

My Turn: A Great Bookish Tell-all

I was there—a witness at the site of the most famous battleground in the civil war over the so-called “canon.” I taught one of the Great Books courses full time for three years at Stanford University¹ in Stanford’s infamous and now defunct Western Culture Program (the program has since been reconstituted into a new yearlong undergraduate requirement called “Cultures, Ideas, Values” [CIV]). My three years happened to coincide with the last three years of the program—1985–1988—a period, in other words, in which the program came under constant review and even became the focus of a national debate over core versus diversified curricula. From this insider’s vantage, I have a story to tell. My remarks and anecdotes, I believe, can offer a new perspective on the debate, which even today remains heated and arouses strong feelings. Some of what I have to say is about the supercharged issue of race relations on American campuses and, relatedly, about the diversification issue, and I want to underscore at this outset that I profess to no great expertise in the field of race relations in America. I speak, rather, as a teacher in the classroom, one who especially during those three years had to think hard about the presentation of the canon in an increasingly multicultural setting.

My main claim is that from my on-the-ground view of the debate at Stanford, the Great Books course operated at Stanford in a very different fashion from the way it was debated, represented, and construed by the media and by the program’s most outspoken critics and especially by its most

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outspoken defenders. In the following pages, I want to reconstruct some of the detail and texture of the course as it functioned at Stanford, and while these snapshots of the course will serve to localize the issue, I also propose that this reconsideration of the Stanford course contains a few general lessons about the current debate over education in America. But before I begin my narrative, I want to lay out my several subordinate theses in order to avoid confusion and to accommodate in advance my desire for a somewhat discursive presentation. These claims are:

1. I still want to affirm—provisionally—the value of reading and teaching the old die-hard classics even in a required setting, though I am no Straussian, nor some rearguard apologist for a declining white male military-industrial complex.
2. At Stanford, given its unique educational environment, the Great Books of Western Culture course functioned, in form and content, as a subversive course, which is the basis of my above affirmation.
3. The course was extraordinarily popular and successful according to its participants, including minority and women students. But the course operated differently for minority students at Stanford from the way it operated for majority students; more significant, the memory of the experience of this course, I submit, diverged for minority versus majority students.
4. The critics of the course criticized it for the wrong reasons, and their real agenda remained opaque, even to themselves.
5. The general move toward diversification of the curriculum, which I generally welcome, threatens, however, to crowd out a kind of education that I very much value and hate to see abandoned for the wrong reasons. The Stanford program, I concede, had to go, but I want to mourn its passing and remember its triumphs.

AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO WESTERN CULTURE— OR, MY STORY

Hired right out of Berkeley graduate school as a political theorist, I had no idea when I first accepted the job that this Stanford position would eventually prove to be so controversial. The job description sounded ideal: I was actually going to be paid to come in to talk about a different “great book” each week with small sections of extremely bright and energetic students, students from all over the country and from other countries as well. We would cover more than forty books in the year—from Homer and Plato to Galileo and Shakespeare to Marx and Freud. One of eight instructors, I

discovered that my colleagues would be drawn from all sorts of disciplines in the humanities (Stanford professors in various fields also could volunteer to teach a section), so I would be learning as we went along. Moreover, it so happened that political theorists were highly valued in such a program, perhaps because the Great Books canon had much in common with a standard Plato-to-Nato, History of Political Thought sequence, and the result of this coincidence was that in my first year, four out of the eight instructors turned out to be political theorists—which meant that I would have disciplinary as well as interdisciplinary colleagues. Great students, interesting colleagues, no committee work—what could be better?

Teaching at the grunt level—which means that one teaches students face-to-face in a seminar situation, as opposed to blathering to a captive audience from behind a distant podium—immediately proved gratifying, for the Stanford students were extraordinarily industrious. But meanwhile the program, though historically a subject of some controversy, came under renewed and heightened attack. Minority students denounced the program as being ethnocentric at best and racist at worst. Feminists identified the canon as being sexist and phallogocentric. Professional deconstructionists on the faculty claimed that the program privileged logocentric cultures, thus they recommended that popular issues and marginalized peoples be studied. In response to all of the criticism, Stanford administrators and faculty tinkered with and slightly reformed the program, now including works by Third World authors and women as well, but these reforms were then blasted by national celebrity conservatives such as Allan Bloom and then Secretary of Education William Bennett. Bloom and company charged that Stanford had pandered to the pressures of the mob and concomitantly had abandoned any claim to academic standards. Bloom and his book on such courses, *Closing of the American Mind* (as well as E. D. Hirsch's book, *Cultural Literacy*), galvanized a national debate over education in a declining America, and Stanford became a lightning rod for all sorts of charges and countercharges. The debate polarized sides, and practically everyone with an opinion jumped into the fray.²

Thus I found myself at the center of a national debate—a clip of one of my classes, for instance, appeared as file footage on the *NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw*, and friends across the country would call to ask whether I was the lackey oppressing students with Shakespeare and Dante. I went about my job, trying to put the best face on a difficult situation while letting the gods and goddesses decide the larger historical issues, but at times tensions would reach nearly the breaking point, for instance, when the Reverend Jesse Jackson came to Stanford and seemed to inspire a group of students to march around campus chanting, "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western Culture's got to go!" Was I going to join the march or not? Did I support the proposed changes or not? What did I think about Bloom's book? Strangely, administrators and reformers did not solicit the views of instructors who would know

what was actually going on in the program at the ground level, in the classroom. So, for the most part, it was pretty easy to keep quiet about my views, but inquiring minds, especially students, would sometimes ask for my opinions about Great Books programs, and Stanford's in particular. Still, I kept to myself.

