor good to eat. Indeed, the boys threw the pears away. When he asks himself why he did this,
Augustine’s only answer is that he did it for the sake of doing wrong—that he loved sin for its own sake. The whole description is so vivid that the incident becomes a kind of drama for the reader. The reader witnesses the wrongdoing. Thus the reader plays the role of spectator. He observes a scene in which Augustine, and not himself, plays a part.

This in fact sets the stage for the next scene of the *Confessions*. At the opening of Book III, when Augustine is a student in Carthage, he himself becomes enmeshed in being a spectator. He attends the theater, reveling in the grief, sadness, and joy that he witnessed there. He remarks again and again that these spectacles are external and utterly remote from him, displayed for him insofar as he is their witness. But was not this the reader’s relation to the story about the pears? What has happened here is that Augustine has prepared a place for the reader, and then occupied that place himself within the text.

There must be some distance between the author of a text and the readers of that text. However, Augustine, by writing about himself, makes that separation between reader and text as extreme as possible. And yet we have just seen how Augustine, in making the reader play the part of spectator, has started to diminish that very distance. Elsewhere in the text, the reader adopts other roles—listener, judge, critic, admirer. At each step, the separation between external reader and the text diminishes. This distance vanishes completely at the end of Book IX. This is also exactly the place that marks the culmination of the external circumstances supplied by Virgil’s *Aeneid*. There, at the death of Monica, Augustine’s mother, Augustine’s Dido, he prays. (How unlike Aeneas!)

And so by means of these Confessions of mine, I pray that my mother may have her last request of me still more richly answered in the prayers of many others besides myself.

In other words, Augustine invites the reader to join with him in prayer, to do the very thing that Augustine is doing. The distance between Augustine and the reader, between Augustine and me, or between me and not-me, dissolves if we join him in the activity of prayer.

Again, at the very same place, at the end of Book IX, Augustine leaves the account of his external circumstances and goes on to philosophical activity. And what is the topic of that activity? Memory. Memory—we all have it, although what Augustine remembers is different from what I remember, or from what you remember. And even within each memory, the me and the not-me differ, since each of us is a different thing from the content of our memory. The tension between reader and text, between
me and Augustine, between me and not-me has been brought into the text itself here at the end of Book IX. And that tension moves on into Book XI and the treatment of time. The distinction between me and not-me culminates in the placing of the self in time: now there is a difference between the me-I-was and the me-I-will-be.

And why is the distinction between what I am (or have been or will be) and what I am not so very important? It is important because it is the distinction between my soul and my sin. For Augustine, the soul is who he truly is, and the sin, although in some way his, is what he is not. With the treatment of time, we and Augustine finally face, in its clearest form, the inheritance of the eating of the first fruit. For Adam and Eve, looking for godhead, found sin, death, and time. Augustine invites us to pray with him at his mother's death. If we join him in prayer at the end of Book IX, and through that initial breaking of the barriers of self are able to reach the question of time, then we are ready, at Book XII, to enter the book of Genesis.

Thus the reader moves from passive to active. He was merely a passive spectator at first, when he watched the drama of Augustine's life. If he responds to the invitation to pray, then he becomes active. But the core of that activity is precisely the difference he has just gone through—the difference between action and passion, what I do and what happens to me, or, in other words, between the me and the not-me.

The account you have just heard takes the previous accounts into a new mode. For the poetry or fiction that became a stage for philosophy is now so entwined with it that both the how and the what, and the text and the reader, are revealed as temporary categories. Yet, though this account is about the reader, it does not essentially touch us. It is not about us as individuals, but about us as the readers of this particular text. In other words, this is still a lecture about the Confessions as a great book. And in all such lectures, the audience, like Augustine and the reader in the first nine books, is passive. The lecturer, who has spent time making himself passively dependent on a book in studying it, reveals some of its subtleties, and invites the listeners to undertake a similar relation. And although a listener may leave the lecture and go on to study the text with others, the effort suggested by the lecturer remains an individual and solitary one.

So in all of these sketched lectures, the greatness of the book has been the concern. The approaches that I have associated with Dante, Descartes, and Hegel, do not involve me-as-an-individual, because their focus has been the text itself. It has been with something which is not me.

* * *
The other end of the spectrum from looking at the *Confessions* as a great book is viewing it as my favorite book. Such a perspective is not primarily focused on Augustine but on myself. When I view the *Confessions* as my favorite book, I don't stand on the ground of the text. Instead, I consider the text on my own ground and as dependent on my activities. And, although considering the book's greatness necessitated avoiding reading it as autobiography, considering the book as my favorite book is intimately connected with autobiography. In fact, it involves me in giving an autobiographical account of myself. I do not have to surge into the story of my life. But I do have to give an account—as one does with friends—of what the *Confessions* has meant to me as an individual. It has meant many things—the most suitable of which to address in a lecture has to do with my life and thought, and the works of two modern philosophers: Wittgenstein and Heidegger.

Both these writers are from our world, a world where "reading" means "reading silently." One or the other of them absorbs and influences many of our contemporaries. Their work makes them as different as two thinkers can be, and yet they display two significant similarities. For both, their work falls into an earlier and later stage, the latter stage being an explicit denial or rejection of the former, like Augustine's in the *Confessions*; and both wished to end philosophy. Please don't misunderstand when I say they wished to end philosophy. That does not mean they wished to end thought, or seriousness, or responsibility. Rather they felt that philosophy as a separate and autonomous activity, which they both associated with Descartes, made one thoughtless, frivolous, and irresponsible.

These two were never casual about philosophy. At one time, there was nothing more important, or more natural, for them to do. They did not criticize philosophy from the outside; they were "insiders." Yet, in spite of heroic efforts to end philosophy, they each failed—not just once, but twice! My own thought has gravitated around their efforts because I agree with them—I feel their desire and I feel their failure. And like them, I don't feel it from the outside. Considering the One and the Many, being and non-being, categories, language, and truth, was more important, and more natural, than anything else for me. In fact, at one time it was life's breath. Yet at times one recognizes that what comes naturally—one's gifts, one's abilities, even one's breath itself—causes one to suffocate.

Though I had been drawn to Wittgenstein and Heidegger before that crisis, my shortness of breath involved me with their work more and more intimately. They were a kind of artificial respirator through which I could consider my own task and theirs. If I scrutinized their work, I might be able to avoid their failure. In those days I was like a chess player studying the games of past grand masters, or like a pathologist doing an autopsy.
on a victim of the disease I myself was suffering from. However, the more I thought about what they had attempted and failed, the more I realized it was not their lack of cleverness and intelligence that was responsible. In fact, quite the opposite. It was precisely their intelligence and cleverness which caused for each not only one failure, but two. They failed because they were geniuses and because their proposed audience was an elite group of thinkers who could fathom the issue and comprehend certain works. The result was not the end of philosophy at all. Instead, there was an increase of technical and arcane talk. And, because Wittgenstein and Heidegger were "canonized" as new philosophers, they gave rise to a grotesque hagiography, developed and carried on by their own disciples, who should have known better.

The more I studied them, the more I agreed with them on their diagnosis of the ailment. But even more pervasive than they supposed, the disease, philosophy, appeared. Those infected were not just readers of certain books, or practitioners of a certain philosophical school of thinking. The diseased were not just the intellectual inheritors of Descartes, but in fact everyone who lived in a Cartesian world—which is just a shorthand for the modern world in which we all perform every act and gesture of our lives.

It was at this moment that I remembered the Confessions. Was not Augustine similar to Heidegger and Wittgenstein? Was not he himself burdened with his own gifts and was not he as skilled at technical rhetoric and philosophy as anyone? He felt, as acutely as anyone, the desire for philosophy and the hunger both for truth and for his own discovery of that truth. And did he not only face these horrors but succeed in resolving them in a work that was for everyone, not merely professors and intellectual technicians? And wasn't Augustine's indictment of philosophy similar to my sense of why Heidegger and Wittgenstein failed? For their greatness prevented them from seeing beyond their greatness. Augustine recoiled from philosophy because it could never teach him humility.

It was because of these concerns and thoughts that I was drawn to the Confessions. In my own concerns and confusions, I needed an ally and a friend. And I didn't turn to the Confessions because he had achieved what I was attempting. His concern and mine differ. Unlike Augustine, the name I heard with my mother's milk was not Christ's. I was not a Christian and the task and need I felt were mine, not Christian. So I didn't read him to learn "how-he-did-it." I read the Confessions as the struggles of someone similar to but yet quite different from myself. In short, I read it as autobiography, and it is as autobiography that it has been my favorite book.

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We have now looked at two ways of reading the *Confessions*—as a great work and as my favorite work. As a great work I read him as a scholar would, bringing to bear a knowledge of other books he uses, the responses of other writers to his work, and what, for lack of a better word, I must call history. It is because I am familiar with the genesis of what we call autobiography, that I realize that reading the *Confessions* as autobiography would be remarkably anachronistic. Once I hold that tendency in check, the book opens up, and I can become in some sense passive as I learn from it. On the other hand, when I read the *Confessions* as my favorite book, I read it quite differently. Then I read out of my own activity and I read it precisely the way I guarded against before.

In the first case I read him out of knowledge, in the second case out of need. Although both these ways of reading may involve other people, they are primarily solitary. When I speak about the greatness of the *Confessions*, I'm telling you something. I may depend on the work of others and even prompt you to find aspects of the work I had missed or gotten wrong. I could, therefore, in telling you, also gain something in return. But our relation to each other is essentially solitary. In sharing with you remarks about the *Confessions* as my favorite book, we again can become useful to one another. Your need may be similar to mine, and you too may decide to turn to the *Confessions*. But again my reading the *Confessions* was private and silent—just like the kind of reading Ambrose did one time in Milan. Both of these silent ways of reading are important, even though they are so different from one another. In fact from the perspective of one kind of approach, the other is suspect. From the vantage point of my need when I read Augustine as my favorite book, the greatness of the *Confessions* seems sterile, a mere diversion. From the perspective of my studies of Augustine, reading the work for encouragement and consolation seems undisciplined and self-indulgent. Yet, as I said, both approaches are important and even necessary.

The third approach to a text, where we are haunted by a text, overlaps with these two familiar approaches and yet differs importantly from them. In the third approach to the text we may start by reading the words silently and privately, but we must go beyond this to reading publicly. What I mean by public reading is an essentially cooperative activity. In this approach, not only do we depend on one another, but knowledge and need are also no longer held apart. They too merge toward one another. This occurs when the *Confessions* begins to haunt us. Need stops being my particular need, but it is rather a need we all feel, and the relevant knowledge is precisely what we all lack. It is in this context that we no longer read as solitary
explorers or solitary sufferers; an individual reads as preparation for what reading makes necessary—a conversation.

In reading the *Confessions* as a great book, I withheld viewing it as an autobiography. In reading it as my favorite book, I read it as I would read such a work written by one of our contemporaries. My expectation in seeing such a work is that it is autobiographical and I read it as such. Though I said both readings had a kind of legitimacy, nonetheless a tension and conflict exists within me between these readings. For is it or is it not autobiography? Well, in one sense it is clear that it isn't. Yet it isn't just not-autobiography. Our normal expectation on reading the *Confessions*, and the label it often carries on its book jacket, aren't just misplaced. To view it without keeping in mind that a man Augustine wrote about his life—and therefore that it is autobiography—would be to fathom its greatness but lose the life of the text. But imagine such a work being published today. It might gain a few readers and perhaps even a sympathetic review or two. But on the whole it would be viewed as silly, or pretentious, or even irresponsible and absurd. It is a text that could not be written now, in our present. It is a past text, but clearly it is not a dead text—nor is it a text that is truly alive. The text is an in-between text—not entirely dead nor entirely alive. It is a ghost.

I need to describe more clearly what such a ghost text is and how it haunts. The *Confessions* haunts because its greatness—some aspects of which I mentioned—seems incompatible with its form as autobiography. Insofar as we penetrate the scope and intricacy of the work, the expectation of a roughly factual account of someone's past life becomes increasingly problematic. And as the work begins to look fictional, its truth becomes suspect. Fictionalization, whether intentional or accidental, will earn our criticism because fact and fiction have to do with truth and not-truth. The evidence, however, from the earlier part of this lecture, is that Augustine did indeed shape his story in a way that we would call fictionalizing. If he is replacing fiction for fact, is he truthful? The answer seems obviously to be no. But suppose that fact and fiction are different for Augustine than for us—that truth is different for him than for us. By this I don't mean that he holds truths different from the ones we hold, but rather that he means something other than what we mean by the word truth. What a strange suggestion—and yet it has already come up earlier in this lecture. For to ask about what one means by truth will involve what one means by self. And then, if a self is different, then the thing which a self writes—an autobiography—will be different from any autobiographical essay or text we have ever read or written before. I think that this suggestion is right—that truth means something strange for Augustine. But
though I say this, and though I can explain why I say this, I don’t under­stand what it means.

Augustine reaches a conclusion about truth in his discussion of Genesis. In pondering the meaning of its first line—In the beginning God created heaven and earth—he considers various possibilities. In the end, he presents his opinion: every truth any reader knows is contained in the first line of Genesis. In trying to understand this startling suggestion, I come up with analogies. Is the first line of Genesis like a mathematical axiom of such power that in itself it contains all other truths? Or is it like a painting, which presents to each viewer a personal and legitimate vision? Both of these options are, however, implausible. They make more sense to us than they would to Augustine. Perhaps to probe the meaning of the first line one needs charity, or love, without which, says Paul, one’s words are like the clanging of a bell. This looks more promising. Love or Charity turns sound into meaning and, one could say, into truth. But if charity gives meaning to utterable things, and makes them true, then it seems that all utterances would mean the same truth. As I say these words, you may feel we have returned to Paul's clanging bell. Without having resolved this riddle about the first line of Genesis, let me go on to another one. Augustine states that if his task had been to write such a book, he would have wanted to write it as Moses did. Is it possible that he did this very thing in writing the Confessions?

Let us think about what we mean by confession. Usually confession involves an acknowledgment of a past action, and a resolution with respect to the future. Confession is a bridge, an inbetween like the ghost text, and, as philosophy was for Augustine, between the past and the future. The security of that bridge depends on the commitment of the confessor. Only time can reveal that commitment. When the confession is made to another person, then that person must risk entering into the confessor’s future. When the confession is made to God, there can be no secrets between the confessor and God. In such a case, however, those outside the confession know of it only what the confessor then chooses to make public.

With this much to guide us, can we say whether the Confessions are addressed to us or to God? Augustine speaks often, and passionately, to God, referring to him as “You.” And, although it occurs less often, he does speak both directly and indirectly to the readers. So the answer seems to be that the Confessions are addressed both to us and to God. Now God can certainly hear this confession and judge or forgive Augustine. But can we? Were we his contemporaries, we would be able to forgive Augustine some personal offense. But of course we are not his contemporaries; our forgiveness would be irrelevant to him. But can we even presume to forgive
him? For what? His recorded offenses are against God, not against us. To say this another way, only God can judge or forgive. So although Augustine is in part writing for us, he cannot be confessing to us. By confessing to God in our presence, Augustine affords us the opportunity to listen neither in judgment nor in forgiveness. What is the alternative to listening in judgment or with forgiveness. It is to listen charitably.

Now remember what Augustine said about Genesis—that he would have liked to have written a book like that. Somehow, for Augustine, Genesis was written through or in charity. Somehow Moses was able to write such a book. Augustine could not presume to reproduce this effort. But he has been able to produce a text which can really be read only with charity. If it is read without charity, the Confessions becomes the mere clanging of a bell. We can try to disguise the clanging by reading it as a great book, or as our favorite book. It is when we read it with charity that each of its lines—like the first line of Genesis—becomes all of the truths we know. It is when we read with charity that the differences between me and not-me, between my truths and your truths, vanish.

* * *

Do you really understand what I'm saying about the Confessions? It's hard for me to see how, because I don't. And it's not from ignorance or lack of effort that we don't understand. If you feel that my words shimmer before you, tempting you, yet eluding your grasp, then you feel what I feel. You are in the presence of a ghost, as I am. The Confessions are a ghost which haunts. The Confessions succeed at the task that Augustine set for himself, or that was set for him. But what such a task is and how it was fulfilled remains deeply impenetrable. And we do not penetrate it by learning yet another ingenious aspect of the text, which might emerge from reading still more carefully. For when a text begins to haunt, the locus of attention is not the text, as it is when the text is a great book, nor ourselves, as it is when the book is one I love or hate. In other words, we are neither passive nor active. Rather, the locus of attention is what I can best describe as what is in between us and the text—the gap between our deepest expectations and those of the text.

Becoming clearer about this haunting in-between cannot be a solitary activity. I need others—but not for their information or insights and not for encouragement. That is, I need others neither as scholars nor as friends. At this stage, I need others to help me see something about myself. To use their help, and to offer help to them, my private and solitary reading must give way to public reading. Our public reading, a modern reflection of the
sort of reading Augustine expected of Ambrose, is conversation. Our understanding of the *Confessions* as a great book or as my favorite book may be *enhanced* by conversation; our facing it as a haunting text is absolutely dependent on conversation.

A ghost text has two interrelated functions. It elicits the most salient categories of our world. It also affords us the opportunity to think through those deepest habits that have thoughtlessly determined our lives. So a ghost text brings to the surface the true ghosts. These reside not in texts but in ourselves. They are the haunting accretions of our past, our educations, our social, economic, and political environments. It is in the presence of the ghost text that these other ghosts come forth. To confront one means to confront them all.

And so what do these considerations have to do with our activity here? Great books are, as I once read on an envelope, great teachers. Great books, as the story goes, are written by great minds—great thinkers—and understanding these books involves understanding these minds. But that requires understanding the languages in which they wrote as well as understanding the other works that they produced. In other words, this effort is scholarship. Some of us are better, some are worse at it. If our communal task is scholarship, then our activities here are doomed to failure. For we read only parts of books, in a variety of translations, and make the effort to speak with one another about them in the strange format we call the “seminar.”

Another approach to the reading of great books is to read them because they raise timeless concerns—the issues which have troubled or absorbed humanity. Among these concerns we will find some that are of particular importance to each of us. But if this is our approach, it is hard to grasp why we read our particular texts to raise these issues. There are hundreds of textbooks which have been written precisely to raise these timeless concerns. There, these concerns are called the problem of free-will, the problem of meaning, the problem of justice. And the result of this attitude is what one would anticipate. Our texts would evaporate. Problems and issues require solutions or stances. The result is an argument or debate among those animated by a particular issue, with others who are unmoved having nothing much to say. The text would become either loved or despised, depending on whether one agrees or disagrees with Plato’s politics or St. Paul’s theology.

These two ways of reading are like those intermediate parts of Plato’s divided line where opinion and understanding are highlighted. Reading for greatness belongs to the part of the line where understanding resides; reading for the timeless issues belongs to the part where opinion resides.
There is a next step in Plato where one struggles to move beyond hypotheses. What I am describing also forces us to leave the realms of personal opinion and scholarly understanding in order to face our most invisible assumptions and have the courage to explore them.

