

Louise Cowan

The Necessity of the Classics

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

But a strange thing has happened: this pretender has developed a genuine sense of responsibility that cannot so lightly be dismissed. The burden of leadership, with its peculiar blend of selflessness and pride, has become his own. Despite his low station, he follows along after the troops in battle and

stands at the last defending the banner of his defeated people, exposing himself to the enemy's onslaughts when all others have fallen. The film makes us question: Is this heroic gesture still part of the act? Where does it come from, this apparent greatness of soul that finally requires in a counterfeit role an authentic death? Kurosawa implies that it issues from the depths of human nature itself. But if so, as the film makes clear, it hardly arises naturally. On the contrary, its realization has come about through schooling in a tradition. Such magnanimity, we are shown, requires *mimesis*—imitation. To remake oneself in the image of something that calls to greatness demands a heroic tradition displaying heroic models. *Kagemusha* is, in fact, despite its Japanese subject matter, in the line of the Western and Roman epics, an extension of

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the Greek heroic code. Like these classics, it uncovers the innate nobility of the soul as a driving force that issues in noble action. *Kagemusha*, a modern classic, speaks to us with a peculiar power in a time when all energies seem to be devoted to self-preservation and to bodily comfort.

The word *classics*, if used with strict accuracy, refers to academic studies in Greek and Latin, though it is frequently applied to a list of great books, largely philosophical, that have been assembled for their ability to promote dialectic. Further, *classics* is sometimes employed in reference to a curricular syllabus, under whose auspices works such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Catcher in the Rye* come to assume inordinate importance. These meanings are related of course, and even somewhat overlapping—though they also have clearly different implications. But one use of the word *classic* in our

society is often considered to be a kind of idealistic pretentiousness, despite the truth, the reality, that it conveys. I am speaking of the meaning Matthew Arnold ascribed to the term in his effort to identify poetic works of unquestioned quality that deserve a place in what is simply “the class of the best.” Despite any appearance to the contrary, these masterpieces, Arnold thought, would never lose “currency.”

Some forty years after Arnold, from a position of high modernism, T. S. Eliot further extended the idea of the “best” in literature when he spoke of an identifiable ideal body of texts from Homer to the present, having what he called a “simultaneous existence” and a “simultaneous order,” and making up a tradition that can be acquired only through hard labor. Eliot

was speaking within and to a world in which, as he well knew, this tradition *had* lost currency. Hence, addressing himself to poets, he reminded them of their need for its retrieval.

What Eliot wrote at that crucial moment we should now be ready to acknowledge as applicable to us all. We have begun to see a world in which the classics have virtually disappeared—though they have been woven so tightly into the patterns of

our culture that *meaning*, for us, is hardly separable from them. For a while we may be able to get by on the echoes of their past glory; but when they finally have become perfectly silent, what sort of world shall we inhabit? To lose the classics is to lose a long heritage of wisdom concerning human nature, something not likely to be acquired again. Yet most college curricula now remain sadly untouched by their august presence, or at best make a gesture in their direction with

a few samplings for select students. Such neglect is one of the most serious threats our society faces today.

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



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The universal value of the Western tradition.

tuality, competition: the sciences.

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

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

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

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

The two fountainheads of poetic wisdom for the West have been the Greek and Hebrew writings. One speaks of nobility; the

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

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

And the poetic process goes on. The sublime Greek writings have attracted to themselves others from various places and epochs and in response to new additions reveal fresh insights, transforming all sorts of heterogeneous texts into an organic, if polyphonic, whole. Diverse works from various cultures, such as *The Divine Comedy*, *Hamlet*, *Paradise Lost*, *Faust*, *The Scarlet Letter*,

Moby-Dick, *Madame Bovary*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Go Down Moses*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *Beloved*, among many others, strike sparks from the earlier works, revealing nuances hitherto concealed. Then these later texts themselves, after they have settled into the community of immortals, select their associates and invite them in, continuing to unlock within themselves meanings inaccessible without their fellows.

This body of writing, until recently considered the very center of European and American education, has stood guard over the march of Western civilization, preserving its ideals of truth and justice, whatever its lapses may have been. And the later writers included in this remarkable group of texts have continued the unsparing examination of conscience that the Greeks inaugurated three thousand years ago. Hence, the Greeks make up the unmistakable foundation of our body of classics. To be ignorant of Homer, Aeschylus, and Sophocles is to be ignorant of the range and depth of human possibility.

In *The Oldest Dead White European Males*, Bernard Knox, one of our foremost classical scholars, recounts the story of how the Greek texts survived for the Western world: “When in the third and second centuries B.C. after the great age of Greek literary achievement, the scholars and critics of the Alexandrian library set to work to establish the texts of the classical authors and equip them with commentaries,” he writes, “they also established select lists.” They did not use the word *canon*, though it is a Greek word, meaning a carpenter's rule; rather, they spoke of the writings they chose as *hoi enkrithentes*, “the admitted,” or “the included.” Knox goes on to say, “In the final, desperate centuries of classical civilization, the years of civil wars and massive foreign invasions, the vast bulk of ancient Greek literature [vanished], including, to our

everlasting loss, most of the work of the nine lyric poets.... Only those works transferred to the more durable (and expensive) material of parchment could survive...Homer, Hesiod, Herodotus, Thucydides, seven tragedies each for Aeschylus and Sophocles, ten for Euripides, eleven comedies of Aristophanes; ...all of Plato and much of his successor Aristotle.”