I kept quiet in good part because I found myself—a Berkeley political theorist, no less—on the wrong side of the debate, that is, the nonprogressive or “politically incorrect” side: I found that I truly liked teaching Chaucer, Cervantes, and Wordsworth, and if pressed into answering the absurd question, “Which is more important for first year students, reading *Faust* or Alice Walker?” I ended up choosing the devil. And yet I refused to align with Bloom and Bennett, whose reasons for parading these works were vastly different from mine. The debate had gotten out of hand. I went underground, and I know that most of my colleagues did as well, largely because our perspectives did not fit the received political categories. I also did not know how I could convincingly reply to the charge that my position might be a rationalization of my privileged place and narrow perspective as a white male; such charges do not allow much room for counterargument. The particular virtues of the course as it operated at Stanford issued from Stanford's unique context; hence, Stanford never should have been targeted as a national test case. The national debate missed what was going on at Stanford. A few words about Stanford are in order, then, before I state my case.

Stanford is a peculiar place with particular needs, and its students may or may not be typical of students at other colleges and universities. The place itself is surreal. Massive stone buildings with uniform red tile roofs have been designed to give Stanford the extended look of a fake Spanish mission, with an occasional Romanesque colonnade that makes the breezeways all the more picturesque. The surrounding weather is always idyllic, sunny and yet cooled by ocean breezes. Palm trees, looking like overgrown potted houseplants, grow in strategic locations throughout the campus. People jog and bike all over the area's flat terrain. Roving bands of Hispanic and African-American laborers keep the yards well tended, and someone sees to it that the color of the flowers in the gardens is rotated on a regular basis. High-tech amenities help keep the flow of ideas flowing. Several classes are filmed and broadcast daily over a closed-circuit television network, by which they are piped into student dormitory rooms to be captured on personal VCRs and played back at one's leisure (of course). Professors can call up the library's reference catalogue on their office computers and order books by hitting the return key, and library personnel will fetch the books and deliver them directly to the busy reader, still at her or his desk. In general, Stanford drips with New World opulence, and people (especially white people) lead pretty much low-stress-level existences.

Stanford was a huge colossus, an overdetermined mega-multiversity that enjoyed a tremendous reputation, despite all. At the time, which was pre-earthquake, Stanford had surpassed Harvard in the *U.S. News and World Report* annual poll as the number one undergraduate university in the country, and droves of students applied for admission to the place. It could lure prospective students with grand and oh so lucrative visions of easy employ in neighboring Silicon Valley enterprises and other Northern California business.³ Students attracted to Stanford traditionally came from mostly lily-white, Northern California, Waspish, nouveau riche or aspiring nouveau riche families. No blue bloods and old money here. Students were bright, but they flocked toward technical and engineering majors (good investments), which was Stanford's main area of expertise and comparative advantage. Lacking the tradition of liberal arts found at the old Eastern Ivy League universities, Stanford was really a trade school, though most of the country did not realize it. It was, and still is, more of a corporation than a college.

Stanford wanted to be more than a trade school, for it not so secretly emulated prestigious Eastern institutions (Yale Blue, Harvard Crimson, Stanford Cardinal—get it?). Several faculty members knew that the place was severely deficient in the humanities, and their expectations for transforming it were low and realistic. They merely wanted to get Stanford students to read some books before they marched off to corporate careers (though they aimed at achieving something a notch higher than cocktail-chatter proficiency). After rancorous debates, and starts and misstarts, the faculty eventually agreed to require all students to take a yearlong course in the humanities—the year was 1980. Thus the “Western Culture Program” was born. It should be emphasized that the original objectives of the course were extremely modest and, given Stanford's Silicon Valley corporate context, vaguely subversive. The leading advocate of the program was the vanguard campus radical, a Shakespeare scholar who was the person most responsible for later preventing the Reagan library from locating on Stanford grounds; the eventual program director was an eminent historian specializing in critical theory; the majority of the instructors were recruited out of Berkeley and the hills of Santa Cruz; and my political theorist colleagues were specialists in, respectively, Rousseau, Marx, and Merleau-Ponty.

One of the faculty compromises stipulated that the course not last more than a year, because engineering majors were already heavily burdened with course requirements; additional requirements would prevent a graduation in four years. What would be, then, the content of the new course, given these constraints? Hard choices would need to be made. Diverse faculty could not agree upon common themes, questions, priorities, and agenda; they could at the time, however, agree, or at least not disagree, upon authors. At the time, the names of Plato, Aristotle, Dante, Marx, and so on were ones that seemed

sufficiently unobjectionable to most everyone in both the humanities and the sciences. The selection of these authors, a process that later would be called “canon formation,” was hardly a concerted attempt to indoctrinate students into hegemonic practices (though I realize that authorial intentions may ultimately be beside the point). To repeat, in context, the course was intended to be subversive, at least from the humanities view of things, and it was largely staffed by those of us sympathetic to intellectual and cultural subversion. Though we never received explicit marching orders, the purposes and the ethos of the program were clear enough. Outsiders looking in had missed the point.

Allan Bloom thinks the Great Books are great because they embody and promote the higher concerns of the human “soul.” In transcending the particular contexts in which they were written, in presenting answers to the “perennial” questions posed about the human condition, the Great Books attest to the best features of the West (if not to the West’s greatness in general). Bloom holds out for higher truths and absolute standards, no matter how severely common opinion may discredit such projects. Cultural elitism is a dirty job, but someone has got to do it.