The relation to texts which I am calling haunting can make this possible. The tension between my sense of meaning, language, truth, fiction, fact, and life, and Augustine's in the Confessions, first forces me to attend to what is so pervasive in me as to have been invisible. Because my sense of these terms constitutes my world, the Confessions seem otherwordly, or ghostly. So some translation is necessary. Yet it does not matter that these texts are read in various translations, because the true effort of translating begins once the ground opens between me and the text. It is also all right that we read parts of works. For we are reading not authors or books, but what I call texts. Authors and their corpuses — intact entities — give an artificial appearance of life. The temptation is very great to enter into them and to substitute them for ourselves.

In this task of confronting a haunting text, each of us is essential. Though ghosts are hard to see, they, like everything we see, may be seen from different perspectives. What haunts me will overlap with but will not be identical with what haunts you. And if I make that attempt to confront these ghosts, and to exorcise them, then I will need your help. If you are making that attempt, you will need mine. Descartes, making the effort without help, so lost his sense of perspective that he looked for certainty to hold onto, conflating it with knowledge.

So I need your certainties to risk exploring what has become uncertain for me. I need your uncertainties to help reveal to me the fabric of my own beliefs. The problems we face are not timeless and universal. They are absolutely timely, because they are yours and mine. And the text is essential because without it thought is not sufficiently decisive — neither sufficiently radical nor sufficiently conservative. In my example, I would have circled endlessly around questions of meaning, truth, and their relation to thought. Only by allowing the Confessions to haunt me am I enabled, however dimly, to sense the possibility that these questions may concern not thought but rather will, and might be answered not by my words but by something that I need the entirely unphilosophical humility to hear. These are disturbing prospects, which I have few notions how even to explore. As bare possibilities, they shatter my pride but in the same moment hold open possibilities that my despair has foreclosed. The proper way to address such matters can be neither monologue nor argument, even if at times we do speak in those ways. Rather, speech must be confessional. Yet one is not confessing for oneself alone nor for something that one has
done. Confession is the acknowledgment of a chasm between us and the ghost-like text, and it is the commencement of the exploration of the ghosts in us—those beliefs and opinions that we have inherited and that invisibly chart the courses of our thoughts, our desires, and our lives. It is when a text haunts us that we are both ready for and in need of conversation.

Every text we read here is such a haunting text. You can see that if you ask yourself whether any of them could be written now. The answer probably is that more or less they all could. Insofar as they could be written now, they are great or our favorites. Insofar as they could not be, they are ghosts. Haunting texts afford us the opportunity to make visible these most salient and elusive aspects of ourselves. Yet within this realm of exploration and change, these texts also can be great books, and we can love some and recoil from others. In fact, the same work can be all of these. Everything that I have said tonight I have in some measure learned from Augustine. These remarks are Augustinian. That I am here to attempt this task, I owe to the role the *Confessions* has occupied in my life as my favorite book. Yet what I have learned and gained from them takes its true measure from my response to those ghosts which this and other ghostly texts revealed in me. And ultimately the ghostly and otherworldly quality of the text makes me recoil from it. That recoiling also makes the *Confessions* one of my least favorite texts. For though I learn from Augustine's ability and subtlety, feel encouraged and comforted by the similarity of our purposes, and see myself for the first time through our differences from him, ultimately I recoil because his world and his God are not mine.
Human Being, Beast and God: The Place of Human Happiness According to Aristotle and Some Twentieth-Century Philosophers

Deborah Achtenberg

Early in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes human beings both from plants and from the other animals. Later, he distinguishes us from the god. How are we different? And, why are these differences important? We are different from plants and non-human animals, not to mention the simple bodies, because, unlike them, we can act. Fire must go up and stones must go down; plants must move by nature to their end; the other animals must follow their passions. We human beings, to the contrary, can act: we are more flexible; we are not bound by our feelings or by our end; we move towards what we take to be good. We are different from the god because, unlike the god's actions, ours is not guaranteed of success but must, if it is to succeed, be in accord with something outside ourselves. That something Aristotle calls "telos" or "end." He also calls it "nature," "the mean," or "the good." We are in between, then, beings which have a limit (a constitutive limit or telos) without having action,
and the one being which has action without limitation: the god is a telos
without having one; the god’s aim, like ours, is for the good; but, unlike
us, the god’s every aim meets its mark.

These differences are important because, according to Aristotle,
something’s good is its completion and completions of things different in
kind are themselves different. Happiness is the human good, according
to Aristotle. Therefore our happiness will be what completes beings of our
kind, not what completes plants, the other animals, or the god. Human
beings, he says, are distinguished by reason- or logos-based action; every
action is aimed at something believed to be good; but our beliefs may be
false or the relevant ones may fail to inform our passions. The good, then,
is the completion of this our defining function or activity (ergon); it is
the completion, or, we might say, full development, of both intellect and
feeling so that intellect hits the truth and informs feeling. Such developed
intellect and feeling is called virtue. The good according to Aristotle is a
life of activities in accordance with virtue; it is, in other words, a life in
which developed capacities for intellect and feeling flourish.

Recognition that the human good is relative to the human kind is im­
portant, then, because it enables us to avoid two common mistakes: on
the one hand, the supposition that we are less than we are and, on the
other, the supposition that we are more. For we tend to reduce ourselves
to the level of plants and the other animals and, at the other extreme, to
raise ourselves to the level of a god; sometimes we give up action and con­
tent ourselves with the feeling of the moment, whatever it may be, and
other times we believe our action, just because we choose it, is good. We
give in to our fear, for example, because it is painful to overcome it; or,
we convince ourselves that what we fear should be feared even when the
evidence shows otherwise. We turn in a co-worker we envy, for another
example; then we forget our envy and convince ourselves that it was
righteousness instead.

Contrary to our suppositions, however, we are not the same as the other
animals nor as the god; we can neither cease to follow some logos, nor
in general act successfully without following a logos well. We get angry,
for example, when we think we have been slighted; but our belief may be
false, and if it is, then the anger will disrupt a friendship. We eat, for another
example, because we believe that to do so is pleasant or nourishing, but
if that belief is false—because, say, we’ve eaten too much—we will suffer
discomfort or pain. Our anger is not like the instinctive spiritedness of
a wolf; instead, it results from a belief. Our eating is not like the natural
movement of plants, which must send their roots down into the soil and
their leaves up towards the sun; it is governed, instead, by a belief—the
belief that the food in front of us is pleasant or nourishing. Our actions are, whether we think so or not, governed by reason (*logos*); they are not mere motions; nor are they without external limitation and guide. We do not move by nature or by instinct (*pathos*) to the good; instead, we move towards what we think is good.

For these reasons, human happiness—the full development of our species-given capacity for intellect and feeling—is not easy. For full development of intellect and feeling is not by nature; instead, it is an accomplishment (*ergon*). Nor, however, is it against our nature. Aristotle is neither a romantic nor a Victorian. He is in between those who would have us follow our every feeling, and those who would have us act against them—those who would say “if it feels good, do it” and those who would say “if it feels good, don’t do it.” For we do not attain happiness by nature, nor do we attain it by thwarting our nature. Instead, we attain it by developing our nature, and when we develop it sufficiently, what feels good and what is good are one and the same. This is freedom. For freedom is not doing what you want, unless what you want and what benefits you are one and the same. Nor is freedom lack of limitation; instead, it is awareness of beneficial limitation and accord with it. Such a state, however, is rare. For the acquisition of first-stage development of our species-given capacity for intellect-informed passion and action—that is, the acquisition of virtue—is not easy: anyone, for example, can get angry; but to get angry at the needed time, to the needed extent, at the needed person, and so forth, is an *ergon*—an accomplishment, a piece of work.

But we don't want to work. Instead, we want to be at work. We don't want to try, but to do; we don't want to attempt, but to achieve our aim. What we want, in Aristotle's terms, is *energeia* or *entelecheia*, where *energeia* means activity or being-at-work and *entelecheia* means completeness, being-at-end or full development. Unlike plants and the other animals, we can act; that is, we can both devise and follow plans to achieve full development; unlike the god, however, our action need not achieve full development, for our plans sometimes are bad, and sometimes, though good, do not inform our passions and thus motivate our aims. Human beings can act, but our action is not “by itself.” It succeeds only if it is in accordance with something else, specifically if it is in accord with virtue. Compared to human beings, then, plants and the other animals are passive; they cannot act, but can only move. Compared to the god, however, we are passive. The god is the only being whose action is in no way responsive; it is “by itself” activity. Our action is in part responsive; it is activity in accordance with virtue.
What, however, is activity in accordance with virtue responsive to? In general, virtue, whether it be the virtue of a plant, an animal, or a human being, whether it be a virtue of the body or of the soul, is developed capacity. Simple capacity is the capacity to experience feelings or engage in actions of a certain kind; developed capacity, or virtue, is the disposition to experience feelings of that kind or engage in actions of that kind only when they are beneficial or enabling, and not when they are harmful or destructive. Virtue, in other words, is the disposition for the good—a disposition to experience feelings and engage in actions which are beneficial or enabling and not those which are harmful or destructive.

Human virtue—virtue of character at any rate—is, according to Aristotle, a disposition to choose the mean. Speaking about the mean, therefore, must be a manner of speaking about the good. For all virtues are dispositions for the good. The mean is an analogy taken from mathematics. If ten is too much and two is too little then six is the mean. Aristotle is not, however, attempting to mathematize human affairs. Instead, he is using a mathematical analogy in the realm of the qualitative. He does so also in the Metaphysics: telos, Aristotle’s fundamental discovery, is a qualitative intensifier. To be good is not to be of a certain quality or kind; instead, it is to be a complete or fulfilled one of a kind, or, simply, to be complete: a lyre-player and a good lyre-player are not different in kind, nor are a kitten and a cat.

In the non-mathematical realm of feelings and action, regarding, for example, courage, recklessness is the excess, cowardice the defect, and courage the mean. Consider a particular action, such as rushing ahead in battle. To rush ahead when rushing ahead will lead to disaster is the excess; the one who does this is reckless. To refrain from rushing ahead when rushing ahead would lead to victory is the defect; the one who does this is cowardly. Both to rush ahead when appropriate and to refrain from rushing ahead when refraining is appropriate is to achieve the mean; the one who does this is courageous. Consider also a feeling, such as confidence. To feel confident when confidence is harmful—about a rash plan of attack, for example—is the excess; the one who does this is reckless. To lack confidence when confidence is enabling—about a well thought out plan of attack, for example—is the defect; the one who does this is a coward. Both to feel confidence when appropriate and lack it when its lack is appropriate is the mean; the one who does this is courageous. It is this, that is, virtue, which Aristotle calls an accomplishment or piece of work (ergon): not simply to rush ahead nor simply to retreat, since any normal person has the capacity to do either, but to rush ahead or retreat when needed, as needed, where needed, as the logos directs for the sake of the
beautiful; not simply to feel confidence nor simply lack it, but to feel confidence or lack it when either is what is needed for the end at hand. The human being with virtue, then, is disposed to choose the mean; that is, to experience certain feelings and engage in certain actions only when, where, and as they are needed. The needed is what is needed for a certain end; it is whatever is instrumental to or constitutive of it." The needed is the same as the good.

Choice, too, makes reference to the good. We are different from beasts and from the god because we can choose and thus act on our choice. Choice, according to Aristotle, is not mere desire; instead, it is desire which has been informed by deliberation; if not prevented, it issues in action. Choice distinguishes us from beasts, as well as from children, in this way: they simply act on their desires, while we can choose; that is, we can act on deliberation-informed desires. Deliberation is a kind of thought (dianoia); specifically, to deliberate is to reflect on which action or state of affairs is conducive to one of our ends; it presupposes phronēsis or practical wisdom, the perception of some action or state of affairs as one of our ends. (For example, through phronēsis we discover that studying with a certain person is conducive to wisdom, for we judge this person to be imaginative and able to stimulate our imagination; then we deliberate about the means needed to be able to study with him—housing, food, employment, and so forth). Since the good, according to Aristotle, is end—that is, completion, fulfillment, or full development—choice makes reference to the good. To choose is to desire and, if not prevented, do, what one takes to be good.

Now we have seen that all the important elements of Aristotle's definition of human virtue make reference to telos or the good; for a disposition is a developed capacity, that is, a capacity for the good; choice is not just desire but deliberation-informed desire, and to deliberate is to see particulars as conducive to an end; deliberation presupposes practical wisdom, that is, the perception of some action or state of affairs as an end; and the mean is just that feeling or lack of feeling, just that action or abstinence from action, which is needed by some end. All of this is important because human happiness, that is, the human good, is the full development of this specifically human, not animalic or divine, virtue: neither beasts nor the god have deliberation or practical wisdom. Human virtue is developed human capacity; human happiness is a life in which human virtues flower or flourish; it is a life of activities in accordance with human virtue.

Consider, then, the place of human happiness. It is in between that of the beasts and that of the god. We can consider it by considering
pleasure. For, importantly, Aristotle's definition of pleasure and his definition of happiness are fundamentally the same. Pleasure, according to Aristotle, is unimpeded activity of a disposition in accordance with nature. Since it is unimpeded, it, like happiness, requires virtue. But virtue, though it is in accordance with nature, is not simply by nature. Instead, it requires instruction and habituation over the course of a life. Hence, as I've said, it is not easy.

Keep in mind that the god, according to Aristotle in the *Metaphysics*, has the pleasure all the time which we can share only some of the time. Now we can see why: because the god's activity always has its end, while our activity attains its end only if it is done in accordance with virtue. Sometimes it is done in accordance with virtue, but much of the time it is not. Often we make an effort, but our effort is impeded. Often we try, but do not do. We try to run the marathon, but our feet get in the way. We try to play the lyre, but our fingers get in the way. We try to do a mathematical proof, but instead hit a dead end, when our current stage of mathematical capacity reaches its limit, or, instead, when we find ourselves reflecting on the rumbling of our stomach, or about someone we love, or, worse, someone we hate. Successful activity—energeia—is not by nature. It is a piece of work, an accomplishment, an *ergon*. Or, at least, acquiring the developed capacity and necessary conditions for its exercise is a piece of work. Once those have been acquired, the actual exercise of virtue is not work—it is being-at-work, or *energeia*. Then we don't try, but do. Then, for a short period of time, our every aim meets its mark. Our feet are where they are needed when they are needed. Our fingers hit the right note at the right time. We think, and actually engage the required object. Then our activity seems, and in a sense is, effortless. For then we are acting in accord with our developed skills or intellectual capacities. Virtue of character (*ethikē aretē*) is required as well, so that our loves and hates, our fears and desires and wishes, do not get in the way—do not impede us—and, in addition, so that we see, and thus desire, what the situation calls for.

In addition, intellectual virtue and virtue of character require instruction and habituation—instruction for the intellect and habituation for character—and these require that we are raised in an appropriate city: one with sufficient land for food, with sufficient trade for necessary goods, with the right size for easy governance, with an appropriate balance between the rich and the poor to prevent faction, with an appropriate regime for us to utilize the character of the people, with a sufficient military to avoid war or win it and so to remain as much as possible at peace, with the right aims to develop our human capacities. All of these are the condi-
tions of our happiness—of our full self-development, both of yours and mine, both in Aristotle's time and, as I think at any rate, in ours.\textsuperscript{12}

Of course, these conditions do not always come about, and even if they do come about largely, they do not come about completely. Societies are not perfect; they develop some people's capacities, while leaving the capacities of others fallow. Even if they do develop your capacities, your capacities are not limitless. Some are easy to develop; others are much harder; and the development is preceded by its lack. Pleasure, since it requires virtue, is not easy; instead, it is an accomplishment (\textit{ergon}).

It is because pleasure\textsuperscript{13} is not easy that we tend to confuse ours with that of the beasts and with the pleasure accompanying the functions we share with plants. For these are easier than the pleasures intrinsic to developed, that is, virtuous, activity. For example, we confuse bodily pleasure with pleasure entire since it is intense and therefore easy. Bodily pleasures, of course, are good, but bodily pleasure is the better part of pleasure only for the other animals. So, too, it is because of the difficulty of acquiring the pleasure intrinsic to virtuous activity that we seek extrinsic ones, the ones Aristotle calls superficial ornaments.\textsuperscript{14} Each virtuous or unimpeled activity has its own intrinsic pleasure; but activities are very often left incomplete or unfinished, when we don't have the time or the resources or the capacity. This is displeasing, frustrating, or even painful; frustrated activities lack their intrinsic, or natural, pleasure. Then we find relief in bodily pleasure, since it is easy, and expels our pain. Or we seek extrinsic pleasures, like excess food or drink, or, for us, television or movies or video games, since our ordinary activities cannot find their completion. We are not gods. Our activities often miss their mark. So we seek the pleasures we share with the other animals, or the pleasure we get from the activities we and the other animals share with the plants, the vegetative activities related to growth and procreation, or whatever is largely passive; we drink something, stuff ourselves, turn on the VCR, and get close; we, as we say, "veg out." And all of this is because human happiness is in between—in between that of the beasts and that of the god; in between non-action and action which is at every moment successful. We can act, but our action, to be successful, must be responsive, responsive in just the right way to the object of our action. When we do the needed act, at the needed time, in the needed place, in the needed amount, and with the needed aim, then we succeed. When we do so, then we are free, since we are not impeded on any side, and we are pleased and happy; but to be able to do so, as we have seen, is a serious, and difficult, accomplishment.

* * *
We are led back, then, to Aristotle's notion of end or telos. Telos means end or goal, completion, fulfillment, or full development. It is one of the four causes, the four answers to the question why, discussed in the *Metaphysics*. It is Aristotle's fundamental discovery. There is efficient cause, or the source of motion; material cause, or the out of which; formal cause or what he calls by the unusual phrase the "what was being"; and final cause—telos—or the "for the sake of which."

How shall we understand telos? We can see how necessary it is to understand it, if we are to understand what we have done so far, since each of the parts of Aristotle's definition of virtue presupposes it. By telos, Aristotle means, I propose, constitutive limit. As the edges of a table not only limit the table, but constitute it, so virtue not only limits our activity, but allows it to be, fully, what it is. Tele are contrasted to limits that are not constitutive, but destructive or disabling: split the table with an ax and the new limits will not constitute, but destroy, the table; engage the enemy recklessly and you will not engage the enemy at all, but be defeated by him. Limits differ; not all limits are destructive or harmful; others are beneficial. Those which constitute an action or thing are beneficial; they are its telê.

Consider, for further illustration, an example from a skill, namely, playing the lyre. Is putting your finger on the string constitutive of lyre-playing? Sometimes it is, and sometimes it is not. Sometimes pressing the string is lyre-playing; other times, it makes noise. In running, sometimes leaning forward will enable you to run—will be a constituent of running—and other times it will cause you to fall. Sometimes speeding up will enable you to run and other times slowing down will do so. When you fall, you cease to run, so in that case, leaning back or speeding up, leaning forward or slowing down, is not constitutive of, but destructive of, running. When it is the cause of continued running, it is not only that, but also a constituent of running; it is part of the telos. Or, put another way, then it is a constituent of what it is to be running.