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

This is most plain in comedy. In contrast to only seven plays each from the tragedians, eleven of Aristophanes’ comedies survive—all naughty and all subversive (and all much beloved by the early Church Fathers). We sometimes tend to underplay the importance of Aristophanes’ remarkable comic genius, primarily, one supposes, because the genre of comedy seems inherently less important and—of course, mis-

takenly—less serious. It is the distinguishing mark of comedy that, as Aristophanes argued in his choruses, it sifts the truly degrading from the merely shocking and protects the health of the city. Obscene, bawdy, risqué matters have their rightful place in the purifying heart of the comic; pornography dwells only in deadpan seriousness.

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

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

for more than three centuries.

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

*In all those stories the hero
is beyond himself into the next
thing, be it those labors
of Hercules, or Aeneas going into death.*

*I thought the instant of the one humanness
in Virgil’s plan of it
was that it was of course human enough to die,
yet to come back, as he said, hoc opus, hic labor
est [here the work, here is the labor]*

*That was the Cumaean sibyl speaking
This is Robert Creeley, and Virgil
is dead now two thousand years, yet Hercules
and the Aeneid, yet all that industrious wis-*

*dom lives in the way the mountain
and the desert are waiting
for the heroes, and death also
can still propose the old labors.*

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

We might call this the Roman view of the heroic life, one that had immense influence on the West. The *Aeneid* was for centuries the most popular book in Europe, the book for the formation of Europe during the development of Christian culture. T. S. Eliot considered it “our classic”; it has been woven into western thought and institutions. The *Aeneid*’s two great features are *pietas* and *fatum*, duty and mission, as we

might translate the Latin. No two words could more accurately describe America’s deepest sense of what some have pejoratively called “manifest destiny,” but which others have believed to be a true mission.

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

Hence, as Thomas Greene wrote in *The Descent from Heaven*: “The loss of Virgil to the modern world is an immeasurable cultural tragedy.... [F]ar more than Homer, Virgil has been the classic of Western civilization. This has been true partly because he is more fitly a poet of maturity than of youth, because his work continues to educate as the understanding ripens. Fully to know him one must know him long. If he teaches the schoolboy style, to the man he imparts nobility.” Western man has found his ideal of the public virtues in “pious Aeneas,” the man of destiny chosen for a

great task: strong, brave, generous. He is resolute enough to turn his back on personal happiness; he fights skillfully and bravely; he is in fact a great hero. But he is a hero for a cause, for others, having accepted his role in life, his duty. Virgil taught the Western world the civilizing arts and incorporates the softness of our hearts (our Trojan ancestry) into the dynamism of civilization. As T. S. Eliot has reminded us, the prophecy of the *Aeneid* has not failed; we are still in a sense citizens of that city, the eternal Rome. But many current readers cannot accept the poem's ambiguity; perhaps the loss of the ability to bear subtle distinctions stems from the loss of the poem itself in our culture.

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

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

This choice of a short life lived in pursuit

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

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

up trying,” Professor Whitman observed.

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

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

A recent book entitled *Who Killed Homer?* takes up this very topic. Written by two Classics professors, Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath, this book gives a clear and unequivocal answer to their question: the professors have killed Homer. Their argument is that the academic world has finally “killed” the body of ancient poetic knowledge that had survived sturdily if somewhat precariously for centuries. By fostering a detached and impersonal scholarship, adopting a methodological sophistication, and marking off the territory as fit solely for specialists, the professors have sought to

triumph over the texts they teach and write about, without witnessing to the wisdom and vitality of their contents.

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

Our loss of the Greeks and Romans is symptomatic of our loss of the idea of *quality* and of *aspiration*, our loss of the heroic which is known in poetry. Yet we need the classics as never before in our history. For what is happening in our time is the making of a new synthesis, much like that large encompassing pattern of culture constructed in the High Middle Ages or in the period we know as the Renaissance. Ours is a time when the human schema and indeed the total world picture are being redefined. Ours is a “postmodern” age, and we live in

a time of “globalization.” We are called to respond to our *fatum*: to begin the task of sifting from the poetic traditions of the whole world those works that reflect and extend the meaning of our literary tradition.

This process has gone on at various junctures in civilization: European writings have been added to the Greeks and Romans, as have those representing America. Now that there is indeed one world for us, in which economic, educational, and cultural systems are linked as closely as were the different countries of Europe from the Renaissance onward, we are obligated to include writings from the rest of the world in our curricula and our concern. We need not be afraid that by extending generosity to worthy things outside the Western tradition, we shall be debasing our heritage. As Bernard Knox wrote, nothing short of totalitarianism will admit unworthy things into the canon. Placed beside the works that have long been there, the shallow and merely political pieces will gradually fade away, as did the minor works of the past. But we need an active and lively sense of our own heritage if the widening of the Western heritage to the world is to occur. When our society does indeed become “globalized”—when West and East do stand together as equals in the exchange of ideas as well as goods—we had better be ready by having something left to preserve.

Our need for the classics is intense. Yet any defense of them in our time must come from a sense of their absolute necessity—not from a desire to inculcate “cultural literacy,” or to keep alive a pastime for an elite, but to preserve the full range of human sensibility. What is needed is to recapture their spirit of high nobility and magnanimity, of order and excellence, but to recapture that spirit in a framework of democracy engendered by a Biblical culture of radical openness. The things worth preserving, the things we ought to be passing down, far transcend any single heritage: they partake of the fundamental structures of being itself. Melville called them the “heartless, joyous, ever-juvenile eternities.” And if our children do not encounter these realities in their studies, they are not likely to encounter them at all. As *Kagemusha* makes clear, greatness of soul is an aspect of human being as such, but it is not a quality that comes naturally. It must be taught. The classics have become classics because they elicit greatness of soul. Far from being a particular province of the specialist, they are the essential foundation of our educational process and the impulsion toward that forward movement of the human spirit for which schools exist. In an unpoetic age, we have to learn all over again what and how to teach our own children. We need to re-read the Greeks.