Once actually teaching these works, however, the lowly instructor soon realizes that the “Western tradition” consists not of a protracted pack of high-minded cultural elites (or those in effect promoting elitism) but rather encompasses an extraordinary series of cultural subversives, one right after the other, with Socrates and Jesus as the two most famous. How could this conspicuous feature be overlooked? The Stanford “canon” was filled with figures who wrote in the vernacular or popular tongue (Dante, Chaucer, Rabelais, Cervantes, Luther); with figures who turned their worlds inside out or upside down (Goethe, Hegel, Shakespeare, Galileo, Machiavelli, Darwin); with rebels, malcontents, and disaffected types (Pico, Luther, More, Rousseau, Locke, Descartes, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky); with tragedians (Homer, Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides, Virgil, Goethe, Shakespeare); and with out and out cultural revolutionaries and blasphemers (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud). When Stanford initially tried to reform the canon (before throwing it out), it looked to include the voices of women and American blacks. Some feared tokenism, but actually it was an easy move to include the works of Sappho, Marie de France, Christine de Pizan, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, Virginia Woolf, Frederick Douglass, and Richard Wright, for these writers fit right into the Western tradition (as I have sketched it), and quite nicely.

I must say, after many hours of teaching these writers, that they work beautifully in the classroom. I saw it. Bloom is right, if for the wrong reasons. These books inspire good thinking. They inspire great papers and original ideas. They generate enthusiasm for learning and make learning—believe it or not—fun. They produce moments of magic in the classroom (and not every text does—let us not get carried away with lit crit theory). Why? My

own pet theory is that at a place like Stanford, such works, advertised under the august banner of Greatness, perpetrated a certain irony upon the student mind, which prompted him or her toward greater participation in the texts of the course. Students arrived in the class suspecting that Stanford's sole required course would attempt to indoctrinate them into the cultural status quo, and instead these students became exposed to an onslaught of rebels and subversives. And even those authors in the course who were not outwardly subversive generally wrote in a way that disrupted dogmatic appropriations of their texts and instead invited or virtually required intensive exegesis. For students, all of this indirection was eventually liberating, if for a while bewildering—for their own readerly participation and even the possibility of harsh disputation were seemingly encouraged by the texts of the course, and thus they found themselves reassessing their initial anti-establishmentarian suspicions and even questioning their own anti-intellectual tendencies (a strain that runs deep, even among the best students). Was the course rebellious or not? Was it conservative or not? Sometimes they felt jerked around, but mostly the result was an engaging intellectual experience—because they had to judge works on their own, to judge the course on their own, to think on their own. Assumptions were called into question. Deeply personal issues were raised. Lives were occasionally transformed—or at least careers and career concerns interrupted for the time being.

If anything, the “Great Books” teach—explicitly and subtextually—moral and cultural self-questioning. Socrates is the star of such courses.⁴ Bloom may be right in his suggestion that these books prompt us to examine our lives deeply, but he is wrong to suggest that Socrates (and even Plato) provides hard and fast “answers” to “perennial” questions. The beauty of these texts—the reason they stay alive year after year, the reason they continue to produce original student papers and brand new insights year after year—is precisely because they keep such *questioning* alive and going. Each generation can find something new in them, but this is because these texts do not present themselves as doctrinaire (whereas some texts, in certain contexts, do). Students feel the excitement of finding something for the first time, though a book may be centuries old, and they also know that they are not being force-fed a hidden agenda. They know when a professor or an author is being tendentious or rhetorical, and any successful teacher of “Great Books” soon learns to minimize his or her classroom presence, to get out of the way and let these books perform their spells upon students' minds.

Inside the confines of the classroom, teaching was marvelous at Stanford. Class morale was extremely high, and student ratings reflected this morale. Stanford students who were taking the course approved of it in overwhelming numbers (though not unanimously, of course); the statistics across the board were incredible, even though the course was a required one.⁵ And based upon what I saw with my very own eyes and heard with my very own

ears, the vast majority of minority students also loved the class while they were taking it. My very top students included African Americans, Latin Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans—no affirmative action needed here, thank-you. And women were superbly engaged with the course. Sure, in theory, I could be systematically fooled about many things, insensitive or oblivious or self-denying, but about this matter of student approval, minorities and women included, I am quite confident.

If what I am saying is true—that the Great Books of Western Culture Program at Stanford was by any measure an extraordinary success—then how did it get branded as elitist, racist, sexist, and so forth? If the course actually taught cultural subversion, how did it get construed as culturally conservative, if not reactionary? Why did minority students in particular evidently change their minds about the course as their Stanford careers progressed? Why did this curricular issue become the most explosive racial issue on campus, whereas there simply was not the same mobilization on, for instance, the issue of apartheid in South Africa or, closer to campus, there just was little opposition when the Stanford Business School built a big new building on land that encroached on sacred Native American grounds that had been protected in the original school charter?⁶

My encapsulated answer to this cluster of questions: the secret to the on-the-ground success of the Great Books program at Stanford was that these texts characteristically taught students to read between the lines, to distinguish between letter and spirit, to affect a critical distance that still implicates—in a word, they taught irony—and they generated enthusiasm for those who appreciated the opportunity to be ironical about texts, and to be ironical about being at Stanford in general.⁷ Cultural subversion at a place like Stanford could be promoted only by way of irony, and one hoped that the cognitive dissonance that irony affords might inspire personal self-examination. (We instructors used to say that we hoped that every future Stanford engineer would read *Faust* in order to have a robust sense of modern tragedy.) The Western tradition is largely an ironic one; and the books in that tradition do not teach, after all, reverence for themselves but rather invite readers to question their books and eventually, one hopes, to question themselves and their world at large.