This latter phrase shows the connection between form and end in Aristotle's metaphysics, and explains why he uses the unusual coinage, the "what was being" (*to ti en einai*), as a substitute for form. The "was," here, is an imperfect, and commentators disagree on just how to take it. They agree, however, that it refers to repeated action. I propose that the "what was being" means what something was being all along. When you leaned forward and fell, your intent or aim was not to fall, but was to lean forward and run. Leaning forward was intended to be running; but, sadly, or sometimes comically, it was not. When you leaned back and ran, your intent was fulfilled or completed; your leaning back was running all along;
it was a constituent of running; running is what leaning back, along with the other movements made, was being.\(^{15}\)

Another way to understand *telos* is as the completion or development of potential. Virtue, for example, is first-stage development of potential. When I have, for example, the intellectual virtue Aristotle calls "science" or *epistēmē*, the capacity to demonstrate or give arguments through the study of logic or analytics, I have developed my latent capacity to demonstrate. The second, or more complete, development of that potential is to activate that developed potential, that is, to demonstrate. The progression is capacity, developed capacity or virtue, activity. But this way of understanding *telos* is just another example of the first way. That is, it is another example of *telos* as what constitutes something or as what enables it to be what it was being, all along, in potential. Acquisition of virtue, Aristotle says in the *Physics* and *De Anima*, is not alteration. It is not to become different or to change kind, though it may involve this. Instead, it is to develop or complete the kind that something already is.

*Telos*, then, is not a kind. To talk about *telos* or completion is not to distinguish things into kinds or categories, but to distinguish potential from development within kinds or across them.\(^{16}\) *Telē*, in fact, may be very different in kind, as we can see from the example of courage, where the *telos* in one case may be to run forward, and in another case to run around, and in another to retreat. Just as in playing the lyre the *telos* may sometimes be to depress the string and other times to release it, so on the battlefield courage may sometimes require running forward, and other times running back. *Telos*, then, is relative—not, as we would say, subjective, but relative to the context and to kind.\(^{17}\) As Aristotle puts it, completions of things different in kind are themselves different.

Since good, according to Aristotle, means *telos*, good, too, according to him, is relative—again, not subjective, but relative to context and to kind. The *Ethics* is about the human good and so, as we've seen, it is relative to the defining human kind or activity (*ergon*). Moreover, as previously stated, it is easy for us to misidentify our good with that of plants and beasts or with that of the god. We might think that the good life is the life of pleasure, as Aristotle points out in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.5. But that is not the good life for us—not, of course, that pleasure is not good; pleasures are good, Aristotle says, and the best life and the most pleasant life are one and the same. But the life of pleasure, by which he means the life guided by desire alone, is not our good; for our desires do not always guide us toward what's needed. As our good is not the same as that of plants or the other animals, so, as we've seen, it is not the same as the god's. For the god's only good is himself; while the good for us, until we've
achieved it, is outside ourself. The god is always complete, while we are not. We can constrast the beasts, human beings, and the god in this way: the beasts have a telos or constitutive limit, but cannot act, since they lack choice; the god has (or is) activity, but has no telos or constitutive limit, since the god is at every moment already complete; and human beings are in between. We have both action and a telos: we are neither as fixed as the other animals, nor as free as the god; we can act, but our action, in order to be successful, must be the realization of a constitutive limit.

2

So far I have described Aristotle's account of the place of human happiness in between that of the beasts and that of the god and shown how that account rests on his metaphysics—on his understanding of human nature and its full development, and on full development, or telos, in general, as the guide and constitutive limit of our aims. I find Aristotle's account largely persuasive; I do not find the standard objections to it decisive. As may have been evident to you, however, I have not described Aristotle's account as he would describe it. Instead, my account of Aristotle has a point of view. I see Aristotle's ethics from the standpoint of the difficulty of happiness—the difficulty of achieving a life in which developed capacities for reason-informed passion and action flourish. Specifically, I see it from the standpoint of the difficulty of achieving this kind of happiness in modern individualist society, a society in which the various conditions which together are required for a fulfilled human life are compartmentalized, and we are thus prevented from attaining our aims—work is separated from family, politics from business, study from religion and psychology, and so forth. In addition, I speak from a standpoint which might be called liberal, or even left, since it begins with the assumption of the equal importance of full development for all and with the belief in the capacity of the group to raise each of its members to a higher level, their desires to claims of justice, and their capacities to a higher level of development or virtue.

In the twentieth century, two philosophers have gone back to Aristotle's conception of the place of human happiness, the political philosopher Leo Strauss and the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. Of these two, Strauss's point of view is closer to that of Aristotle and MacIntyre's is closer to the one which I have expressed, while Strauss recognizes, as I do, the importance of a metaphysical basis for an Aristotelian account and MacIntyre does not. In what follows, I will give a brief sketch of each one's return to Aristotelian ethics and, in so doing, begin to make the case for a return like my own, to a liberal, but metaphysical Aristotelian ethics.
In “An Epilogue” (1962), Strauss argues, against then contemporary political science, for the Aristotelian belief in the irreducibility of human nature. Man, he says, is a being *sui generis*, not reducible to any other kind. Contemporary political science reduces man—to a being without latitude; to a being for whom every stimulus is a value. But man is not such a being. Instead, man is a being distinguished from every other known being because it posits values. A desire does not make the desired thing a man’s value; for a man may fight his desire or, if overpowered by his desire, he may blame himself. This shows that the desire does not make something his value; only choice does this, where choice is not the choice of means to pregiven ends, but the choice of ends—the positing of ends, or, rather, the positing of values. By reducing man, Strauss says, the new political science strengthens the worst proclivities of democracy. “By teaching the equality of all values, by denying that there are things which are intrinsically high and others which are intrinsically low as well as by denying that there is an essential difference between men and brutes, it unwittingly contributes to the victory of the gutter.” These are stirring words. They are addressed to that within us that seeks something noble, to the ineradicable desire for the high, and they speak about what happens to that desire and to us when man is reduced to less than he is.

In “Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy” (1969), Strauss addresses the same problem, this time not in political science but in contemporary philosophy. He divides then contemporary philosophy into its two still predominant groups, despite name changes and changes in views: the positivists and the existentialists, where positivism is the belief that only scientific knowledge is genuine knowledge and existentialism the belief that all principles of knowledge and action are historical (where by “principle” he means “ground” or “basis”). Though these two schools seem quite different, Strauss points out, they are united by their common rejection of political philosophy. Each rejects the knowability of the good, positivists because the good cannot be known scientifically, existentialists because even science is just one form among many of viewing the world, all equally groundless, all of equal value. The positivists, then, like the new political scientists discussed in “An Epilogue,” would make us less than we are, for their rejection of the good implies the impossibility of choice. The existentialists make us more than we are, for though they accept the importance of choice and action and believe that human beings posit values, they believe such values cannot be known—that they are the result, instead, of groundless human choice or of historical fate. Existentialism arises, Strauss says, out of a desire for a code to live by when the ideals of wisdom and of rigorous science are separated; that is, when our desire for the good
is accompanied by the belief that the good cannot be known. Heidegger is the existentialist Strauss has in mind; he is the center, Strauss says, not part of the flabby periphery, of the existentialist movement.23

As a young man, years earlier, Strauss had already noted this difficulty in Heidegger's teachings—the problem which arises when the ineradicable desire for the high is severed from metaphysical or theological ground. Heidegger, he sensed, "spoke of something of the utmost importance to man as man."24 He aimed at something important or serious, we might say. Nonetheless, "What I could not stomach was his moral teaching, for despite his disclaimer, he had such a teaching. The key term is resoluteness without any indication as to what are the proper objects of resoluteness."25 It was this moral teaching, Strauss says, which led Heidegger later to side with the Nazis.

Strauss saw the same difficulty in the teachings of the political philosopher, Carl Schmitt, in the thirties.26 Schmitt opposes the neutrality of the modern state, with its low goals (humanitarian-pacifist morality, comfort-guided economics, or non-controversial technology). In its place he puts the affirmation of what he calls "the political as such," understood as the division of human beings into fighting groups—friend-foe groups always ready to fight. Against neutralist modernity, neutral because humanitarian and pacifist in character, Schmitt poses the non-neutrality of the fighting group which, because its members are ready to risk death, is not neutral, but affirms.

Strauss notes two difficulties with Schmitt's affirmation of non-neutral politics. First, it is as neutral as the liberalism it opposes. He calls it "liberalism preceded by a minus-sign,"27 or the "affirmation of fighting as such, regardless of the object of fighting":

Whereas the liberal respects and tolerates all "honestly held" convictions, so long as these respect the legal order or acknowledge the sanctity of peace, whoever affirms the political as such, respects and tolerates all "serious" convictions, in other words, all decisions leading up to the real possibility of war.28

Second, Strauss notes that Schmitt's affirmation of the political, that is of fighting, as such, is not consistent, since sometimes he affirms it not as such, but on the basis of the moral, where morality is understood not as humanitarian-pacifist but as affirmation of the serious over against the reduction of life to mere entertainment, to a life, as Strauss characterizes it, in which man has forgotten what counts.29 Still, though, Strauss says, even this affirmation of the moral remains neutral. For Schmitt does not answer the question, what are the proper objects of fighting, or, more
generally, the question, what is right. That is, Schmitt rejects the neutralization of human beings, but puts groundless affirmation in its place.

To find an answer to the question what is right or good, to the question what is the proper object of our resoluteness, of our ineradicable desire for the high, Strauss turns to the pre-modern—to the classical philosophy especially of Plato and Aristotle and also to the Bible; to Athens, as he calls it, and to Jerusalem, each offering an object for our aims, though one is found through reason and the other not through reason but through revelation. According to both, man is justified when he is in accord with something outside himself: justice is compliance with the natural order according to classical philosophy; righteousness is obedience to the divinely established order according to Biblical religion.

Strauss turns back to these because he believes that what is needed cannot be found in modernity. For, according to him, modernity is united in its progressive rejection of value. It is, therefore, characterized by its progressive abandonment of that the positioning of which distinguishes human beings from the other animals. Modernity has, according to Strauss, three waves: a first wave which, I suggest, we can identify with the first mistake pointed out by Aristotle, the reduction of the irreducible human kind to the status of plants and non-human animals; a third wave, which can be identified with the second mistake pointed out by Aristotle, the error of raising ourselves to the level of gods; and a transitional second stage, containing elements of both. The first stage he identifies variously with Hobbes or Machiavelli and the rise of modern science; the second with Rousseau; and the third with Nietzsche. Machiavelli turns us away from the “ought” to the “is”; that is, from how one ought to live, to how one does live; Rousseau identifies the “ought” and the “is,” since, according to him, there is no appeal from the existent general will to some principle or ground beyond and constitutive of it; and Nietzsche abandons the “is” for the “ought,” or at least for value, since, according to him, all truths are values and all values are created—not discovered, but created.

Modern science, like Machiavelli, is part of the first-wave move away from value; for it, too, is founded on the rejection of the classical belief in natural ends: ends towards which we and all other beings are directed; ends specific to each specifically different nature, ours being determined by our rational and social nature. These ends give all beings, including human beings, a place within the whole. Man has a place in an order he did not originate; he has power, but his power is limited; he cannot overcome the limitations of his own nature. Modern science leaves us with a mechanistic science of nature, thus rendering the question of human ends always a problem.
The philosophy of late modernity is no better; for it results in historicism. Hegelian historicism suggests that history is in its final decline, so it cannot provide the objects to guide our aims. Non-Hegelian historicism provides us with two choices, a universalist historicism represented by Marx's vision of a mobile, not deeply rooted, world society dedicated to the full development of everyone, and a particularist historicism represented by Nietzsche's anti-egalitarian vision of the man of specialization who is subject to harsh limitation, against the man who follows goal after goal, in aimless "full development." The former is the liberal ideal Schmitt rightly rejected. The latter is akin to the ideal which Schmitt proposed and Strauss rejected. The one is universalist and peaceful; the other is particularist and warlike. Each, as we've seen, is neutral, and so cannot provide us with proper objects. We could be stronger about the particularist ideal and say that its desire for the high, severed from metaphysical or theological ground, easily becomes the rule of muscle, or blood, or land. Strauss did have this in mind about Heidegger, whose unguided resoluteness, according to him, led directly to his siding with the Nazis in 1933, as I have mentioned before. Whether the same could be said of Schmitt's affirmation of the serious understood as warlike and particularist and his becoming a Nazi, I do not know.

What's needed, then, is a principle or basis on which to judge—between particular and universal, war and peace. Plato gives us an example of this in the Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito. The principle—the proper object of our aims—is the good, understood as wisdom, or human wisdom, and the apparent means to it, namely, philosophy or dialogue. Socrates does not commit the injustice of allowing Crito to steal him out of prison. Why not? Not out of obedience to Athens simply because it is his own. We know from the Apology that Socrates would disobey Athens in one case, namely, if he was forbidden by the city to philosophize. Not because Athens is simply just, that is, in accord with a universal principle, as we know it is not from the conviction and sentencing of Socrates. Instead, because Athens, though imperfect, is not wholly bad, but comes close to justice—Socrates was raised and educated in Athens, and allowed to philosophize for many years. The Crito and Euthyphro remind us that Socrates stands between affirmation of the particular and of the universal. Crito affirms the particular—his friendship group, of which Socrates is a member—and cannot see a more universal entity, Athens and its laws, as the proper object of his affirmation. Thus Socrates must personalize the laws—make them more particular—to motivate Crito's obedience. Euthyphro, on the other hand, affirms the universal. In the name of piety he is prosecuting his father for allowing a killer to die in a ditch. A workman killed a
workman and Euthyphro's father left him too long in a ditch, where he died. There seems something inhuman about Euthyphro's unconcern about the particular—his unconcern about his father—apparently for the sake of a universal principle, justice. Crito can only help his friends and harm his enemies; Euthyphro, apparently, stands by a principle no matter who is hurt. Socrates stands in between: he helps Athens, his own, not simply because it is his own, but because it is in many important respects, though not in all respects, good. Awareness of the good, then, not only provides a basis for judgment; it also is not "absolutist" but allows for ambiguity. The things around us, as Socrates says in the Republic, tumble about between being and not being, in this case between being and not being just.

According to Aristotle, too, the good provides a basis on which to judge—to judge regimes or forms of government and to decide between war and peace. Just regimes are distinguished from unjust ones not, as we might say, by the consent of the governed, but by rulers who rule not for their own but the common good, where the good is understood by him, as we've seen, as a life in which developed capacities of intellect and character flourish. Without an understanding of a substantive human good we are left with affirmation of limitation as such or the claim that all limitation is dominance, that is, that all limitation is to be opposed; but opposition to norms ought to be for the sake of something; it ought to be for the sake of norms which can lead to human development, to constitutive, not harmful or destructive, norms.

The good also provides a basis for deciding between war and peace: war is not for its own sake; it is not the end. We would call a man a murderer who made enemies of his friends for the sake of war, Aristotle says in the Ethics. Instead, war is for the sake of peace. Peace, too, is not the end, however; it is itself guided by another criterion, namely, the good life, understood, again, as a life in which developed human capacities flower.

What I have sketched here is Strauss's account of the two schools of contemporary philosophy, divided by their estimation of human action, but united by their rejection of the good and by their common origin in the progressive rejection of the good by modern philosophy and science. The rejection has three waves: the first turns from the "ought" to the "is"; the second identifies them; and the third replaces the "is" with the "ought" or at least with value. The result is historicism of two sorts, one affirming the universal and peace; the other the particular and war. What's needed, instead, is a principle or ground for deciding between these, the principle
which Biblical religion called god and pre-modern philosophers called the good.

Strauss's writings are an invaluable series of reflections on this modern trend along with interpretations of the ancient writings which counter it. His writings have not until recently been much considered by American professional philosophers, however. There are a number of reasons for this neglect. I suppose a principal one is simply that Strauss's philosophical origins are in Continental Europe rather than Britain. American philosophy, as a discipline, has been and still is principally Anglo-American in content and style, despite its current interest in themes which derive principally from Nietzsche. A second reason is Strauss's perceived political conservatism.34

It is right, I believe, to call Strauss a "conservative," but important to see what that might mean. His is not the extreme conservatism which affirms the particular as such (whether it be race, land, or tradition) or war for its own sake. His comments on Carl Schmitt demonstrate this, as does his invocation of the distinction between the ancestral and the good.35 Instead, he is conservative in his recognition of the need for something to guide or limit the ineradicable human desire for something high—for the serious, as he puts it when speaking about Schmitt; for a code to live by, as he puts it when talking about existentialism; for objects for our resoluteness, as he puts it when speaking about his early reaction to Heidegger. It is the fact that this desire, unguided, is dangerous that leads Strauss to associate what I have called "accord with something outside ourselves"—the accord with virtue and thus with telos which is required according to Aristotle for happiness—with the high or noble. Recall that it was Heidegger's moral teaching—unguided resoluteness—which according to Strauss led him to side with the Nazis. Philosophy, Strauss says, though privately extreme, must be publicly moderate.36 This is one part of Strauss's conservatism.

Another is his thoroughgoing privileging of rank. For a random example, consider this passage from "An Epilogue": the new political science "must begin to learn to look with sympathy at the obstacles to it if it wishes to win the sympathy of the best men of the coming generation—those youths who possess the intellectual and the moral qualities which prevent men from simply following authorities, to say nothing of fashions."37 Strauss's students extend this privileging. Allan Bloom, in his recent book on the crisis in American education, The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students, is not reticent in stating that the students he has drawn his conclusions about are those who are both talented and well-off. "A
word about my 'sample' in this study," he says. "It consists of thousands of students of comparatively high intelligence, materially and spiritually free to do pretty much what they want with the few years of college they are privileged to have— in short, the kind of young persons who populate the twenty or thirty best universities." The privileging of rank is another part of Strauss's conservatism.

Recently, however, Alasdair MacIntyre, his origins not in phenomenology and existentialism but in what he calls analytical philosophy, and his aim not to provide proper objects for the ineradicable desire for the high but to find a pluralist account of happiness as unity, has, like Strauss, called for a return to Aristotle. In After Virtue (1981; second ed. 1984), MacIntyre calls for a return to an Aristotelian ethics to rescue us from the twin evils of end-neutral emotivism on the one hand, and Aristotle's "metaphysical biology" on the other. The similarities between these two different accounts of our current impasse and its origins in the Enlightenment are worth noting.