Here is the controversy: the Great Books did not work quite the same way for many minority students as they did for run-of-the-mill white Stanford students—though that difference was not one of abilities or levels of performance (for a great number of minority students fared splendidly in the program).⁸ To repeat my claim, the Great Books taught, if anything, personal and cultural self-questioning. This critical stance was the lifeblood of such courses, but I imagine that many minority students had already “questioned themselves” before they came to Stanford and thus were perhaps less appreciative, over the long haul, of this particular aspect of the course. The white

student—certainly not all but a great many—could more easily approach the possibility of entering the halls of sunny Stanford with straightforward, unadulterated pride; the function of the Western Culture Program, then, was to subject that pride to questioning. Though our secret hope was to instill a questioning attitude about what it meant to be at Stanford, what I think happened for most white students is that, once graduated from this freshman course in cultural subversion, such students did not, on the whole, become culture critics or revolutionaries but rather would look back upon their year-long experience as yet another test successfully completed, another triumph, another occasion for pride, and thus they looked back upon the course with an odd fondness, as a trying yet formative experience in their brilliant young careers.

What I suspect happened with many minority students is that they were more ambivalent, and not simply proud, about their initial decision to attend traditionally white Stanford.⁹ Such students probably had subjected themselves to severe second-guessing when they initially agonized over the decision of whether to attend a formerly lily-white school built by railroad money and coolie labor. In the back of their minds, they may well have felt themselves vulnerable to the reproach that they had “sold out” to white corporate America, abandoning somehow their ethnic or class heritage. Such profound ambivalence, the feeling of being torn between past and future, is felt perhaps by any marginalized individual who attempts to forge a new future from within a dominant culture, but that tension was compounded by the extreme whiteness of sunny Stanford. Then, the minority student experienced a triple whammy upon entering Stanford, I imagine. She was already hypersensitive to personal and ethnic criticisms of her even being at Stanford, and then she soon discovered that the subtext to the one course required of her at Stanford beseeched her to “question herself and her moral foundations.” At first, she enjoyed the whole classroom experience of criticizing these books and all that they outwardly represent—such an exercise was therapeutic, it allowed her to let off steam. It also was a bit like doing penance, absolving her for her decision to have come to Stanford (though it hardly allayed her anxieties). She excelled in such a course, for she was already versed in cultural self-criticism and motivated to continue (and her simpatico instructors exhorted her onward); but, by the same token, the course was not anything all that new for her, and she didn’t hold on to the memory of it as being particularly distinctive or formative, as her white peers did. As she moved on in years at Stanford, becoming implicated herself in all that was Stanfordish, and overheard all of the standard lines about the course (racist, sexist, elitist), she was forced to repudiate the course. Though she may have inwardly remembered that once upon a time she actually enjoyed such a course, the marketplace criticism would now prove overwhelming, and thus she felt a strong need to fend off the hurtful charge that she might have once partici-

pated joyfully in an allegedly racist course. Besides, she might still feel a few pangs of guilt about being at Stanford (and for still enjoying it!). She was in no position to respond that the course was *not* inherently racist by design (are calculus classes that do not teach theorems by recent black mathematicians inherently racist by design?). By her senior year, she would sign a petition calling for the removal of the Western Culture requirement—in a successful act of psychological demonology—just before she went off, and deservedly so, to Yale Law School.

The national debate missed all of these social-psychological-situational undercurrents. The debate became politicized, Left versus Right. Bloom's insistence that the Western Great Books can be read not simply as a way of provoking self-examination but rather as an extended series of self-help manuals providing wisdom and truthful, universalistic answers to perennial questions provided the Stanford critics with a straw case that was easy to dismiss. Bloom failed to convince skeptics, and he mucked it up for the rest of us, putting us on the defensive and making it more difficult to get a fair hearing. The course was about irony, and Bloom was anything but ironical, but that was not the main reason for the program's demise; Bloom's contribution was only a distraction, a sideshow, a nuisance.

The Stanford faculty reformers lost nerve and went overboard, deconstructing everything about the program along the way. Their occasional silliness played right into Bloom's hands. One time it was proposed, for instance, that we begin to study "artifacts" systematically instead of books to embrace nonliterate peoples—in theory, this sounded promising, but then we instructors, the people who had to carry out such proposals, had to contemplate actually plunking a rock down on the seminar table and generating meaningful discussion.

What I fear is that the alternative course now essentially teaches affirmation, not criticism, even while it adopts an outwardly deflationary stance toward mainstream Western culture. Above all, it is celebratory of political pluralism, ethnic diversity, and cosmopolitan Otherness, but it is not, and by design cannot be, radically self-critical. What instructor would dare invite students to bash ethnic literatures in the same scathing ways that the Western tradition from Socrates to Christ to Marx and Nietzsche invites radical self-bashing? In short, I fear that the new course—or like courses and course curricula—good intentions to promote global awareness notwithstanding, no longer teaches *irony*. Hence, the new course may look more cosmopolitan, but "by design" it is actually less subversive (in context). It will be easier now for a student to look forward, quail free, to engineering or law school, or to wear his or her ethnic or gender identity proudly as he or she walks into, say, the nearby Stanford shopping mall. (Stanford owns a large shopping mall right next door to the campus—so close, in fact, that it is sometimes hard to distinguish between the two). Whatever the particular

virtues of the new course, I am troubled that an entire pedagogical approach, an entire trope, has gone by the wayside.

My own feeling is that a required Great Books program is not for everyone nor every college, nor should anyone pretend that an exclusive diet of Great Books will somehow lift educational standards across America, restoring discipline and civility and revitalizing the economy along the way. I do not think that these books contain panhuman lessons, nor do I think that they should necessarily be given priority in the general curriculum, and certainly not exclusivity. After following and participating in the many debates about “canon formation,” I do think it is right and necessary to shake up the traditional reading lists, to awaken teachers from dogmatic slumbers and to lift generational blinders, and I find this trend on American campuses invigorating. We have expanded our perspectives, we have encouraged new and diverse ideas, we are reading new books, and we are respecting and listening carefully to once-excluded voices. It is an exciting time in academe to be reading, thinking, discovering, and challenging. Looking over the new Stanford CIV syllabi, I am envious of the people who have a chance to read and teach all of these non-Western books, and I do not for a minute think that the current crop of Stanford students will be deprived of a fine education.¹⁰ (A hostile part of me is secretly thrilled that a bunch of white, upper-middle-class Stanford students are being required to read about exploited and neglected peoples; the new program is clearly a campaign to indoctrinate students into openness and liberality.) I am even a strong supporter of promoting curricular diversity through affirmative hiring practices, though I do not think that the best arguments for this action are always put forward (and as white male trash myself, I find myself a potential loser).¹¹

Yet having made all of these admissions, confessions, and concessions, and knowing that I am making myself vulnerable to the all-too-easy reproach that I am clinging to a dead, white man’s world, I will declare that I am still a supporter of the Great Books of Western Culture Program as it operated at Stanford. In fact, I deeply lament that the “Homer to Holocaust” trajectory of Western Books will no longer be emphasized as such at Stanford. What is taught at the textual level in a course is not always the same as what is taught at a subtextual level—and I am contending that the subtext to the Western Culture Program was not an oblique endorsement of the powers that be, and I am suggesting that the subtext of courses aiming to expand diversity may be other than it seems. I am willing to consider that this current generation of students may need more affirmation than self-critique, that historical forces are such that individual students need some remedial reassurance before deeply critical thinking may proceed, a pat on the back to say, “Hey, it’s *okay* to be at Stanford.” Maybe we are so culturally war-torn that multicultural and gender affirmation must be shoved to the forefront now, but I will go out on a limb and say that in the long run, I do not think

that that approach will generate any great transformation in cultural affairs, and not much brilliantly original thinking, and finally, *very* few revolutionaries. Stanford now teaches cultural assimilation—openly and shamelessly, that is. Do not expect many cultural firebrands to be graduating from there soon.

To collect this train of thought: the particular character of the Stanford debate grew out of unique and contrived circumstances. The debate intensified, because artificial time constraints were imposed upon the Stanford curriculum. We were forced to agonize over the relative merits of Western versus non-Western texts, because the four-year engineering major was deemed sacred at Stanford, and thus we had but a year to work with. Reasonable people should never have been asked to decide between Dante and Confucius. The easy solution would be to avoid such debates, to sidestep such monumental cultural judgments. One option would be simply to assign *more* books, to expand the humanities curriculum (imposing constraints on engineering majors if need be), to require that students be exposed to a heavy dose of Western and non-Western texts, more of everything. Another option would be to abolish all core requirements, to return by default to an interest-driven, marketplace, liberal curriculum. Let 100 flowers bloom, and if some busy bees are too busy to read, so be it. Emile and Sophie should do what they want; none of that “forcing them to be free” paternalism. (An incidental benefit of the second option, by the way, is that self-selecting elective courses tend to produce higher student approval ratings; professors can preach to the already converted.) Of these two “solutions,” I tend to favor the latter, if only because it has been my experience that requiring (Anglo) students to read, say, the Koran does not generate the hoped-for tolerance and understanding of Islamic peoples but rather all too often produces a knee-jerk chauvinism, a reactionary embrace of “Western” values. Still, I am not completely happy with the prospect of decentralizing all curricular operations, for such a move tends to undermine as well the above-described situational possibilities for self-referential irony.¹² One signs up for a course on, say, Narratives of Genital Mutilation in Somalia, and one gets in return pretty much what one expected. Everyone is happy, student and teacher are mutually and self-congratulatory, yet the course material usually is not subject to internal review as an integral, if a tacit, term of the course itself. In contrast, when one is required to study Marx or Nietzsche, one really has to examine and call into question the cultural conditions that make it possible, here and now, to study Marx and Nietzsche at all—which makes it more difficult to walk by those Hispanic and African-American gardeners as one scurries to class.

I am not entirely happy with the prevalent trend toward the complete liberalization of the curriculum, a trend that seems to be a correlate of diversification. I have a few nagging problems with the liberal model as applied to academe (here comes political theory). Though the Stanford Western Culture Program is dead and gone, and I see no chance for revival,

I would like to give a better sense of what went on in those small classrooms, what the course was about, and what I, for one, liked about it, though it was *required*. These vignettes will help build my case not against diversification in the general curriculum but rather against a liberalism that diffuses and eventually eliminates radical self-critique.

The Stanford Western Culture courses were designed especially as reading and discussion courses—goals certainly not exclusive to Western culture courses, but which I mention to help characterize the particular ethos of the Stanford program. We insisted upon reading primary source material, even after the distinction between primary and secondary writing had been thoroughly challenged by contemporary scholars who seemed to believe that their own critical commentary successfully obscured that distinction, as illustrated in their own near-literary prose. In practice, the distinction was pretty easy to respect, and the point of respecting it, even if ontologically untenable, was to convey to the student the need to rely upon his or her own faculties, to think, read, interpret, and judge for himself or herself. The students were forced to confront and plow through these texts largely by themselves, and the subliminal message was that they ought not rely upon external voices, secondhand reports, and ready-made authority figures who would do the thinking and reading for them. The point of *that* lesson, in turn, was not to instill an undue skepticism about human interdependence or to foster (male) autonomy but to convey the point that it was possible, indeed, enjoyable, to trust themselves, to become active readers of books rather than passive consumers of info-tainment.