MacIntyre, like Strauss, believes that the West is currently in a dangerous state, comparable to the period of the decline of the Roman empire into the Dark Ages. Strauss calls our current state a "crisis": Western man no longer knows what he wants, Strauss says; for he has lost his faith that he can know what is right and wrong, good and bad. MacIntyre calls our situation a state of "grave disorder in the language of morality": "we have—very largely, if not entirely—," he says, "lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality." He labels that disorder with the name "emotivism," where by "emotivism" he means the doctrine that all value judgments, and more specifically all moral judgments, are nothing but assertions of personal preference or feeling. We live, MacIntyre states, in a specifically emotivist culture. For people now think, talk, and act as if emotivism were true; that is, they live, talk, and act as if value judgments were mere expressions of personal preference. The result of this is that contemporary moral debate is interminable, each side shrilly shouting its moral claims as if they were transpersonally true, while in fact basing them on nothing more than personal preference. Thus arguments about war and peace, abortion and choice, social welfare and capitalist freedom, go on interminably, without any prospect of resolution.

In addition, emotivism results in a specifically emotivist self, a bifurcated self, divided into two value-neutral parts: one, the organizational self of bureaucratic man, in whose activities ends are taken for granted and the means to ends are manipulated; and another, the personal self of private human beings, for whom values are central, but purely a matter of arbitrary choice. The emotivist self results from two beliefs, the belief that actions
are not value-guided but reducible to mere behavior, and the belief that roles and traditions are not definitive of who someone is, but mere matters of arbitrary choice. These two beliefs should remind us of beast and god: the managerial self on the one hand, and the expressive self on the other.

Like Strauss, MacIntyre points out that neither school of contemporary philosophy can get us out of our predicament. Neither, he says, could even diagnose it. For analytical philosophers and phenomenologists, though divided by differences in vocabulary and style, are united in their dedication to description over evaluation, the former to description of language, the latter to description of structures of consciousness. As the analytical philosopher C. L. Stevenson claimed that value judgments like "This is good" simply mean "I approve of this; do so as well," so the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre argued that claims to rational morality were nothing but the exercise of bad faith by those who were unable to tolerate the recognition that their own choices were the sole source of moral judgment, and the existentialist philosopher Nietzsche claimed that would-be objective moral judgments were just the mask worn by those whose will-to-power was too weak for them to assert themselves with archaic and aristocratic grandeur. Like Strauss, MacIntyre sees this existentialist alternative to analytical philosophy as dangerous: the Sartrean existentialist as well as Nietzsche's Übermensch "belong," he says, "in the pages of a philosophical bestiary rather than in serious discussion."

Like Strauss, MacIntyre finds the origins of our current predicament in the collapse of the two principal teachings of the pre-modern West: the rational ethics of Aristotle and the theological ethics of divine law. The moral scheme of these two teachings dominated the European middle ages from the twelfth century onwards, according to MacIntyre. The scheme has three parts: man-as-he-happens-to-be; man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-telos; and the precepts of rational ethics for moving from one to the other. This moral scheme, however, presupposes a number of views which have been rejected since the Enlightenment: it presupposes an account of potentiality/actuality, of the essence of man as a rational animal, and of the human telos. For virtues are those developed capacities which enable us to move from our mere potential to the realization of our essential nature. The precepts of rational ethics are, in other words, teleological, instructing us on how to move from potency to act, from our potential to our nature or telos.

Unfortunately, theological ethics has the same scheme: man-as-he-happens-to-be; man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-telos; and the precepts which enable us to move from one to the other. The scheme is the same,
though the precepts are expressions not of teleology but of divinely ordained law. On both accounts, the third element in this scheme—the precepts—are lost. For Protestantism and Jansenist Catholicism unite with seventeenth-century philosophy and science in the claim that reason cannot comprehend essences or transitions from potency to act.

Like Strauss, MacIntyre sees the Enlightenment rejection of teleology as progressive, starting with the early Enlightenment’s “mechanistic account of human action” and ending with Nietzsche’s claim that my morality is only what my will creates: we must create new tables of what is good, Nietzsche says; we “want to become those we are”—human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves. It is not hard to see that these two phases, like the first and third waves of modernity described by Strauss, are the two mistakes pointed out by Aristotle, one of supposing that we are less than we are, the other of supposing we are more. For the mechanistic account of human action consists in the belief that human action can be explained wholly in terms of antecedent, mechanistic causes, and not at all in terms of the end which we set for ourselves; while Nietzsche claims not only that we set our own ends, but that in doing so we make those ends good. Mechanists claim we cannot act, but instead are pushed; while Nietzsche claims our action is its own justification. One identifies us, if not with the beasts, at least with mechanism; the other identifies us with the gods. Like Strauss, however, MacIntyre’s claim is not that Nietzsche is wrong or that he is trivial. Instead they both agree that his diagnosis of the ultimate result of modernity is both apt and profound; it is his prescription which they reject. They both agree that modern philosophy is, through and through, incapable of giving ground for value judgments, but deny that this means we ought to or can create our own values. Instead, each sees Nietzsche’s critique as a critique not of ethics, politics, or rationality itself, but of the modern understanding of ethics, politics, and rationality. Each thus calls for a return to pre-modern philosophy, Strauss to (among others) Aristotle, MacIntyre not to Aristotle, but to an Aristotelian ethics.

To do so, MacIntyre gives his own Aristotelian account of a virtue. A virtue, according to him, is a quality whose exercise enables us to achieve the goods which are internal to complex forms of human activity. He calls such activities “practices”: a practice, according to him, is a coherent and complex, socially established, cooperative human activity; arts, sciences, and games are practices, as are politics and the making and sustaining of family life. A virtue, then, is a quality which makes it possible to attain the goods internal to complex forms of human activity. For example, a chess player who lacks the virtue honesty may win at the game
of chess by cheating; he thus will achieve a good external to chess, prestige, for example, or status, or money; he will not, however, insofar as he cheats, achieve the goods intrinsic to chess: he will not in fact have played a good game of chess; nor will he have extended his chess-playing skills, nor attained the enjoyment intrinsic to the game of chess itself—its competitive intensity, for example.

MacIntyre's definition of a virtue is, arguably, Aristotelian. According to Aristotle, a virtue is a disposition to choose the mean, where the mean, as I have described it, is just what is required for the end in question, and so could be understood to be what MacIntyre has called an intrinsic good. In addition, the virtuous man, according to Aristotle, does what is needed or appropriate not out of compulsion or simply from habit, but because he desires it for its own sake: the courageous man does what is needed, when needed, and as needed, not for the sake of money, nor simply because he is angry, but "for the sake of the beautiful," that is, for its own sake. This is what distinguishes the one who has virtue from the one who merely has continence: in the virtuous man, desires and beliefs are in harmony, and the virtuous action is without conflict or regrets; the continent man, to the contrary, does what he believes is appropriate, but must overcome a contrary desire in order to do so.

The difficulty, however, is that MacIntyre's account provides no way to distinguish between one who overcomes fears and dangers in battle in order to enjoy, for example, war for its own sake, and one who does so in order to defeat a tyrant. Remember that according to Aristotle we would call the one who would make enemies of his friends for the sake of war a murderer. His point is that one who fights war not for the sake, ultimately, of the flowering of human virtue, but for the sake of the enjoyment of war itself, is not virtuous but vicious. As I have shown earlier, it is the end, the telos, which, ultimately for Aristotle, determines which capacities are virtues and which vices: capacities for the good are virtues; those for what is bad are vices.

MacIntyre's account of the end or telos of our virtues is curiously empty. The good life, according to him, is a unified life—the life of a unified self, one not bifurcated into the mechanized actions of an end-neutral manager on the one hand and the expressive life of one who arbitrarily chooses roles on the other. Instead, it is a life unified by a narrative which connects the individual's behavior both to his or her intentions and to larger, communal settings and roles. Action, on this account, is not mechanistic, but guided by what the actor takes to be his or her end; nor is action wholly self-determined; instead, it gets its intelligibility and its identity from the larger community and tradition of which it is a part.
Which ends, however, and which community traditions, ought we to use to organize the narrative of our life, and which ones ought we to avoid? There MacIntyre is silent. But there lies the difference between being happy and being miserable, between tyranny and just rule, between justified and unjustified war. For the ends we set, and the traditions we follow and roles we fill, can lead to full human development, or away from it. MacIntyre, on this point, devolves into a groundless pluralism. There are different norms which we might pursue, he points out; sometimes, he states, these different norms may be incommensurable; each makes sense only in its own context. “The good life for man,” he states, “is a life spent in seeking for the good life for man.”

According to Aristotle, however, every action and choice aims at something believed to be good; aiming at what one takes to be good is not the distinguishing characteristic of virtuous actions as opposed to vicious ones; instead, it is aiming at what in fact is good which distinguishes them. It is in order to help us improve our aim that Aristotle writes the *Ethics* itself. His listeners know what is beneath us—the life of slaves or beasts—and are aiming at the high; they are the aspiring gentlemen of the day. But, their aims need guidance. MacIntyre's positive account, then, fails, or at least needs to be much further worked out. For, though it allows that there is distinction between human action and mechanical causation, it does not give us a guide for our action, and thus becomes a version of the mistake which he imputes to Nietzsche. MacIntyre states the alternatives in ethics starkly: Nietzsche or Aristotle. It is not clear that his own account describes the alternative which he prefers, however; for intrinsic good without a guiding aim—energeia without a telos—is not Aristotle at all, but is Nietzsche.

MacIntyre finds himself in this impasse because he rejects Aristotle's account of human happiness and substitutes for it his own. He does so for one principal reason: because he rejects what he calls Aristotle's "metaphysical biology," that is, because he, like the Enlightenment philosophers he mentions, rejects teleology. As stated earlier, however, I do not think these objections to Aristotle's ethics are successful. First, though Aristotle's account does rest on his biology, it does not rest on the part most commonly, and I think rightly, rejected: it does not rest on the belief that living beings move by nature towards their end. The ethics presupposes that human beings have an end; but it denies that we move by nature towards it: virtue and happiness, according to Aristotle, are not by nature, as I mentioned before; every action is aimed at something believed to be good, but our beliefs may be false or may fail to inform our passions.
Second, though Aristotle's account of human happiness does rest on his metaphysics, specifically on his account of potentiality and completion (dynamis and entelecheia), this part of his metaphysics is arguably true: it is arguably adequate to the phenomena—to the distinction between, for example, a blind person and a sighted person with his eyes shut; moreover, the fact that it is puzzling—and I think that it is—does not argue against its truth, unless someone can show that the real cannot be puzzling.

Third, I deny that Aristotle's account of human happiness—specifically, his account of the human ergon and its telos—makes human beings more fixed than they actually are. Aristotle's account of the human ergon, instead of making human beings more fixed than they actually are, locates the source of our evident versatility: we need not follow our passions, for example, but may act against them, or even alter our tendency to have them; the other animals must follow their passions; we, however, can act.

MacIntyre's Aristotelianism arises not out of reflections on the dangers of the unguided desire for the high, but on the need to overcome the fragmented quality of modern life. A virtue, on his account, is a human disposition which makes a unified life possible. His account is, still, however, liberal: he wants an Aristotelian ethics which is pluralist rather than exclusive; one which does not claim "institutional hegemony"; one which is applicable to people who live in different societies and follow different codes. In this, however, he has gone too far; for, since the good is relative, it is not vagueness about the good, but the good itself, that is, telos, which provides the needed diversity.

Conclusion

We are left, then, with two contemporary Aristotelianisms, one conservative and metaphysical, the other liberal and anti-metaphysical. The latter is problematic since it falls into one of the two alternatives it was devised to avoid: it leaves us pursuing arbitrary aims. The former is not problematic, but partial: accord can be identified with the high, but it can also be identified with wholeness or unity. Which is the American problem, the uncontrolled desire for the high or the fragmentation of desire, the tyrant or the "as-if" personality, Alcibiades or Gary Hart? The answer, I suppose, is both. The two accounts also differ in origin and in aim. Strauss's origins are in phenomenology and existentialism and in reflections on Nazism and other right-wing teachings; his aim is to find a plausible and efficacious aim for the ineradicable human desire for the high. MacIntyre's origins are in analytical philosophy and in reflections on the increasing fragmentation of contemporary life; his aim is to find a historical and pluralist account of happiness as unity.
MacIntyre’s anti-metaphysical Aristotelianism is not an isolated case. As philosophers turn increasingly towards the continent, whether to Nietzsche or to Heidegger, their interpretations and revivals of Aristotle do so too. It began perhaps with Hannah Arendt’s attempt, in the fifties, to found an Aristotelian account of action on natality rather than entelechy (that is, on our capacity to begin something new rather than on human nature and its telos); it continues with Martha Nussbaum’s attempt, in the eighties, to interpret Aristotle’s ethics as grounded not in metaphysics or nature, but in ordinary language; it continues in the current attempts by Anglo-American interpreters of Aristotle, Timothy Roche and Alfonso Gomez-Lobo, for example, to show that the *Nicomachean Ethics* does not have a metaphysical foundation; and, as I’ve stated, it continues in MacIntyre’s ongoing attempt to found his Aristotelian ethics on narrative structure rather than metaphysical ground.

For those who, like myself, associate themselves both with Aristotle and with liberalism—that is, both with Aristotle and with the pursuit of progress and change—these two types of Aristotelian ethics cry out for a third: for a liberal, but metaphysical, Aristotelianism, the outlines of which I have only begun to sketch out. It would, first, be an ethics dedicated to the same goal as Aristotle’s: happiness understood as the full development of our species-given capacities for intellect and feeling. It would presuppose, however, the equal importance of full development for all; this could perhaps be justified on moral grounds, as it is by William Galston in *Justice and the Human Good*, or on practical grounds, as a means of engendering public spiritedness in the liberal state. It would see the prudent pursuit of this goal—full development for all—as its ground, that is, as the principle on the basis of which to judge between beneficial and harmful change. It would recognize, as Aristotle does, self-government, not big government, as a constituent of, and not just a means to, such full development, and community as its condition—as Aristotle recognized the city as its condition in his time—since the liberal state remains largely neutral about the human good, with state being separate from church, from economics, and, largely, from culture. It would recognize as well the ambiguous relationship of the liberal state and capitalist economy to such communities, that the state and economy often destroy communities rather than sustaining them, by pandering to our desires for passive pleasure on the one hand and immortality on the other, to our consumer desires and to our proliferating attempts to overcome death. It would privilege neither the downtrodden, as much of the American left does, nor the talented, as does Strauss. It would recognize the capacity of the community to raise the level of each of its members, their desires to claims of justice and their
capacities to higher levels of virtue or development; the community, in other words, would be that particular body, intermediate between state and family, as Michael Sandel has said, through which our particular capacities, desires, and needs are raised to the level of the universal, without ever losing their rootedness in the particular: our capacities developed to the extent of their human potential, our desires and needs fulfilled in accordance with our common human nature. It would be a liberalism that would not deny, in its search for wholeness through community, the need for daring and risk, but would recognize that risk taken on and for oneself or one's group can be ennobling, as Michael Walzer has said in his discussions of the self-management of dangerous businesses. And it would be a teaching about happiness which could animate a sound pluralism—a pluralism based not on subjective whim, but on the relativity of good to context and to character; what is required to develop human capacities varies from place to place and person to person: sometimes we need to toughen up, other times to loosen up; sometimes to control our impulses, other times to discover them; sometimes we need a kick in the rear, sometimes a help up; sometimes we need sports, sometimes to learn parenting; sometimes we need great books, sometimes we need therapy; sometimes we need political participation, sometimes communion with God. The origin of this Aristotelian ethics would be in American philosophy and reflections on the fragmented, not to say narcissistic, American self; its aim would be to identify accord not just with the high but also with wholeness. It is an account that I hope to detail further in the future.

Notes

1. Our own end is only outside when we have not achieved it.
3. *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.9.
4. See *Politics* 1 on slavery. The slave lacks choice; it is lacking that which makes him a slave.
5. *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.9.
7. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.5. I distinguish here so-called final and instrumental good or bad: the beneficial and harmful are final (that is, intrinsic); the enabling and destructive are instrumental.
8. Again, instrumental and final good, where final means constitutive, as I argue below.
9. *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.3 1112b; 6.9 1142b.
10. *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.8 1142a; 6.9 1142b.

11. Pleasure is unimpeded activity of a disposition in accordance with nature (*energeia tês kata physis hxeois, anti de tou aisthêtin anem-podiston*). (This is Aristotle's first definition, *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.12 1153a14. The second does not conflict with it. 10.4 1174b31.) Happiness is activity in accordance with virtue. Virtue is a disposition in accordance with nature (*kata physis*). So activity in accordance with it is unimpeded. Therefore, happiness is unimpeded activity of a natural disposition, specifically, of the disposition to choose the mean or to hit the truth.

12. The city (*polis*) does not, and cannot, exist here today. So, some other condition is necessary for full development, as I state below.

13. And thus happiness.

14. “Superficial ornament” is interpretive. Aristotle says pleasure “*hosper periaptou tinos*” (1.8 1099a16). Ross translates this, “pleasure as a sort of adventitious charm.” Irwin translates it pleasure “as some sort of ornament.”

15. That this implies that each of these movements, by being together with the others, is more than itself— is raised to a higher level of development—is a reason for beginning to think that Athens and Jerusalem—that is, hierarchy and equality—are not as separate as they sometimes seem. Each “low” motion, by being together with the others, is raised to a higher level.


17. For example, running forward is the *telos* relative to one battle, but not to another; it is a context-relative good. For another example, intellectual instruction is a good relative to a human being, but not to a beast or to the god; it is a good relative to kind. There are, also, I maintain, goods relative to differing character or psychology: some people need competition; others need cooperation.


20. Currently, though, the American left privileges the downtrodden. Hence, in that sense, my standpoint is liberal, not left, since it privileges neither the downtrodden nor the talented, as I say below. It includes some elements from the left, though, specifically, the left suspicion of the relation between capital and human development.


27. P. 350.


29. P. 350.

30. P. 346.

31. I think it is possible to defend certain principles found in the Bible without resorting to revelation. As mentioned in a previous note, each first-stage potential is raised to a higher-stage potential by being together with other first-stage potentials. This is often true among people: the group can raise its members to a higher level.


33. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1177b.

34. "The real issue is Strauss's ruthless determination to use these old books to 'moderate' that idealistic longing for justice, at home and abroad, which grew in the puppies of America during the years when Strauss was teaching and writing," M. F. Burnyeat, "Sphinx Without a Secret" (*New York Review of Books*, May 30, 1985), p. 36.