Again, I must say that in practice this strategy worked well. Students read. We would, however, discourage them from reading the encyclopedia, crib notes, or secondary material when they were tussling with a text for the first time. We wanted their own naive but genuine readings. Although at first this practice would seem as if we were trying to draw blood from stones, soon enough students would discover that they *did* have ideas to contribute—and that became exciting. And we instructors studiously avoided lecturing about works and kept reminding ourselves about the need to refrain from lecturing, which sometimes required superhuman efforts at self-restraint on our parts. (We had all been to graduate school, after all.) Students picked up on these cues, namely, that they *could* read and think on their own, that they could and must participate in their own education, and that we would refuse to patronize them. (In contrast, the common academic practice of listing long bibliographies of “recommended reading” on course syllabi sends out the message: “There is more to this topic than you can possibly know [whereas I, the professor, know much]”—which serves little educational purpose than to make the student dependent upon the professor and to discredit in advance the possibility that a student can have anything new under the sun to say.) The virtues of the teacher are not always the same as the virtues of the

scholar, and we instructors in the program would continually remind ourselves that our mission in the classroom was not to show off how much we knew but to encourage student participation—and the two often are at odds. There were, of course, educational costs to such a strategy: the privileging of text over historical context, a consequence of forsaking secondary sources and lecture modes of presentation, would tend to make these works seem disembodied, abstracted from their class, racial, and gender origins, and one's historical sense would sometimes become fragmented if not skewed, but the need to put student participation front and center in the program outweighed these costs, we decided.

For similar reasons, we wanted this reading course to be populated by full books, not selective snippets and cropped passages. Again, the point was to throw the full burden of reading and interpretation upon the student and emphasize the experience of reading and interpreting—whereas a survey of snippets would serve one better on the game show *Jeopardy* or in a game of Trivial Pursuit, but we wanted more than mere exposure to names, dates, and places. This desire for student participation through readerly interpretation probably was the reason the course tended toward works of imaginative literature, as opposed to didactic works of analytic philosophy, history, sociology, and so forth. The course was largely a course in fiction (I have read Nietzsche, so I know that this term is loaded), and thus some of those professors who have a more social scientific or historical perspective upon the Western tradition took exception with our overview and saw our presentation as limited or tendentious. But in practice, in the classroom, in the trenches, the rule of thumb that students find fiction more accessible (non-threatening, enlivening, fun, whatever), eliciting their active response more often than nonfiction, is hard to ignore.

Moreover, the course was a seminar course, dedicated to discussion. We insisted that a section be limited to sixteen or seventeen students—which meant that Stanford had to commit to this labor-intensive policy, costly especially since instructors were required to have Ph.D.s. The small scale was meant to foster intimacy, conditions conducive to general participation. Students became well acquainted with each other. Meeting for twelve hours a week, in close confines, meant that one had to listen to and confront others' views. In practice, these books routinely provoked a wide variety of views. Throw Plato into a room of Stanford students and you are not going to get sixteen similar reads—unless they first read the encyclopedia entry or Bloom's essay. A seminar setting is a great way to prompt undergraduates to learn to live with multiplicity, diversity, contestability, and ambiguity. (And my own feeling is that Plato actually prompts this result more effectively than reading Lao Tzu or Luce Irigaray, but I will not push that preference.) With so many rival interpretations on the table, we soon learned that the

point was not to revere these books but simply to find some way to understand them and their seemingly protean ways.

Yet I cannot account for my appreciation of the Western Culture Great Books course at Stanford simply on the basis of these formal attributes—that the course was self-critical, participatory, readerly, interpretive, diverse, and open-ended. Many courses can teach the virtues of “critical thinking,” and such lessons need not be confined to the West. Moreover, even within the bounds of Western literature, the Stanford course was quite limited and could never pass as an adequate survey of all things Western. The reasons I happened to enjoy the Stanford course, though, even in its limited, selective scope, did pertain to the content of the course. It did have an agenda of sorts. What did these books teach?

THE EPIC TRADITION

The Great Books course at Stanford was, to a great extent, a sustained survey of the epic tradition of heroic travelers in Western literature. This wandering theme was dominant among the texts of the course, and it provided an interesting hook to implicate the student reader: the notion of a linear plot, held together mainly from the perspective of a single protagonist, the individual wayfarer, invited the student to see a similar trajectory between the plotline and the experience of reading (this parallelism between poetry and pilgrimage sometimes is referred to as narrativity, sometimes as temporality). As the hero experiences various trials and tribulations, so goes the act of reading for the reader. Read one after another, these stories cumulatively suggested how the self is constructed in Western thought, and after reading so many individual odysseys and autobiographies, one gained a sweeping sense of how or why Western individualism developed as it did.

But an important aspect of the course was that it demonstrated that these stories indeed constitute a more or less continuous tradition. One became able to follow the intertextual references and allusions between and among the books and to appreciate the plays and variations upon the overall epic theme: from Homer to Plato to Virgil to Augustine to Dante to Christine de Pizan to Goethe to Descartes to Cervantes to Dostoyevsky to Nietzsche to Richard Wright. Note Virgil’s reversal of the Homeric progression; watch Dante follow Virgil; ponder Nietzsche’s parody of *Faust*. Against the greater backdrop of the notion of Western epic, Christian eschatology took on a new light, and then one could examine the works of Chaucer, Rabelais, Luther, and Goethe distinctly as commentaries upon the Christian narrative.

It is true that when a teacher puts a particular spin on a group of books, something else is lost or distorted. The above grouping of books into a story about the Western epic probably places undue emphasis on the individual

(and by implication, the individual reader). Such a course needed an outside perspective upon itself, and to this end a dose of, say, Confucianism was called for.¹³ But I also might note that these Western texts characteristically undermined themselves should they ever seem to be inviting straight identification and strict emulation. The moral exemplars in these texts usually were ambivalent about their projects; their stories usually called attention to the act of reading and the need for interpretation; and this epic tradition tended to announce itself as a tradition of fiction, at once epic and mock epic. Could Plato really be advocating the rule of philosopher-kings? Did Virgil really want to endorse Aeneas' brutality at the end? How could Goethe be offering a tragedy that also is a mock redemption? How were we to "follow" poor old Don Quixote's example, especially when he renounces his own quest at the very end of this strange book? Was not Zarathustra, fishing up in the hills, an odd teacher of virtue indeed? Was Emma Bovary a heroine or an anti-heroine?