37. P. 204.


42. P. 2.

43. Pp. 11–12.

44. P. 22.

45. P. 2.

46. P. 12.

47. P. 22.
48. P. 22; p. 113.
49. P. 84.
50. P. 114.
53. P. 191; see also pp. 219, 223.
55. P. 219.
56. As has been argued by, for example, Hannah Arendt in The Human Condition (University of Chicago, 1958) and by Bernard Suits in "Aristotle on the Function of Man: Fallacies, Heresies and other Entertainments" (Canadian Journal of Philosophy 4, September 1974), p. 23.
Dead Leaves:
Illustrations of the Genealogy of the Epic Poem

Jonathan Tuck

Poems, like people, have parents—and grandparents—and a whole remote ancestry of other poems to which they owe their own begetting. Though poets may try to set themselves up as a second deity, creating from nothingness with perfect power and freedom, still the poems they make bear ancestral markings and acknowledge their indebtedness. Each spring growth of foliage seems to remake the whole world anew; but each leaf is of a kind—a larger family—and also has more particular origins. The leaves fall and die, but not before they transmit something of themselves to their offspring. So too the leaves of a book, pages traced vein-like with lines of verse, take part in this cycle of begetting. Poems, too, can die to the world, although not exactly as leaves or people do. Some poets claim to have made the most permanent of objects, more enduring than bronze or monuments of stone, exempt from the ravages of time. Such claims are typically written in dead languages; or in any case they must have for us a quaint, antique sound. We know better: Words are winged, and if in their flight they fall on barren soil, nothing dies as fast. Their only chance for survival, for immortality, lies in their power to propagate.

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In the Homeric No-man's Land, the space between the two armies, the Achaian hero Diomedes, son of Tydeus, meets Glaukos of Lycia, a Trojan ally. Diomedes has just gotten away with assaulting two of the immortal gods, despite a rebuke from Apollo; but now he grows cautious. He is not willing to join battle with another divinity, he says, so he prudently inquires about Glaukos' identity and origins. Both the question and the caution that prompts it are surprising to us: Diomedes has been busily slaughtering scores of others for some time now without any such scruple or ceremony. In his aristeia, his finest hour on the battlefield, he has shown a strength that transcends human limitations, and it is the desire to defeat those limitations that makes men fight at all—so that their glory may be a song for men to come. Yet now, oddly, Diomedes feels hemmed in by his mortality. His strange moment of pensiveness in the midst of the battle prompts his question to Glaukos, and the answer at first shows the same mood of quiescence:

“Τυδείδη μεγάθυμα, τή γενεὴν ἐρεώνεις; οὕτη περὶ φύλλων γενεῆ, τοῦ δὲ καὶ ἄνδρῶν. φύλλα τὰ μὲν τ’ ἄνεμος χαμάδις χέει, ἄλλα δὲ θ’ ὕλῃ τηλεθῶσα φύει, ἄρος δ’ ἐπιγένεται ὃρη’ ὃς ἄνδρῶν γενεῆ ἡ μὲν φύει ἢ δ’ ἀπολήγει. εἰ δ’ ἐθέλεις καὶ ταῦτα δαμέναι, δερ’ ἐν εἰθής ἠμετέρην γενεὴν, πολλοὶ δὲ μὲν ἄνδρες ἱοσσιν’. “

“Great son of Tydeus, why ask of my generation? Like to the generation of leaves is that of men. The leaves are dashed to the ground by the wind, but then the wood Burgeoning brings forth others, and the time of spring returns. So with the generations of men: One blossoms, another dies. Yet if you wish even so to ask and learn the facts About my family stock, it is known by many men . . .”

—Iliad VI. 145-151

Glaukos too seems to be oddly conscious of human insignificance. In his simile of the leaves, the chiastic order of presentation suggests a difference of emphasis between the life story of the leaves and that of men. The leaves are first dashed to the ground, but then the wood brings forth more. New life here follows death; while in the one line devoted to human affairs the generations of men first bloom and then die. Syntactically the word ἀπολήγει gives the line a kind of abruptness, since it here lacks its more usual complementary genitive or participle. In sound, however, it drifts away into a kind of dying fall, with the repetition of the long ‘ay’ sound
in ἡ δ’ ἀπολήγει. The tone is melancholy and detached. We might even suspect Glaukos of being afraid of Diomedes and resigned to his own imminent death; certainly he has good reason to be, given what we have seen of Diomedes’ prowess. But the sentiment conveyed by the similitude of the leaves goes beyond either bitterness or quiescence: It has a kind of noble, philosophic serenity that makes the passage seem detachable from its context. In a sixteenth-century edition of the poem there might be a little picture of a hand in the margin, with an index finger pointing out the portable sententia. There is a grandeur-in-misery here in being able to be aware of such things; like Pascal’s thinking reed Glaukos seems to be finding his dignity in self-knowledge. So the shift is especially jarring to us when in the next line Glaukos says in effect: “But if you really want to know, my family has a proud history.” And then he is off into an exciting account of the noble feats of his grandfather Bellerophon.

In like manner, we the audience are emotionally whiplashed by the peculiar ending of the episode. Diomedes announces in tones of delight that he and Glaukos are ξένοι, guest-friends, by virtue of their forbears’ friendly relationship, and he proposes a separate peace: He and Glaukos will each find other men to kill; with each other they will exchange armor in token of comradeship. The two men clasp hands, and we share in their gladness. Here in the midst of the welter of warlike, self-aggrandizing appetites is an island of sublime, heroic good will. Here past friendships mean more than present frenzy. But we are sadly jolted by the author’s last words in recounting the episode:

But Zeus son of Kronos stole Glaukos’ wits away,
for he exchanged with Diomedes his armor
of gold for bronze, for nine oxen’s worth a hundred!

(VI. 234–6)

So much for the timeless claims of guest-friendship. Just like Glaukos when he proceeds to recite his genealogy, Diomedes returns abruptly to the self-assertive world of present needs and desires.

Perhaps we can better understand the back-and-forth movement of this episode by returning to the image of the leaves and asking the following odd question: Why does Homer choose to compare men in their generations to leaves specifically? One immediate answer is that he is putting in the mouth of Glaukos something very like a pun: τὸ φύλλον (with an acute accent and two lambdas) meaning “leaf” is very similar in sound to τὸ φύλλον (with a circumflex accent and one lambda) meaning “tribe,
race, stock, a group of people with a common origin." From this latter word comes our Latinate English "phylum," used in biological classification. The word for "leaf" seems to come from the ancient word φλέο, "to teem with abundance," while the word for "tribe" is descended from φύω, "to bring forth, produce, beget, generate." It is hard to doubt that the two roots are related, if not united, somewhere in their Indo-European past. So Glaukos seems to say jokingly, "Son of Tydeus, why do you ask me about my γενεα, my family stock? The family stocks of men (φύλα) are dashed to the ground by the wind . . ." Only now, in listening, do we realize that the other word, φύλα, was meant.

But apart from its wit, the connection is very apt. We need not ask of a man's individual lineage, for men are as multitudinous and as faceless as leaves on the trees. Yet Glaukos does go on, proudly, to give his genealogy; men, like leaves, may be many but they are not all the same: They come in kinds, preserving important distinctions. This opposition of multitude to orderly variation is shown in another Homeric use of the pun on φύλα, in Book II of the Iliad. Nestor publicly advises Agamemnon:

"Marshal your men by tribes [φύλα], by clans, Agamemnon, so that clan may help clan, and tribe help tribe [φύλα δὲ φύλοις]. If you do this, and if the Achaians obey you, you'll know then which of your leaders and men is a coward, and which is worthy, each group fighting as a unit."

(II. 362–6)

In this passage the word φύλα is used three times in the space of two lines, giving it a memorable emphasis. Nestor's advice is taken, and a bare hundred lines later we hear this:

They stood in the flowering meadow of Scamander, countless, as leaves and flowers blooming in season.

(II. 467–8)

And later in the same book of the poem, the goddess Iris, disguised as Priam's son Polites, has this to say to the Trojan assembly:

"Indeed, I have gone many times into manly battle, but never yet saw such a host, so many. For they look most like leaves, or the sands of the sea, as they come to the plain to fight against our city."

(II. 798–801)
Thus in a short space we see these two near-homophonic words used to balance off the faceless multitude of the Achaian forces, like leaves of the forest, as seen from without, against the orderly distinction in their arrangement by clans, as seen from within.

The simile of the leaves carries within it another pair of opposed, yet complementary qualities. Glaukos' speech to Diomedes seems to invoke the cyclical recurrence of the leaves from one spring season to the next. If we ignore distinctions among individual leaves or generations of them, it would seem that the generality of leaves is immortal, at least in Diotima's sense of immortality through successive begettings and substitutions (Symposium 208 a). Yet leaves as individuals are proverbially light and fragile, playthings of the wind, and nothing can be more final than their individual death, as Achilles reminds us:

“But this I say, and swear a great oath to it:
By this staff, which will sprout no leaves or shoots
ever again, since it left its stump in the hills,
nor bloom anew, for the bronze blade has stripped it
of leaves and bark, and now the Achaians' sons
bear it in hand as judges while they uphold
the laws ordained by Zeus ....”

(I. 233–9)

When we look at the leaves from the outside, ignoring their several particularities, they seem to go on forever. In choosing to look from the outside, we gain a kind of god-like detachment, but we lose the urgent immediacy, the specialness of a particular set of leaves—the cutting of the tree up in the mountains, the cruel stripping of the bronze blade. So too if we look at the lives of human beings in the largest spatial and temporal context, all single human destinies merge into the continuing story of the race. Thus we can seem to cheat our mortality, but the eternal life we gain is a kind of living death; in becoming part of an anonymous multitude we lose what is specifically valuable in human life. We become vegetables, machines for eating and begetting. So we must seem to the gods, as we learn from another of Homer's uses of the emblem of the leaves. In Book XXI of the Iliad, Apollo answers Poseidon's challenge thus:

“Earthshaker, you would say that I was senseless
if I were to fight with you for the sake of mortals,
those wretched ones, who now like leaves are full
of blooming life, feeding upon earth's fruits,
but then droop into death. So let us now quickly leave off our fight; let them decide it."

(XXI. 462-7)

If on the other hand we emphasize a different aspect of the leaves, their individual fragility and the finality of their passing, we are led inward, into an autumnal landscape of pathos and regret. So too in the story of humanity, a focus on the particular identities and valuable uniqueness of single people goes along with an awareness of their inevitable doom. This is the view we call “tragic”—and in daring to look in this way we assert our own dignity, our capacity for heroism and self-knowledge. As Glaukos returns to recount his own particular lineage, as Diomedes returns to the world of private appetites, war, and thievery, so throughout the Iliad we return constantly to the pathos of the concrete. In this poem it is the death of the leaves that is finally the more important. Think in contrast of the Odyssey, with its emphasis on what endures and is reborn, with its great image of the bed rooted in the olive tree.

But the power of the simile of the leaves is that it holds in unresolved counterpoise both views of human experience. Socrates claims that the same man can write both tragedy and comedy; I claim that Homer is here, with a kind of perspectivism, writing both at the same time. In its generality, the simile seems to move above the level of the poem’s battlefield narrative, making us cast our eyes forward and backward in a grand synoptic gesture of inclusion. But the inclusiveness would not be complete if we lost the particular diachronic context from which the simile arises. It is this inclusiveness that characterizes the poems we call “epics.” Though the human stories epics tell are fixed at a particular point in history, no human story of any consequence can be complete unless it is located in the larger world of space and time that the gods inhabit. Spatially epics go up to heaven and down into the underworld; temporally they go forward and backward, even to the beginning and end of human history. Yet they retain a constant rootedness, a grounding in the singularity of the human actions they tell; hence the tradition that epics begin and even end in the “middle of things.” Furthermore, they have sometimes been thought of as constituting an encyclopedia of all human wisdom, a compendium of all the lores and know-hows of different trades and callings, not to mention ethical teachings, cosmologies, and religious revelation. (This view of the epic poem as a repository of all knowledge helps us to understand Plato’s treatment of the poets in the Ion and the Republic.) In the most extreme case, a poem like the Aeneid could be used for divination—the book opened blindly
and a finger pointing to a randomly chosen passage. The text so chosen would foretell the future or give practical advice, as many believed in the Middle Ages. It is hardly possible to imagine such a practice applied to the texts of the great lyric or dramatic poems. The sheer size and scope of the epic itself, as well as that of the subjects it takes for its province, invite us to treat it as an inspired utterance or sacred book—perhaps even as a domain coterminous with Nature itself. So the writing of an epic is an act of enormous audacity, because such a poem aspires to swallow up all possible experience and hold it in the fixity of a human artifice. It is the binding of Proteus, or to vary the metaphor, it is a kind of rival Creation. And yet these leaves too must die.

* * *

A new generation of leaves, descended from these Homeric ancestors, springs forth in Book VI of the *Aeneid*. Aeneas and the Sibyl see the ghostly images of the dead, gathered at the shore of the infernal river:

```
huc omnis turba ad ripas effusa ruebat,
matres atque viri defunctaque corpora vita
magnanimum heroum, pueri inuptaeque puellae,
impositique rogis iuvenes ante ora parentum:
quam multa in silvis autumni frigore primo
lapsa cadunt folia, aut ad terram gurgite ab alto
quam multae glomerantur aves, ubi frigidus annus
trans pontum fugat et terris immittit apricis.
stabant orantes primi transmittere cursum,
tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore.
```

Here a whole crowd came streaming to the banks, mothers and men, the forms with life all spent of great-souled heroes, boys and girls unmarried, youths put on pyres before their parents’ eyes:

As many as in the woods, in fall’s first cold leaves drop, or landward from the raging deep as many birds gather, when the season’s frost drives them across the sea to sunny lands.

They all stood praying to be first across, and stretched out hands in love of the farther shore.

(VI. 305–14)

The leaves occupy only a line and a half, and the movement of the verse dramatically whirls them away into the following companion simile of the
birds. This is the effect of the striking elision of the last syllable of the Latin word for "leaves," folia, after two short syllables with light, voiceless consonants at the beginning of the word:

- U - U - U -

Lapsa cadunt folia, aut ad terram gurgite ab alto.

Although the phrase ad terram—"to the ground" or "toward land"—belongs formally to the second simile, it serves metrically here as the destination of the leaves' swift motion. In this brief picture we feel powerfully the ephemeral lightness of the leaves, pathetically helpless against the driving wind of Virgil's hexameters.

The passage is impressive enough in itself, drawing as it does upon Virgil's pictorial use of rhythm. But I want to claim much more: The specific power of the passage comes from our consciousness of the allusion to its Homeric antecedent in Iliad VI. At this point, remembering the well-marked dualities in Homer's treatment of the leaves, we expect a second view of them, returning in the spring after the wind has dashed them to the ground. Of course we don't get it, and our expectations are powerfully frustrated. But our continued awareness of Homer's leaves leads us further, to meditate upon the reasons for this departure from the precedent. In the first place, Glaukos spoke as he stood in the upper world, on a field of men living or dying; the Virgilian leaves, however, are compared to the shades of humans already dead. By setting his adaptation of the leaf-simile in the underworld, Virgil reminds us of his own spirituality, a spooky otherworldliness in marked contrast with Homer's rootedness in the natural rhythms of this world. Secondly, we realize that the Homeric completion of the simile in the more upbeat view of the leaves' renewal does have its own surrogate here in Virgil's recension of it: The birds, in Virgil's second simile, are a sort of phantom stand-in for the returning leaves of spring.

Superficially the point of similarity seems to be only the multitude of fallen leaves or of birds gathering on the ground: We had not thought death had undone so many. Of course there is a pictorial similarity too: The birds are leaf-like in appearance, tossed and buffeted by the wintry winds as they flutter to the ground. But these birds are also gathering for a new flight, a migration across the water into the sunny warmth of their winter home, probably in North Africa. In this respect they refer us back to the souls of the dead, waiting to cross the Styx. But the crucial point, distinguishing them from the leaves, is that these same birds will presumably return northward with the following spring—not a new generation, as with Homer's leaves, but these birds themselves. It seems clear that we are being referred
forward as well, to Anchises' Pythagorean account of the transmigration and re-embodiment of souls, later in *Aeneid* VI. The sunny lands of the south recall the blessed, luminous groves in Elysium, where some fortunate souls are sent after they "hang suspended in the empty winds" or "purge their crimes in the vast flood of the sea" (VI. 740–1, where *gurgite vasto* is a verbal echo of *gurgite ab alto* in line 310 of our passage). Virgil seems to be suggesting, in specific, self-conscious contradistinction to Homer, that a kind of personal immortality is possible, even if only for a few: not a derived "immortality" through the survival of one's offspring, but an enduring self, preserving one's identity and abiding in the land of the blest. This happy prospect might lighten our prevailing view of the human landscape of labor, mutability, and death; but the few who are to enjoy it must meet very stringent (and very Roman) ethical standards. The melancholy longing felt by the others, the fallen leaves, is what Virgil returns to at the end of our passage, with the sound effects of the justly famous line:

```
tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore.
```

So far I've been arguing that Virgil's revision of the leaf-simile works in a kind of counterpoint with our memory of its Homeric source. There is even a reminiscence of Homer in Virgil's use of rhythm. I have already described how the elision at the end of the word *folia* hurries us from the dying leaves to the second simile of the birds. Let's look again at the movement of Homer's line:

```
- u u - u u| u u| u u|-- u u -
φύλλα τά μέν τ' ἄνεμος χαμάδις χέει, ἄλλα δὲ θύλη
tηλεθώσσα φυεί.
```

The shortening of the diphthong, long by nature, at the end of the word *χέει* is a metrical effect known as "epic correption." Here, atypically, the correption occurs at a bucolic diaeresis—a pause after the fourth whole foot of the line. We would like to linger at such a marked break in this breathless-sounding, conspicuously dactylic line, but the shortening of *χέει* snatches us up and hurries us along, with marked enjambment, into the next generation of the leaves. The rhythmic force of this device is exactly analogous to that of Virgil's elision; and it comes at the analogous moment in the development of the similitude. Our feeling both of the correspondence between the two passages, and of the differences, is thereby sharpened.

Perhaps I should apologise for dwelling on such small details in these
Greek and Latin texts. I wanted to illustrate the degree of intimate familiarity that Virgil must have had with Homer's poem, and that he also expects from the ideal reader of his own revisionist version. We all know about the large-scale structural ways in which the Aeneid subsumes both the Iliad and the Odyssey: There are the references to the first lines of both Homeric poems in Virgil's first line; there are the plot parallels with the Odyssey in Aeneid I-VI and with the Iliad in VII-XII; there are the close resemblances of certain characters (Turnus, for instance, to Achilles sometimes, and other times to Hector). But such detailed imitation, allusion, and pointed variation as I have tried to show go much further: They amount to a constant pressure, or presence of the older author in the newer. Virgil—surely one of the most self-conscious poets who ever lived—cannot help but acknowledge his indebtedness to his master; at the same time, by varying the allusion he shows his authenticity and independence. To be writing an epic at all means to be working in a certain tradition, to be a "son of Homer" and to admit it. In one sense this admission also grants Homer's implicit claim to have created a second world in the vastness of his artifice. Pope made this point memorably in writing of Virgil:

When first young Maro, in his boundless Mind
A work t'outlast Immortal Rome design'd,
Perhaps he seemed above the Critick's Law,
And but from Nature's Fountains scorn'd to draw:
But when t'examine ev'ry Part he came,
Nature and Homer were, he found, the same.

(Essay on Criticism, 130–5)

But if this should be the last word, then epic would be a Titan that devours its own children. How can Virgil or anyone else write a second epic with similar aspirations of inclusiveness? A truly successful epic would exhaust the conditions for the writing of another such poem. The very power of Homer's original epic forces Virgil at once to include it and to depart from it, to struggle against his own roots.

The particular qualities of epic poems make it especially hard to write in a tradition, and make unavoidable the rivalry between any single epic poet and his predecessors. I have already mentioned the cosmic inclusiveness of epic, its encyclopedic quality that seeks to leave no subject matter remaining for any successor. Though epic poems try to embody the whole of human experience and human history, each one does so from a particular point of view. For epics tend to be "national," to recast history in terms of the destiny of a particular nation or culture. So to acknowledge one's epic predecessor is to participate in a rivalry of cultures—Rome ver-
sus Greece, say, or Christian versus Pagan. Even more problematically, the poet is not a mere mouthpiece for one historical or nationalistic worldview. It is true that such a view speaks through him; he is a prophet, speaking for another as the word implies, and the "Muse" is an image of the cosmic providence that seeks, through epic poets, to make itself known to humanity. But the poet is also engaged in a heroic act of self-assertion, in daring to take up the task of writing such a work, and as a prophet of his own Muse he speaks for himself. So the family drama of poetic influence, the Oedipal conflict of the poet with his own forbears, is sharpened and magnified by the special demands of the epic tradition.

For Virgil, the solution to this predicament is to incorporate or subsume Homer into his own poetic universe. (It is thus that I can speak of the presence of Homer within the text of Virgil.) His allusion to Homer's leaf-simile, for example, summons up all the specific affect of the passage in Iliad VI, where the leaves are made into a powerfully ambiguous emblem both of the pathos of mortal finitude and of the ways in which the cyclical self-perpetuation of nature transcends that finitude. Virgil, I say, invokes all this; and then by subtly varying it, he goes beyond it, projecting this dual perspective on the natural world into a new dialectic with the realm of the supernatural. So his poem implicitly claims that it contains and supersedes the parent poem. Homer's epic inclusiveness aspired to the swallowing-up of the whole natural world. The Aeneid shares this aspiration but adds to it: In addition to swallowing the primary world of nature, Virgil claims to have swallowed up the secondary "world" of Homer's poem. Thus in the theogony of the epic poem, each newly-generated Titan swallows its parents.

I have said that by its nature epic locates present human actions in a larger historical context; this "epic present" is emphatically the intersection of past and future. But the heroic act of writing an epic must itself be located in a similar temporal context, with poetic predecessors and successors arranged in a providential order that sets off the magnitude of the present poem. Virgil's poetic self-consciousness brings a second, self-referential story into his narrative: Behind the drama and great labor of the building of Rome there is the drama and the great labor of the building of the Aeneid. Each of these two great actions comes from a Greek precedent which it acknowledges, incorporates, and seeks to transcend. Each action also seeks to project itself indefinitely into the future: The perpetual glory of the Roman imperium is to be accompanied by the everlasting fame of Virgil's poem.

But Virgil is sufficiently aware of the necessary mutability of human affairs to entertain a melancholy scepticism about the staying power, both
of the empire and of the poem. He expresses his concern about his own poem's posterity by another use of the image of the leaves. In Book III, Helenus prophesies to his kinsman Aeneas about the arrival in Italy:

"Arrived there, when you reach the city of Cumae, the sacred lakes and whispering woods of Avernus, you'll find the frenzied seer in her deep cave who sings the fates, and notes them down on leaves. The songs the lady writes, she puts in order, leaf upon leaf, and shuts them in the cavern. There they remain untouched and in their places. But when a gentle breeze blows in the door, the hinges turn, the delicate leaves are scattered; then as they flutter through the cave, she never cares to replace them or remake her songs. Unhelped by Sibyl, vistors hate her halls."

(III. 441-452)

For this reason, when Aeneas comes in Book VI to consult the Sibyl he begs her to sing her prophecies herself, rather than entrusting them to the leaves and making them whirling playthings of the swift winds. He promises to build a temple to Phoebus and Trivia, where a shrine will be set apart to preserve the Sibyl's written prophecies, with priests as caretakers.

The possessed prophetess, the Sibyl, is here a stand-in for Virgil himself. Like her, he is divinely inspired; and he is our guide into the underworld just as she is for Aeneas. That there is a relationship between the Sibyl and the figure of the poet is also suggested by a verbal correspondence: In her prophecy the Sibyl says

\[
\text{bella, horrida bella,}
\]
\[
\text{et Thybrim multo spumantem sanguine cerno.}
\]
\[\text{war, savage war}\]
\[\text{I see ahead, and Tiber foaming blood.}\]

(VI. 86-7)

In Book VII, speaking in his own voice in the new invocation to the Muse, Virgil says

\[
\text{tu vatem, tu, diva, mone. dicam horrida bella,}
\]
\[
\text{dicam acies, actosque animis in funera reges.}\]
Oh goddess, guide your seer! I shall sing savage war, battle-lines, and kings by courage driven to death.

(VII. 41-2)

Here the word *vates*, "seer" or "prophet," which has been repeatedly used to refer to the Sibyl, is applied to Virgil himself in his capacity of epic poet, and he puts into his own mouth an echo of her own phrase *horrida bella*, "savage wars." And as Virgil is in some sense the Sibyl, he wonders if his prophetic poem will in the end, like her writings, become a "plaything of the winds." The written word is treacherous, and perhaps any such attempt to arrest the flux of experience in the fixity of human artifice is doomed. Perhaps, as he himself has subsumed and superseded Homer, some new poet will come and swallow up Virgil's poem too. To be thus superseded is not annihilation, but it is a very ambiguous kind of poetic immortality.

It may be that the golden bough itself serves in part as an emblem for the contradictions in Virgil's view of his poetic posterity: The bough is artificial, yet a kind of second nature. It has the durability of metal; yet it can be plucked and then grows again of itself. To the person chosen to receive it, it serves as a ticket of admission to the realm that contains the past, the future, and the ultimate mysteries of human destiny. Yet we remember that it yielded itself only reluctantly even to the hand of Aeneas; and if it chooses to deny itself to you, no violence can harvest its riches. It flashes an eerie glint of gold in the shadowy woods, near the jaws of foul-smelling Avernus; and its metal leaves give off a tinny rattle against the wind.

* * *

The dictionary tells us that it was only in late antiquity that the Latin word *folium*, "leaf," was first used to refer to a sheet of paper or page of a book. As far as I know, the connection between the leaves of the forest and the human artifice of poetry is first made explicitly by the poet Horace, a friend of Virgil, in the critical treatise known as the *Ars Poetica*:

Ut silvae folis pronos mutantur in annos,
prima cadunt, ita verborum vetas interit aetas,
et iuvenum ritu florent modo nata vigentque.
Debemur morti nos nostraque, sive receptus
terra Neptunus classes Aquilonibus arcet
regis opus, sterilisve diu palus aptaque remis
vicinas urbes alit et grave sentit aratrum;
seu cursum mutavit iniquum frugibus annis,
doctus iter melius: mortalia facta peribunt,
nedum sermonum stet honos et gratia vivax.

When at the year's end forests change their leaves,
The oldest fall first; so with the generations of words:
The former die, the newer bloom like boys.
For we and all things ours are owed to death:
The harbors that we build (a royal task!);
The barren marshes, then a place for boats,
Now drained for plowing, feeding farms nearby;
The dams that bend the river's angry course
And save the crops—These mortal works shall die,
Nor shall the grace and glory of discourse live.

(Ars Poetica 60–69)

But though this connection had been made, and though Virgil's Sibyl wrote her prophecies on leaves, the word itself probably did not have for Virgil the witty self-reference that its linguistic development, and the predominance of written culture, later made possible. For Dante, the closeness of the related Italian words foglia, "leaf of a tree," and foglio, "page in a book," makes explicit the doubleness of the drama of the leaves. In the primary world of nature, leaves die and others succeed them; in the second, rival nature that is the world of epic poems, what is said to happen out in the woods can also be referred to the successive generations of pages of verse. So Dante's use of the image of the leaves is even more explicitly self-referring, and Dante's poem is even more self-conscious than its predecessors about its context in literary history. It is appropriate, then, that the family drama of Dante's relation to his poetic father, Virgil, is internalized and made explicit within the poem's narrative: Both "Dante" and "Virgil" are characters in a poem written by the first man and pervasively influenced by the second. And their relationship as Dante depicts it certainly reflects the intense ambivalence he feels toward his great forerunner. Virgil is the powerful and beloved guide; but his guidance is fallible and limited in scope—his pupil will go farther than Virgil can take him. And the most powerful indicator of all is that Virgil finally is a damned soul, one of those who have "lost the good of the intellect." As a denizen of Hell he is made to assist in an extended revisionist reworking of his own Book VI. Whenever a Virgilian passage lies allusively behind, or within Dante's text, the implied claim is that Virgil had an inkling, partial at best, of the authoritative version we get from the younger poet. The movement is from shadowy types to truth: Virgil went forth into the night, holding
a lamp behind him to aid his successors. Dante sees more and knows better, and so now does Virgil—but too late.

It is in this emotionally charged atmosphere that we see, in the third canto of *Inferno*, a new generation of the leaves that first grew and died by the River Scamander, on the fields of Troy. Virgil the guide and Dante the pilgrim have come to the banks of the Acheron, where Charon, the steersman of the livid marsh, transports across the water the souls of the damned:

Come d'autunno si levan le foglie
l'una appresso dell'altra, fin che 'l ramo
vede alla terra tutte le sue spoglie,
similmente il mal seme d'Adamo
gittansi di quel lito ad una ad una,
per cenni come angeli per suo richiamo.
Così sen vanno su per l'onda bruna
e avanti che sien di là discese,
anche di qua nuova schiera s'auna.

As in the fall the leaves are taken away
Each followed by the next, until the bough
Sees on the ground all its despoilments lie,
In that same way the evil seed of Adam
Hurl themselves from the shoreline, one by one
At signals, like a bird called by its lure.
Thus they embark over the dusky waves,
And even before they land on the other side,
Again on this side a new crowd is gathered.

(III. 112–120)

Dante leaves no doubt that he is alluding to the Virgilian passage we have just examined. The simile comes at the analogous point in the narrative—an encounter with Charon, a passage over an infernal river into the underworld. Even the second simile of the birds is included: “At signals, like a bird called by its lure.” But having drawn Virgil's text into his own poem, Dante proceeds to transform it by a skillful reallocation of emphasis. The extended treatment of the leaves dwells on the consequence, the result of their fall: “The bough/Sees on the ground all its despoilments lie.” Our first thought is a kind of pity for the tree that has suffered the plundering of its spoils. Virgil gave us the pathos and vulnerability of the leaves themselves, but Dante is here speaking of their source, the tree which is now denuded. Still, the two passages both seem to be portraying passive
victims of the force of another. So we are puzzled and disquieted at the way Dante's version continues:

In that same way the evil seed of Adam

Hurl themselves from the shoreline . . .

The violent contrast between si levan, "are taken away," and gittansi, "hurl themselves," heightened by the reflexive form of both, makes us doubt the aptness of the simile. Our perplexity is increased when we notice a hidden wit in the use of si levan: Levarsi can mean "to raise or lift oneself up" as well as "to be taken away." In anticipation of the moral significance of verticality in the poem, "lifting up" is set in polar opposition to "casting down." Dante is implying that leaf-like souls, unlike Virgil's passive victims, fall by their own choice in an act of deliberate violence.

It is thus fitting that our sympathy is diverted, in Dante's version, from the leaves themselves to the bough of the denuded tree. What is this tree? We probably think first of the forest of the suicides in Canto XIII of Inferno, where both Pier della Vigna and an anonymous Florentine suicide, now turned into a bush, fit the picture of the bereaved plant, deprived of its foliage, staring at the ground. There too the immediate reaction, both ours and the pilgrim's, is pity. But the word spoglie, "despoilments," is used in that canto to refer to the bodies the suicides have cast off by their own act. Along with the pilgrim we must learn the hard lesson that recurs throughout the Inferno: The justice of God often does not easily accord with our immediate passions of pity and love. Our wills must be shaped anew. The suicides have offered violence to more than themselves, and we must look farther to find the tree from which the damned souls, the leaves, have torn themselves.

In the thirty-second canto of Purgatorio, Dante and Statius are following the great pageant of revelation, including the triumphal car drawn by the Griffin, symbol of the incarnate Christ:

So, passing through the lofty forest, bare
Through fault of her that trusted in the serpent,
The song of an angel kept our steps in time.
As far as in three shots, perhaps, an arrow
Loosed from the bow would fly, so far had we
Moved on our way, when Beatrice descended.
Then from them all I heard a murmur: "Adam";
And they formed a ring around a tree, despoiled
Of leaves and other foliage in each branch.
Its living tresses widen all the more
As the tree goes higher; even by the Indians
In their great woods, its height would be admired.
"Blessed are you, Griffin, since with your beak
You pluck not from this tree so sweet to taste;
For later on the belly wrenches from it."
Thus circling around the mighty tree
The others shouted; and the animal twice-born
Cried: "So the seed of all just men is saved."

(XXXII. 31-48)

The Griffin goes on to renew the tree laid bare by the fault of Adam. We can see that the epithet *il mal seme d'Adamo*, "the evil seed of Adam," in our original passage, was not lightly chosen. These leaves are not generalized symbols of the condition of mortality; they are particular reminders of the human act that originated that condition. The emphasis on "seed" in *Inferno* III (Cf. III. 104-5), reinforced by sound effects—*similmente il mal seme d'Adamo*—here finds justification. Though the evil seeds ironically bear no fruit, cast on the barren ground of hell, the *good seed* of Adam is Christ, the first fruits and the seed of all righteousness, repairing the damage wrought by Adam's fall. By his act the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is transformed into the great tree that is an epithet for Heaven in *Paradiso* XVIII:

*l'albero che vive della cima
e frutta sempre e mai non perde foglia.*

the tree that lives from its top
and always bears fruit, never losing its leaves.

(XVIII. 29-30)

It seems that we have accounted for Dante's adding to his Virgilian source the detail of the tree contemplating its own despoliation. In so doing he turns the falling of the leaves into a typological image of the fall of humanity, and of all nature. Through Christ's saving act, however, the leaves as well as the fruit are restored to the tree, and so the integrity of the restored tree is a kind of image of the Incarnation, the marriage of the human and the divine. These things are known to a Christian through the revelation of Holy Scripture; but Virgil as a Pagan has had no access to scripture, and thus he has departed by the time Dante and Statius see the tree's antitype in the pageant at the end of *Purgatorio*. Dante the poet's
revision of the simile from *Aeneid* VI shows both the rhetorical power and the spiritual limitations of the older poem.

Another image of this transformation is Dante’s use of Virgil’s birds. We remember that in the *Aeneid* the birds seemed almost as passive as the leaves: “the season’s frost/Drives them across the sea.” The difference was that the death of the leaves was utterly final and definitive, while the flight of the birds left open the possibility of a cyclical return. Dante takes Virgil’s migrating birds and reduces them to one hunting bird, probably a falcon returning to the falconer’s lure. Here is a conspicuous revision of Virgil, for whom the points of similarity between leaves and birds were multitude and helpless passivity. Dante’s bird is only one, and its passage is a willed act of obedience to a command. Whose command? Virgil himself is made to tell us, in his capacity as guide, in Purgatory. Look up, he tells Dante the pilgrim,

> “Turn your eyes to the falcon’s lure, whirl’d round  
> By the Eternal King, with his mighty spheres.”
> Then like the falcon, who looks first below  
> Then turns to his master’s call, straining ahead  
> From craving for the food that draws him thither,  
> Just so was I.

(*Purgatorio* XIX. 62–67;  

When a soul ordained to bliss or to damnation proceeds to its eventual resting place, it resembles the falcon heeding the command of the falconer—that is, God. But unlike the migratory birds of the *Aeneid*, this falcon is on a one-way journey, propelled by its own will either for good or for evil. The damned souls which hurl themselves from the shoreline are following their appetites into hell, just as the more blessed falcon of Dante’s comparison in Purgatory strains ahead toward the Lord’s supper. Dante’s version of the simile implicitly condemns the melancholy quietism of Virgil, who makes Anchises say *quisque suos patimur manis*, “Each of us endures his shadowy doom.” Even the damned souls in the *Comedia* hurl themselves forward, instead of stretching out their arms in ineffec­tual longing.

As Virgil revised Homer, Dante revises Virgil. In each case filial piety toward a literary parent causes the imitation; but in each case the imitated model is subverted by implicit criticism. By subsuming the source into his own poem, assimilating it into even small details of the allusive passages in the text, the succeeding poet suggests the incompleteness of the original,
now fleshed out by his own still more inclusive epic vision. Virgil's revisionism is sometimes ambivalent: He seems to feel a kind of nostalgia for the simpler, more naturalistic view of history that he finds in Homer's poems, but he knows he lives too late to indulge in it. There has been a tragic fall from naive archaic heroism into the necessity of a political art. The greater self-conscious artificiality of Virgil's poem is in part an implied celebration of purposive human artifice in the building of Rome, but also in part an expression of Virgil's regretful awareness of the human costs of the great enterprise. As we have seen, Virgil's ambivalence emerges in his prospective view of his own poem's posterity. In casting himself as the Sibyl, he appropriates to himself the authority and lasting power of divine inspiration; but in the image of the scattering of Sibyl's leaves he expresses his worry that the inclusiveness and integrity of his poem will be compromised with the passage of time. Virgil knows that when a poem is subjected to the kind of systematic and intimate textual revision that he himself performed upon Homer's work, it suffers a kind of diaspora, a tearing and scattering of the unified imaginative vision of its creator-poet, wind in the Sibyl's cave. In this Virgil was a true prophet, as we recognize when we consider his treatment in the *Commedia*.

In contrast, Dante shows greater confidence in his power to subsume his predecessor and to preempt any that might come after him. To some extent this confidence results from his own self-assertive personality; but it is also the confidence of the Christian humanist that his creed is the true, valuable, and permanent interpretation of the partial truths of the ancients. In the measure that Heaven is the True City, "that Rome of which Christ is a Roman" (Purg. XXXII. 102) which includes, fulfills, and transcends the Rome that Aeneas labored to build, so the journey chronicled by Dante is the true *Aeneid*. All human descents into the underworld are types of Christ's descent to harrow Hell. All human journeys to beatitude are types of his resurrection and ascension. Thus a literal truth—the truest of all truths, for Dante—is *incarnated* into the ostensible fiction of the narrative of the *Commedia*. Dante the pilgrim instantiates Christ by dying and rising with him, as the poem's chronological scheme makes clear. (Dante descends into Hell on Good Friday of the year 1300 and emerges on Easter Sunday. See *Inferno* I. 36f., XXXIV. 68, 112f., and especially XXI 112–14.) In the same way Dante the poet claims to provide a kind of incarnation in literary history analogous to Christ's incarnation in real human history. In the complete interpenetration of Dante's *mythos* and his subject, the word made flesh is made word again, as an organizing principle for experience; and then by the powerful immediacy with which it is made *present* for us, it is made flesh once again. Christ the Logos is
here allegorically a ratio, a master relationship between the human soul and divinity that is replicated in a kind of continuing proportion by Dante the pilgrim, by Dante the poet in his retelling, and by us, the readers. The unity and incorruptibility of Christ himself serve as a kind of guarantee of the integrity and incorruptibility of Dante's poem. We see this with extraordinary power at the end of the *Commedia*, where the unity of the creation is imaged as the cohesion of a book of pages bound together:

In the phrase "bound up by love into a single volume," the world *volume* is used wittily to mean both a book and anything turned—like a sphere,
for example. The word is used in this second sense repeatedly in *Paradiso* (XXIII. 112, XXVI. 119, XXVIII. 14). But the most important preceding use of *volume* comes in *Inferno* I, where Dante also pairs it with *amore*, "love."