Furthermore, this extended story about Western individualism, if that is what it was finally, was not, in the end, a triumphant tale. After a year of reading these texts and the progression they suggested, students were tempted to write term papers on "the rise and fall of Western coherence." About a third of the way into the course, Thomas Aquinas presented himself as the great scholastic unifier, the world made complete sense, faith and reason, past, present, and future were all reconciled, and the pagan and Christian worlds became one; Dante then extended this mind-expanding universe into the afterlife and collapsed the distinctions between temporal and eternal, sacred and secular, and art and life. Thereafter, the unity of the medieval world came crashing apart, and John Donne told his lament, and Shakespeare scandalized. But then the course picked up momentum in its successive efforts to decenter the Western self: Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud. By the end of the course, one had been exposed to almost all of the names in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, and one could begin to appreciate Nietzsche's jokes. The course at its end announced its own denouement, and then it dropped the student off a moral cliff, providing no pat or summary answers and forcing departing students to fend for themselves thereafter.

A second prominent motif attended the theme of the wandering individual: death, by way of an imaginative excursion into a fictive underworld. These travelers, almost to a person, found it necessary at some critical point in their careers to descend into an underworld in order to gain moral insight into their affairs in the world above. If anything, this descent motif—which I have elsewhere called the Orphic-epic tradition—unified the cluster of books covered in the Great Books course at Stanford. Whereas many modern writers—Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, and Richard Rorty—have contended that the Western tradition from Plato onward is a tradition of metaphysics, of transcendental yearnings, of rationalist impulses, of heavenward glances,

the Stanford course presented a much different view of Western thought (it may be that the above modern writers overlooked the Western literary tradition and paid too much attention to religico-philosophical texts). Redemption was never the goal in descending downward. Rather, one belabored death in order to gain some insight into one's earthly attachments. Yet this whole exercise of imagining a world of the dead was conducted with such poetic good cheer! When Don Quixote, for instance, stumbles into the Cave of Montesinos (in a down-to-earth parody of our classical heroes' descents), falls asleep, and dreams the hellish thought that Dulcinea may be a disenchanted peasant girl after all, and we as readers begin to realize that the poor dolt has a deep psyche that knows he has been romanticizing the thought of Dulcinea all along, we then catch ourselves distinguishing between this fictive character's "real" versus "apparent" selves; after all that, we laugh. Not only do epic heroes renew themselves, reaffirm their worldly projects, as a result of descending downward, so too as readers do we find ourselves participating reflexively in the text, now reaffirming our project of reading after reading about death. A little work of fiction, we discover, can help withstand the defeatism that death might otherwise counsel. And to think we in the West have an entire tradition of writers, readers, and characters all confronting each other in the context of a fictive world of death, an extended community of dead poets speaking to one another beyond the grave by dropping creative references to Orpheus, all in service of celebrating the activity of reading little works of fiction, though all the while everyone involved in this protracted conspiracy knows that we all are subject to a literal death!¹⁴ Students were duly impressed.

When faced with the criticism, then, that the course was filled with "dead white boys," I had to cringe with the sense that the opponents who issued this charge did not realize how very profound their criticism was. Yet they did not give these dead white boys credit for acknowledging their own limitations (which was sometimes a needed lesson at Stanford, for some undergraduates and even many professors viewed themselves as walking immortals). The Stanford course was an elaborate meditation upon death; it grappled with the meaning of all attachments, all interpersonal ties in the face of death; it struggled with the meaning of conducting any mission, or reading any book, or taking any college course, or debating any curriculum, in view of human finitude. Far from effecting a tragic response to those open-ended issues, the course, by implication, affirmed the value of pursuing those issues, asking those questions, and trying to build those communities with the dead. Again Socrates led by example, for he was the person who knew that he knew nothing and was poignantly aware of his own mortality (he had been Delphicly reminded), and yet he persisted in striking up dialogues with other featherless bipeds around him. In light of self-confessed radical ignorance and in view of death, such activity was hardly rational, and we could make

little sense of Socrates' activity by referring to some grand metaphysical scheme of things. We were tempted to believe, rather, that Socrates was led onward by his own sense of irony.

Another charge leveled against the course was that it systematically privileged a male point of view. The writers were male. The epic heroes were mostly male. Their individualizing tendencies probably had something to do with maleness. Their conquests were all too often brutally macho. The Orpheus tale repeatedly marginalized the female. Even the concern with death probably issued from a male anxiety.