“Or se’ tu quel Virgilio e quella fonte
che spandi di parlar sì largo flume?”
risponse’ io lui con vergognosa fronte.

“O delli altri poeti onore e lume,
vagliami l’lungo studio e’ l grande amore
che m’ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.
Tu se’ lo mio maestro e ’l mio autore;
tu se’ solo colui da cu’ io tolsi
lo bello stilo che m’ha fatto onore . . .”

“Are you that Virgil, then, that famous spring
from which pours forth so great a stream of speech?”
I answered him with shame upon my face.

“O light and honor of all other bards,
Let the great zeal and love avail me now
That long have made me search throughout your volume.
You are my master, my original;
And you alone are he from whom I took
The style whose beauty brings me honor too.”

(I. 79–87)

The honorific word *volume*, applied first to Virgil’s work, refers to the epic inclusiveness that allows him to *involve* and encompass so vast a world within his poem. But its last use in Dante’s poem, framing the *Commedia* at the other end, as it were, shows how much larger a claim he makes for his own *volume*. The time-honored image of the “Book of the World” is here adapted to two purposes: It expresses the sense of integrity and oneness that Dante the pilgrim perceived in all of creation, with the power of the vision vouchsafed to him in the highest of the heavens; but it also self-referentially implies the power of Dante’s poem to convey this same sense, though mediated by language, to his audience. The encyclopedic claims of epic are made literal.

But at the end of the passage there is a sudden reversal:

One instant is to me more Lethe-like
Than twenty-five centuries of oblivion
For Neptune, marvelling at the Argo’s shadow.
The all-inclusive power of epic has also been internalized and made contingent on the visionary power and articulateness of the poet. If his capacity for beatitude proves to be fleeting, as is the common case for living human beings, his volume will be in effect *squadernato*—scattered in single pages throughout the universe. Remarkably, however, by locating himself and his own failure of vision within the narrative, Dante asserts the scope and lasting power of the vision that he admittedly fails to depict or even evoke in a lasting way. Unlike Virgil, whose survival and fame seemed to depend on the continuance of an earthly empire, Dante links his own poem to the eternal actuality and truth of God's empire. That he is not able to convey it directly somehow guarantees that it is there. This rhetorical strategy accounts for the great paradox of the last canto of the *Commedia*: that in the most successful evocation of divine presence in any work of literature, the inexpressible is expressed precisely through a failure to express it. Thus when Dante appropriates Virgil's image of the Sibylline leaves, it has a quietude and sweetness remote from Virgil's disturbing melancholy. Dante is here revising and subsuming not only Virgil's poem but his own:

Qual è colui che somnìando vede
che dopo il sogno la passione impressa
rimane, e l'altro alla mente non riede,
cotal son io, ch'è quasi tutta cessa
mia visione, ed ancor mi distilla
nel cor il dolce che nacque da essa.
Così la neve al sol si disigilla;
cosi al vento nelle foglie levi
si perdea la sentenza di Sibilla.

As is the man who, in his dreaming, sees
And then, the dream past, still its imprinted power
Remains, but all the rest from him is gone,
So too am I now: Almost all the vision
Falls off from me apace; yet there distills
Within my heart the sweetness born of it.
Thus in the sun the snow unseals itself;
Thus in the wind, among the delicate leaves,
The prophecies of Sibyl went astray.

*(Paradiso* XXXIII. 58–66)

* * *

Skipping over three hundred fifty years and some notable episodes in this family history, we come to a new death of leaves, newly reborn, in
Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Satan, cast into hell, rears himself up from the burning lake and struggles massively to the shore.

Nathless he so endur'd, till on the Beach
Of that inflamed Sea, he stood and call'd
His Legions, Angel Forms, who lay intranst
Thick as Autumnal Leaves that strow the Brooks
In *Vallombrosa*, where th' *Etrurian* shades
High overarcht imbown, or scattered sedge
Afloat, when with fierce winds *Orion* armd
Hath vext the Red-Sea Coast, whose waves orethrew
*Busiris* and his *Memphian* Chivalrie,
While with perfidious hatred they persu'd
The Sojourners of *Goshen*, who beheld
From the safe shore thir floating Carcasses
And Brok'n Chariot Wheels. So thick bestrown
Abject and lost lay these, covering the Flood,
Under amazement of thir hideous change.

(I. 299–313)

I have time only to sketch in the most compressed and cryptic way how Milton receives and transforms this legacy of the simile of the leaves. Like Homer he locates the passage generally in a context of huge, heroic battlefield conflict. Like Virgil he compares the leaves in their multitude to the number of the fallen. Like Dante he gives us the final sight of the leaves on the ground, in the fallenness of a Christian Hell. And there are numerous other particular points of allusion as well, to these authors and others, like the epic poet Tasso, the Biblical narrator of Exodus, and most especially the prophet Isaiah:

And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fall down, as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling fig from a fig tree.

(Is. 34:4)

The richness, the plenitude of this catalogue of allusion testifies to the inclusiveness of Milton's encyclopedic epic. Yet the sheer range of the field surveyed, the number of sources invoked, is dizzying to us: The leaves of these preceding volumes lie as thick as those in Vallombrosa, and we surveying them are like the fallen angels, amazed at the wild declension of images and the change from one to another. The passage becomes a kind
of labyrinth, as the pun on “amazement” suggests. What are the sources of our difficulties? Perhaps we can enumerate some.

First, the different sources alluded to are made to work against each other. Let me give two examples. Vallombrosa, a pretty rural convent outside of Florence, seems to provide a concrete, naturalistic, this-worldly location for the fallen leaves. That suggests that the simile will be faithful in spirit to Homer’s practice of contrasting the violent scenes of his narrative with incongruously peaceful vignettes of country life. But the place Vallombrosa is chosen for the particular reason that its name is significant: It means “Shady Valley,” the Valley of the Shadow of Death, an allegorical landscape like Dante’s. Our satisfaction at recognizing this wordplay does not last long. At the end of the line, “Etrurian shades” adumbrates, if I may use that word, the presence of the Etruscan or pre-Roman ghosts of the Aeneid, in whose underworld there is also a valles umbrosa. The lineation gives us time to be confused; then the enjambed remnant of the clause makes us realize that the word “shades” refers not to ghosts, but metonymically to trees. We are back in the placid natural landscape again.

A second example: Our awareness of the presence of Virgil and Dante within and behind Milton’s text conditions us to think of spirits waiting on the near side of a body of water, preparing to cross over. It is on the hither shore that both Aeneas and Dante the pilgrim stand, contemplating the numberless dead. But here the simile of Pharaoh’s chariots (“Busiris and his Memphian Chivalrie”) chasing the fleeing Israelites (“the Sojourners of Goshen”) leaves us with no firm place to stand: At first we are with Pharaoh, pursuing from the near shore; then, by the magic of a subordinate clause, our perspective shifts to the farther shore and we are with the Hebrews, looking back. But what we are looking at is the wreck of Pharaoh’s army, now not on either shore but scattered in or on the water, like the fallen angels. The shift from one invoked source to another enforces on us abrupt dislocations in space and time.

Another source of difficulty for us comes from the unique temporal setting of Milton’s story. As his poem goes on to show, the fall of Satan and the rebel angels helps to cause the fall of humanity and of all of terrestrial nature. Such phenomena as the change of seasons, the coming of storms, the death of leaves or of any other living thing—all these result from and instantiate the first coming of death that Milton depicts. It is thus incongruous for him to use these later, more familiar phenomena in similes: To do so is to compare a thing with itself, or a subset of itself, as if I were to say, “The earth’s rotation on its axis is as regular as the alternation of night and day.” As Wallace Stevens once remarked, identity
is the vanishing point of resemblance. Milton’s implicit claim is that the primary truths of human history, told in his poem, are more intelligible in themselves than any poetic comparison could make them. At worst, poetic comparison will mislead us, like the inappropriately tranquil scene of Vallombrosa. In trying to reduce the subject to the narrow limits of our fallen human comprehension, poetry causes us to make mortal errors again and again. The sheer difficulty, the deception and complexity of Milton’s verse are often attempts to make us aware of this repeated process. Even at best, any statement of likeness would be redundant, strictly speaking. The originating status of Milton’s subject matter is so all-encompassing that no comparison can be found which is not absorbed into the thing compared to. Hence no epic simile in the ordinary sense is possible: If the normal action of the similes is to include other realms of experience in an epic narrative, here we find that all of those realms are already automatically included. And so are we, the beholders. The poem cannot offer us a god-like or privileged place to stand, from which we can contemplate in detachment the unity and comprehensiveness of creation. It is our very fallenness, our implication in the events narrated, that causes our difficulties in reading.

Milton’s poem thus conspires rhetorically against itself, but only after disposing of its precursors. We saw Virgil rewriting Homer and Dante rewriting Virgil; but for Milton there is no single epic forerunner, no fatherly master-poet to whom he is irretrievably indebted and whose precedent he must overcome. In place of an intricate counterpointing of two texts, we get from Milton an all-out assault on what heportrays as a monolithic tradition of epic poetry. As he claims in the invocation at the start of Book IX, all conventional heroic narrative is intrinsically inferior to the story that he alone is trying to tell. But he too, of course, is fallen, dependent on the inspiration of a heavenly muse. His greatest source of information and also of difficulty is Holy Scripture itself. A revisionist treatment of Genesis can only dramatize its own futility, and that of all human poetic artifice. As I’ve claimed, other epics try to swallow up their predecessors and preempt their successors. Milton’s more radical project is to chop down the whole family tree, and his own branch with it.

It is somewhat alarming to reflect that he may well have succeeded. Many literary historians consider Paradise Lost to be the last true epic poem in Western literature. I do not know whether this is true; if it is not, I am similarly puzzled by the question of who the legitimate heirs are, in the generations that follow. But the succession we have seen suggests at least a direction: inward, away from the narrative representation of physical experience. As the tradition goes on, more of the poem’s essential content
consists, not in its self-containedness as a text, but in its interaction with its own past and future. The burden of the successor poet is to inherit the tradition and make it new, to use an intimate familiarity with the work of another as the new material for a radically originating act. Perhaps this process can be a paradigm for you and me, not writers of epics but readers of them. We too must remake the poems we read, approaching them with qualified piety and then dismembering them, assimilating them into ourselves. They are the true and valid sources of our self-making, lenses through which we view the whole of things, tokens of admission not only into other worlds but into our deep selves, the underworld in which we learn our destiny. If we don't appropriate what we find in these pages, making them ours by wrenching them out of their own place and time, then they are dead leaves indeed. But if they find new life in us—if our re-vision of these received texts becomes a new mode of vision, ours and yet not ours alone—then we too might be able to see the whole world as one place, bound up by love into a single volume, for as long as the vision lasts.

Note: Given the nature of my argument, it seems indispensable for me to acknowledge at least a few of my own literary debts. Anyone who has read the work of Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom will recognize how deeply and pervasively this essay has been influenced by them. There are brief treatments of the topos of the leaves in C. M. Bowra's From Virgil to Milton and John Hollander's The Figure of Echo. I have consciously borrowed several points from R. G. Austin in my treatment of Virgil. My reading of Dante owes much to Erich Auerbach, E. R. Curtius, and Charles Singleton; my reading of Milton, to Stanley Fish. All the translations, however, are my own.
Members of the graduating class:

It is an honor to be asked to speak to you on your Commencement Day. A recent book bears the title *How to Survive Education*. I haven't read it, and do not know how it's done; but you've done it, and we congratulate you. I myself, who came here forty years ago next August, have not quite made it through: I have still the junior and senior language tutorials to do.

The St. John's program does a lot of stretching and spreading thin. If a sheet of plastic is stretched to its tensile limit, it is likely that a hole will open in it here or there. In trying to cover as much as we do, we are quixotic. Quixoticism has been our keynote from the beginning.

Fifty-one years ago Scott Buchanan and Stringfellow Barr brought forth on this campus a New Program, dedicated to the proposition that liberal education is possible. The enemy was the elective system, introduced by Charles Eliot in his inaugural address as president of Harvard in 1869, and since then adopted in colleges and universities generally. Before Eliot, the curricula were all-required, but—and this was Eliot's objection—they had failed to incorporate the modern natural sciences. Year by year the natural sciences were transforming the world and our picture of it. Eliot, by licensing the natural sciences as elective possibilities, aimed to broaden, deepen, and invigorate education. One consequence, a good one, was that the universities became nurturers of natural science. Another was that

Curtis Wilson, Tutor and twice Dean of St. John's College, Annapolis, reached retirement this year. He delivered this address to the graduating seniors in Annapolis on May 22, 1988.
liberal education lost its sense of identity and direction. Adding to the muddle were the new social sciences, so-called. College education became a grab-bag of choices ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Barr and Buchanan set out to do the impossible. We were all, students and tutors, to become autodidacts, tackling the reading of a veritable Everest of books. The books were to be chosen for their classic quality, for being first-rate. The great works of mathematics and natural science would be included, starting with Euclid and continuing through Newton, Maxwell, and so on. We would become literate in the classics of the scientific tradition, as well as in the classics of literature and philosophy. In my one leisurely conversation with Buchanan, in 1965, he wanted to know how we were getting on with Maxwell and Josiah Willard Gibbs. Gibbs, if you haven’t heard his name before, was a nineteenth-century American, one of the great physicists. I had to confess that we hadn’t managed to cram Gibbs’s works on thermodynamics and statistical mechanics into the program.

This program that Barr and Buchanan conceived was accused of being Epimethean, medieval, backward-looking. In fact, it was as Promethean as all get-out. Like John Dewey, Buchanan came from Vermont, and like him mixed Yankee pragmatism with a visionary dream of what this country could be. He expected the college’s new program to become the seedbed of an American Renaissance.

As for the natural sciences, he had the idea of a hands-on approach. He saw the laboratory as the distinctively modern institution for the acquisition of knowledge; and so he dubbed one whole part of the program “the laboratory.” At different times he considered organizing it round medicine, or the airplane engine. A good carpenter himself, he wanted the students to get handy with hammer and saw, plane and drill. And in the laboratory, both intellect and manual technique were to be brought to bear.

All this was to be done in a marvelously original, eclectic way. For organizing principles, Buchanan turned to medieval tradition. He had the library collection reorganized under the rubrics of the seven liberal arts, so that physics, for instance, came under music. What a librarian’s headache! Buchanan was aiming to tweak all our complacencies.

Of those heady times, which were before I arrived, I have gathered intimations from here and there. One of the earlier tutors told me how, in the autumn of his first year, his senior math students—all male, of course—took him to a local pub, sat him down with a beer, and commanded him to stop considering himself responsible for their education. They were responsible; if they needed help, they would ask for it.

In the middle of the academic year in which I arrived, 1948–49, Jacob
Klein became dean of the College; he was to remain so till 1958. It was a time of consolidation. A new president, Richard Weigle, proceeded to put the College on a tenable financial basis. Coeducation was introduced, a step, it was hoped, in the direction of civility. The faculty, weary of more chaos than it was comfortable with, became more insistent that students acquire something more like ordinary competence. As the dean put it, the glories of fifth-century Athens must now be succeeded by the more pedestrian achievements of an Alexandrian age. The obbligato of social revolutionary fervor dropped to a whisper.

From my first decade here what has remained most clearly in memory are the dean’s opening lectures. Huffing, clearing his throat, Jacob Klein would begin by speaking of the trepidation he felt, in attempting to formulate our task. All knowledge, he would be telling us, was our province, and to keep the wholeness of it in mind was enormously difficult. For it was ever our tendency to make ourselves comfortable by limiting the view.

He would speak of the babble and unexamined jargon of everyday speech. Are we not prisoners to it? In Plato’s simile of the cave, we must somehow be freed of our chains and turn round, looking away from the shadows to what causes them. Surely there is something right about this image of education, whatever the mystery or confusion concerning the rest of the story, the Sun and the upper regions and the fourth part of the divided line. But what was mainly being impressed on the hearers of those lectures was a simple idea and a sobering one: the thought that to take account of the wholeness of things is difficult and demanding.

Of these lectures the one that I remember best was Jacob Klein’s final lecture as dean, delivered in September, 1957. The text has not survived, but the title was “The Delphic Oracle and the Liberal Arts.” It dealt with the ambiguity of the injunction “Know Thyself.”

One meaning is this: Know that you aren’t god. Know that you are a finite, mortal being, dependent on your fellow human beings, prone to error, prone to hybris, the error of overstepping your boundaries. The lesson to draw is modesty, sobriety, circumspection, a sense for our equality with our fellows. To a student this could mean: doing the homework, learning the paradigms. To a scholar it could mean: getting the footnotes right.

The other meaning rested on the recognition that everything is connected with everything. From the farthest reaches of the cosmos to the depths of the human psyche, nothing is simply isolatable, so as to be fully understandable by itself alone. Hence, to know myself, I must know everything. The quest for self-knowledge is thus inherently incompletable. But the oracle, under this interpretation, enjoins it.

In what I have been recounting, there is an aspect I do not want you
to miss. We at this college are a bunch of crazy autodidacts, holding madly onto two horns of a dilemma. If you did not quite know what you were getting into when you first came here, surely the truth has dawned on you by now.

In the last thirty years the program has not changed in essentials. Some things we do better. But I myself, conniving with others, have helped add to the madness, in seeing to it that we get to Maxwell’s equations, relativity, and quantum theory. Mature physicists admit to having been discombobulated in their first encounter with these theories. To get them to seem familiar, the only way is to trace and retrace the routes that have led to such odd consequences: undulations where there is nothing to undulate, events strictly correlated yet separated in space, with no message passing in between, and so on. Imagination has been instrumental in leading to each such result, but the result transcends and contradicts the imagination. As J.B.S. Haldane put it, the world is not only queerer than we have imagined, it is queerer than we can imagine. My discomfort over what we fail to do would be greater if you had not met, at least briefly, with this encouragement and rebuff to our analogizing.

What I have said is no excuse for remediable faults in the program. As to what could be improved, I have ideas, and so do some of my colleagues, but our ideas are not all the same. But the main point I have been making is that the program here is an unfinishable affair.

The remaining words I have for you are by way of homily. To your stack of books, you must now add what Descartes called the great book of the world. The image is not in every way apt, but it is preferable to thinking of the world as an unalterable harsh mechanism, to which you are required to adjust your misfitting shapes. A book can be read, and that, as you know, is an active, formative process. Try observing the world; there is much that is thus to be learnt. But the stance of the altogether detached observer that Descartes projects of himself is probably neither possible nor really desirable. A better simile for you is that of organic adaptation. You must adapt to the world; and, in ways that, to begin with, may not seem as important as they are, the world will have to adapt to you.

For four years you have been discussing works of literature and philosophy, writing essays, analyzing plays and poems and arguments. These exercises have developed in you a number of skills that should be prized: the habit of listening carefully, of being attentive to a question and seeking out its sharp edge; the habit of readiness to enter into another person's thoughts, and to assume a new intellectual posture in response to new facts or ideas. Here and there, by bits and pieces, these habits should prove transferable from one context to another.
For God's sake, don't say, as one graduate put it on a resumé a few years ago, that at St. John's you learned to think. These hyperboles will harm you. There is no point in merely astonishing strangers with our strangeness.

Mind that some of our patterns here are all-too-easily turned into caricature. We inculcate the respect for great books, the taking seriously of the texts we read, as possibly revealing truth. A good habit. Works about our authors we eschew, telling you that these should not be your authorities, that you should think for yourselves. A good pedagogical ploy. But it does not mean that a biography of Cervantes, say, might not reveal something important about the book begun in the prison of Seville; or that the composition of Shakespeare's audience might not have something important to do with the composition of his plays and the wondrous mix of the high and the low that he achieves. Our authors were creatures of flesh and blood, and their works, in many cases, were prompted by the paradox of real-life situations. They were not always merely chatting with one another.

We tutors, who are paid, I guess, to defend all these books, are not to be imitated in all our sophistries. Not everything in the books we defend is defensible. Kant gets from the first to the second Critique by leap rather than logic. Newton fails in Book I to prove satisfactorily a crucial proposition on which Book III depends. Not every failure of logic in the Platonic dialogues is necessarily to be explained away by reference to the mythos of the dialogue.

Graduates, I gather, tend to become nostalgic for St. John's-style conversations. Well, you can have them again, and better, in new circumstances, when you have completed more homework. You will need friends, of course, and to cultivate friends is difficult in this age of endless mobility and of work-days that stretch on into the night. Don't fail to cultivate friends. There are conversations waiting out there to take place. It may not be very easy to find where and when they can occur. Tentatively, you can begin to take a bit of initiative.

You must find your own footing, your point of vantage and vision, freed at last from both the comfort and the annoyance of pedagogical authority. After having been stretched in so many directions, you must begin to assess, and reassess, where your own redefined center of gravity may be, and where your powers can take you, and what you can discover.

I wish that we at the College had managed to give more attention to heuristic. The word comes from a Greek verb. Archimedes used its first-person singular perfect as he leapt from the bath, on making his great discovery. To discover is indeed a perfect thing, in the sense that it brings elements together, makes a new whole. How do you go about making discoveries?
There are no very particular rules. In general you need to be asking a question, focussing on it, wrestling with it. You have to have the bravura to suppose that the parts of the answer can come together for you. You have to have faith in your powers. The evidence for there being something we could call unconscious thinking seems to me very strong. A manifold of processes must go into the recognition of a face or any other gestalt, but it seems to come instantaneously. So with the “Aha!” experience of discovery.

In discovery there is a kind of interweaving of the old and the new, the Epimethean and the Prometheus, the traditional and the innovative. In learning anything, we learn it less well before we learn it better. Our ignorance frequently consists in knowing what is not so or not quite so. Discovery is the finding of the new or the different within the matrix of what is already present, whether in latent memory or conscious thought. There is no point in merely clinging to what is past. What you learned and forgot can come back after years to haunt you, or to fill in the gap in an uncompleted gestalt. As Buchanan put it, we learn to swim in winter, and to ice-skate in summer. You must have faith in possibility and in what is hidden within yourselves. The quest must be to find the question and to persist in the questioning.

In a book about Chinese brush-and-ink painting, I found some precepts that are eminently applicable to discovering. Here they are:

Follow tradition in basic design.

For powerful brushwork, there must be ch'i or spirit. The brush should be handled with spontaneity.

Be original, even to the point of eccentricity, but without disregarding the li of things (li means principles or laws or essences).

Learn from the masters but avoid their faults.

Now I am supposing—is this a mere academic's dream?—that such rules are not applicable only to mathematical discovery or originality in painting. The questions to which heuristic is applicable need not be high-falutin or esoteric. With a bit of good will and heuristic, with patience and pluck, you might be able to transform the daily routines in schoolroom or office, or the community for some miles around. Oh, if you must, save the world, or write another great book! But I have thought it wiser to wish you a simpler destiny, neither tragic nor comic, but similar to the one that Odysseus chose at the end of the Republic.

I think I have about finished. Oh yes! do read and re-read some of Montaigne, when you get the chance.

Such is my homily for you today; it is from the heart. May you fare well.
Two Poems

Going Down the Mountain

The journey down the mountain
Leaves us silent, intent on stepping,
Mule-like and heavily laden,
On the cobbled stream bed that serves as road.
Wind-blown aspens shake and splatter
Gold on the dark mountains—so Zeus
Brought grief to the high-towered girl
In such a glittering shower.
Divine conceptions are just the thing
To bring the whole weeping weight of our
Humanness upon and between us.
We pan where the water still runs,
Recovering what we carry: gold,
Hid in the murk of the ancient clay.

Carolyn Wade Loring, an alumna of St. John's College, Annapolis, taught in the College in 1987–88.
To Ella, who died March 16, 1973

The mountains in evening don’t keep their distance,
   But approach and recede, as if a tired
And heavily breathing animal
   Drew one after another its aching breaths,
Until another day’s labor was done,
   And sleep fell over the whole.
Rain also, beaten by wind
   Through the ravaged stonework of our wall,
Pools and sinks and spills down one stone face
   To another, and to the gray earth below
Where a lilac, tended three years now,
   Chooses, without conviction, to live.
Grandmother: your ironic eyes,
   Paler and bluer than water-reflected sky,
Saw all and wondered. Why now,
   After fifteen years of grieving,
Is your face as close as the mountains,
   Where many animals, in secret, become earth?

Carolyn Wade Loring
La Chauve-souris et les deux belettes*

Une Chauve-souris donna tête baissée  
Dans un nid de Belette; et sitôt qu'elle y fut,  
L'autre, envers les souris de longtemps courroucée,  
Pour la dévorer accourut.  
Quoi! vous osez, dit-elle, à mes yeux vous produire,  
Après que votre race a tâché de me nuire!  
N'êtes-vous pas Souris? Parlez sans fiction,  
Oui, vous l'êtes, ou bien je ne suis pas Belette.  
— Pardonnez-moi, dit la pauvrette,  
Ce n'est pas ma profession.  
Moi, Souris! Des méchants vous ont dit ces nouvelles.  
Grâce à l'Auteur de l'Univers,  
Je suis Oiseau: voyez mes ailes:  
Vive la gent qui fend les airs!  
Sa raison plut, et semblb bonne.  
Elle fait si bien qu'on lui donne  
Liberté de se retirer.

Deux jours après, notre étourdie  
Aveuglément va se fourrer  
Chez un autre Belette aux Oiseaux ennemie.  
La voilà derechef en danger de sa vie.  
La Dame du logis avec son long museau  
S'en allait la croquer en qualité d'Oiseau,  
Quand elle protesta qu'on lui faisait outrage:  
Moi, pour telle passer? Vous n'y regardez pas.  
Qui fait l'Oiseau? c'est le plumage.  
Je suis Souris: vivent les Rats!  
Jupiter confonde les Chats!  
Par cette adroite repartie  
Elle sauva deux fois sa vie.

Plusieurs se sont trouvés qui d'écharpe changeants  
Aux danger, ainsi qu'elle, ont souvent fait la figue.  
Le Sage dit, selon les gens:  
Vive le Roi, vive la Ligue.

* The Fables of La Fontaine, Book II, fable v. Fables i and ii of Book I, with English versions, appeared in the previous issue.
The Bat and the Two Weasels

A bat rushed headlong into a weasel's nest.

She was not a welcome guest.

The weasel, who for the longest time
Had hated mice, sprang to attack. 'You dare,'
She said, 'set foot inside this house
After your sort have been so hard on me?
Speak without lying: are you not a mouse?
Oh you're a mouse all right, or I'm
No weasel.' 'Pardon me,'
Replied the bat, 'but that's not what I am.
What, me a mouse? I wonder where
You can have heard
Anything so absurd.
Thanks to the author of the universe
I am a bird.
Look at my wings: Long live the race
Of those who cleave the air!'
She reasoned so persuasively
She was set free.

Two days later,
Our heedless bat
Barges in blindly at
Another weasel's, an abominator
Of birds. Again her life's in danger:
Mistress Muzzle was just about
To crush the avian stranger,
When she indignantly cried out:
'What do you take me for?
A bird? But you're
Not looking carefully. What makes a bird?
It is the plumage. I'm
A mouse: Long live the rats!
Let Jupiter confound all cats!'
Thus for a second time
The bat kept death away
With repartay.

People there are who, like the flittermouse,
When threatened know what party to espouse.
As circumstances change, it's wise
To choose which attribute to emphasize.

E.Z.
Book Review

Thomas Flanagan: 
*The Tenants of Time*

Eva Brann

Here is a book that lives up to its captivating title. For its perspective on human events is that from which time is most apt to seem like a place, and a place—here Ireland—seem like a temporal being. It is the perspective of history. It is from the point of view of history that we live "in" our fixed century as in a dwelling and in our changing nation as in a stream. Like many good things, the title does double or even triple duty: One of the deep themes of the book is the tenancy of land, the acute catastrophe of eviction for the peasantry and the more muted melancholy of selling-up for the landlords. Finally, there is that personal passage of time, that strange conjunction of public times passing and private days waning, when the termination of our lease on life is in sight: The title is taken from—or worked into—a reflection by the most reflective character in the book, the schoolmaster Hugh McMahon, who says in the very center of the text:

> We are all tenants of Time, and whatever it is that reminds us, that thing we will convict as a murderer, like the messenger bringing bad tidings (428).

Master McMahon hates the testimonials of time's passing, and consequently he himself refuses to testify. Though the kindest of men, he gently

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and quite informatively stymies the young historian with whose appearance
the book opens. For Hugh himself is not a historian such as would put
the stamp of by-gone on the object of his research, but he is rather an
antiquarian who tries against hope to prevent the Gaelic tongue from pass­
ing into history—though he himself had once drilled it out of his pupils.

It is as a reflection on history that I want to recommend *The Tenants
of Time* to the St. John's community. For a deep doubt concerning the
doability and teachability of history is, as it were, the negative foundation
of our program of study. So we are left to come to extracurricular grips
with the potent impossibility of this discipline. This book, which is at once
about the delusory living, the shifting remembrance, and the abortive
writing of history, might have been made for the likes of us.

Before getting to the thought-provoking gist of this novel-history, let
me say something about how it reads. The novels which best typify their
genre are long and historical. Think of *War and Peace* and *Remembrance
of Things Past*. The two, bulk and history, are connected. It is, after all,
the business of narrative prose fiction, as opposed to poetry and drama,
to follow out the setting and circumstances of the precipitating events and
characters in indefinitely ramifying detail until the fiction has been
seamlessly implicated in a public world, the world whose scale is too en­
compassing to be a fiction. In *The Tenants of Time* this interweaving is
done to perfection. The historical figures, such as Parnell and Gladstone,
consort so comfortably with the fictional participants that one is pleased
to find them not distinguished by so much as an asterisk in the appended
list of characters. This novel, which is both long (over 800 pages) and
historical, indeed reads in certain respects just like history: It is muted and
intricate, many-faceted, and replete with the sort of scene-setting detail
that only primary research can turn up. It is, even, at first, a little tedious,
as good history often is, with the absorbing tedium of a tale lev­
ely developed, without the compact actions, the crises, that are the stock-in­
trade of drama. I think in all the forty-one chapters I received a shock
just once; others may find up to three surprises. This levelling of the
dramatic niveau is carefully devised. Every critical event is anticipated,
"prevented," as the Bible used so aptly to say, approached obliquely by
hints or glancing announcements. Novels are long partly so that readers
may inhabit them during a span of real time not utterly incommensurate
with that of the novelistic events. To make that time seem very long and
yet to make the reader never wish to emerge—that is the quintessential
novelistic art. This book was as hard to take leave of as it took long to read.

But whereas from one perspective we are being drawn into a fabric of
accurately researched detail with its numerous interwoven threads, its clues
and knots, from another it is the characters of the novel who start to come out as people. They begin as alien silhouettes outside the compass of our care and end up having captured our affection. They are Irishmen, recall, and each chapter is assigned to one or more of them (and once to a woman) to report their doings or to record their voices. The latter is most delicately done. They all sound different and yet, with the sparest use of dialect, just with an occasional idiomatic turn, they all sound Irish—which is the more remarkable since this novel was written by an American. My particular point here, though, is that if the book is devoted to history, the chapters belong to the people. That turns out to be the crux of this enterprise.

From Homer on, literary works have often been reflexive, that is to say, about themselves (as the Odyssey is about the telling of the odyssey). It is only an illusion of recent frequency that makes us think of this mode as modern. So it is not especially striking for this historical novel to be about the writing of history. What is remarkable is how reflectively it is done.

The situation is that in the first chapter—the year is 1904—a rather prissily conscientious young historian called Prentiss turns up in the town of Kilpeder in County Cork, to do research toward a book on the abortive local Fenian rebellion of 1867. In the last chapter he gives up the project as impossible and takes up the law instead. At the same moment the novel about the same incident has, of course, come to completion, and what is it but the desired history? Inference: When history turns out to be impossible, the novel may do its work.

That this upshot is not frivolous appears in the course of the final conversation, when Prentiss lets off a rehearsed epigram. It is aimed at the converse proposal of certain German historians, to the effect that history is merely a narrative fiction:

A taste for fiction has always seemed to me the unfailing mark of an imaginative deficiency (816).

This mingy witticism has a small truth in it: A person of perfect imaginative repleteness could probably find complete satisfaction in such real-world fragments as make themselves available. But it is evident that the author of the epigram believes neither with the Germans that historians are a species of novelist, nor, as Prentiss pretends, that novelists are historians manqués—both rather light-minded notions—but something more subtle, namely that novelists come to a consummation just when conscientious historians give up.
To appreciate this claim one must ask why, actually, Prentiss does give up. It is because he finds himself stymied from both sides. On the one hand, this supposedly compact tale of a temporally and spatially local event keeps going, as a German idiom so nicely puts it, "from the hundredth to the thousandth." The ramifications of discoverable fact run wild. On the other hand, some sources who know won't tell, and what is worse, those who do tell, generously and intimately, won't tell all, leaving Prentiss with some all-too-well-formed enigmas, both intimate and public. He is too much of a historian and too little of a novelist to invent the truth. So he falls between the stools of too much and too little knowledge, as will, it is implied, any historian who takes the judgment-seat. The novelist has the advantage in both realms: He penetrates his characters' privacies, not because they are his, but because he trusts himself to know what it is like to be a young man in Kilpeder, because he can see the paradigm in the person and give individual shape to the specimen. But he also paints the larger picture more successfully, for where the honest historian is obliged to seek a pattern-in-chief—Prentiss is all for patterns—the novelist can represent the oscillations of perspective as the ultimate truth. For example, as their particular messy little uprising of '67 recedes for the four Kilpeder leaders personally—recedes more and more into nostalgic inconsequences and into shame-faced irritation with its balladistic glorification—the Fenian rebellion as a whole begins to hang like an ever-darker incubus over the great historical event of their maturity, the Parnellian Land War. (In fact the author makes sure that it reaches even into the reader's present, for he unobtrusively presents the imprisoned Fenians as a pattern for the I.R.A.: The former shivered naked in their blankets rather than wear the Queen's convict-uniforms, and the same "blanket protest" has been recently employed by the latter.) And that complex of dampings and reverberations rings truer than would any assessment on the historical level.

Perhaps it is this licence to write history from the bottom up, or better, from the inside out, that allows the novelist to consummate his labors, to achieve a whole, when the wise historian will accept defeat. For whereas history, having no natural being, becomes amorphous under very close scrutiny, characters under the novelist's pointed attention gain "a local habitation and a name." Flanagan's four Kilpeder men are a memorable set, real friends as much in their untimely distances as in their long-breathed loyalties. There is Tully, the infinitely charming play-boy, the felicitously and also fatefully unconforming son of the local "gombeen" man, the money-lender and merchant prince in whose interest the noble land war against the aristocracy finally turns out to have been fought. There is his cousin, Delaney, the heir-apparent in spirit of the Tully ambitions, carried
high by his shrewd, fierce energy and brought down by a whole-hearted passion which exactly parallels that of his hero Parnell. Then there is the above-mentioned schoolmaster and his remote relative, Ned Nolan, the accredited Fenian commander of the uprising, who turns terrorist. Ned is a dark, God-forsaken, pure-hearted man whom the others love, and who, it finally appears, loves them—with fatal results.

What the novelist as historian does particularly well is to build up through his individual people, somehow, by hook or by crook, an impression of a whole people. Perhaps the Irish are a people whose nature specially requires slow narrative development, for it is revealed in antitheses: loquacious and inarticulate, soaked in spirits but delicate about its rituals, strong for brotherhood and ready for fratricide, in turn fanatically remitent and ever ready to turn informer.

Now, one might ask, what is Ireland to us or we to Ireland that we should steep ourselves in its nature and its history? Well, as I have urged, *The Tenants of Time* is almost as much a book *about* history as of history, and therein lies its special interest for us. But isn't it also true that *any* people that is genuinely what it is (as some are not) can capture our sympathy—and this one, lovable and damned, more than most? Moreover there are at present some forty million Irish-Americans: Irish history has spilled over into American history. The book itself has America as a kind of resonating background: Like the present-day I.R.A., the Fenians are partly financed from here, and they are officered by veterans of the American Civil War. Thus Ned, sergeant of the G.A.R., captain of the I.R.B., and, finally, retired terrorist, dreams of a little house on the Hudson. America is the place where the Irish, like most of us, have come for refuge, be it in the notorious "coffin ships" during the potato famine or by frigates sent to rescue failed rebels. It therefore makes sense that an American should produce a novel of Ireland, the more so because America is to history what Athens once was to tragedy: the chosen place of resolutions. It is both moving and right that an attempt to understand Irish history should be made on the other side of the Atlantic, that ocean whose winds carry the mists that make Ireland green, and on the note of whose name the book fitly closes.