Sadly, it was true that the course was far from equal opportunity in its selection of authors and themes. The male perspective was privileged, no doubt about it. That privileging, however, did not preclude a variety of contemporary feminist interactions with these texts. Depending upon the instructor and the class, the course could easily become preoccupied with "gender" concerns (read: the role of women). There was plenty to talk about. First, the course was full of women characters (though many of these women were abused, neglected, and trivialized): Utnapishtim's wife, Eurydice, Helen, Eve, Sarah, Antigone, Briseis, Clytemnestra, Cassandra, Camilla, Electra, Plato's philosophers, Aristotle's near-slaves, Lysistrata, Sappho, Dido, Monika, Isolde, Heloise, Marie de France, Christine and all her ladies, the wife of Bath, Beatrice, Gretchen, Emma Bovary, Mary Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe, Dulcinea, Machiavelli's Fortune, Ophelia, Cordelia and her sisters, Dora. These texts presented opportunities to discuss all sorts of gender-related issues, which were hard to ignore, since we were reading them in a late-twentieth-century context. Certain questions jumped out, and certain silences were conspicuous by their absence. Does Western patriarchy stem from the Judaic notion of a male godhead? Why did Abraham not consult Sarah before he went off to kill Isaac? Why does Homer often shift to the perspective of women? What role do Aeschylus' furies play in establishment of the law court? Was Plato, given his misogynist culture, really serious in proposing that women be philosopher-guardians? How could Aristotle, as a student of Plato, dismiss women so? Why were so many people through the ages threatened by Sappho's success? Do the Tristan stories suggest that romantic love itself is but a story? Did Augustine have a problem with his mother, or what? Why were Dante and Goethe attempting to rewrite Christianity from the perspective of a "woman-principle"? What, after all, was Chaucer's view of his vampy wife of Bath figure? Why was Shakespeare constantly confusing gender roles? How could Rousseau espouse equality and artfully explain the difference between natural and civil inequality and then be so blind to women's plight? Was Emma Bovary a female Faust, or a female Quixote, or both? What, if anything, did Mary Shelley's modern Prometheus, her tale of postpartum monstrosity, have to do with her dead mother's politics? Was Virginia Woolf advocating, through the character of Lily Briscoe,

a stance of moral androgyny? How would Nietzsche, who claimed that Socrates married only to prove the point that philosophers do not marry, respond to Christine de Pizan's assertion that Xanthippe had to be a pretty incredible woman to put up with that penurious mouthpiece (who did not even consult her before he drank the hemlock)?

I can report that the instructors at Stanford placed great importance on feminist issues (more so than on class or race concerns, it so happened), though there was much debate about what the best strategy would be for treating these issues. Some felt that the Western Culture Program presented far too many depressing, debilitating images of women, and that it was necessary as an antidote to include stories of strong women characters, such as Medea, and to include as positive role models important but slighted women writers. Others felt that the course was a study in patriarchy, pure and simple, the study of which, however, could be militarily justified as a tactic "to know the enemy." Still others felt that feminist demands were particularly Western, that Aristotle and Rousseau, for instance, might have been misogynists, but that later claims for women were nonetheless based upon some of their original notions, hence, reading them was necessary and unavoidable. Yet another group felt that a feminist stance could be maintained even while the content of the course might not convey that everything is right in Western culture gender relations. Some of us (myself included) were skeptical of the revisionist attempt to search for excluded women's voices from within the Western tradition, the point of which seemed to be to convey that women have been transhistorically capable of writing and thinking (a pathetic, low self-esteem premise, to my mind). I felt it was more impressive to let the sad historical record speak for itself, to show itself as an overwhelmingly male-dominated enterprise for thousands of years. By the end of the course, we need not feel crushed by that history but rather would get a sense of how very much is left to be done. If anything, modernist writers, those writers toward the end of the course—Machiavelli, Rousseau, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud—taught that Western culture is all of a piece and, as such, is contingent, a construct, a long story, the product of reading books and of reading practices and thus could be changed and changed radically. Such a call *should* leave one disturbed about the course that one has just completed, and that is well and good. It is not true that the immediate subject matter of a course (or the authors of the books of a course) has to agree with or reflect one's own politics or one's hopes for the politics that the course might prompt. What I feared about revisionist feminist history was that at Stanford it served an undergraduate complacency (even among women) about feminist issues: Let us just throw in a few women authors and get on with our business, let us feel basically good about being included (co-opted) in the Western world.

All of what I have said so far presents a rambling case for offering a Western-Culture-Epic-Tradition-Great-Books course somewhere in the

curriculum, but I want to make a stronger claim: I still want to defend the Stanford course as a required one (though I am not advocating a revival, because I no longer see such a course as feasible). Again, I appreciated the particular virtues of the course—as required—in the peculiar context of Stanford, but I also want to propose that this Stanford experience indicates the occasional need for required courses elsewhere, and thus I want to extract a few general lessons from this ordeal (and I qualify my remarks, because I am unsure how far the Stanford model can in fact apply—that remains an empirical, ad hoc matter finally).

First, the course functioned well as a required course. A required course can fail, of course; the requirement can provoke resentment and frustration, for no one wants to be held captive, force-fed wisdom and knowledge. But when required courses work, it usually is because certain things can be done more effectively in such a setting, certain themes can emerge under those auspices. The mere notion of a requirement can put a certain slant upon course material, raising the stakes and thus concentrating minds.

At Stanford, a school that had been actively attempting to diversify its studentry and had been relatively successful in that effort in recent years, the Western Culture requirement served as a social laboratory and quite possibly as an exercise in social engineering. Students from a variety of backgrounds would be thrown into these small rooms together. The result would be a hodgepodge, a mix of pre-majors, races, and parental income levels. They would be defined by no prior interest, no self-selecting criteria.¹⁵ The only things they would necessarily have in common were the facts that they were at Stanford and that they all were reading Plato.

A required setting is superb for discussing “taboo” topics. It was an eye-opener, for believers and nonbelievers alike, to be able to read and discuss Judaic and Christian religious texts together in a nonreligious setting. (Reading the Koran after reading the Hebrew and Christian bibles helps give one a sense of Islam’s claim to succession, which would be an argument for a required comparative religious studies course at particular universities.) Reading Marx in such a setting allowed for a semi-disinterested perspective on the material (which was hard to achieve at Stanford, where the resident Hoover Institute maintains a \$48 million endowment with the express purpose “to expose the evils of the doctrines of Karl Marx”). Since everyone had been thrown in the same boat together, the situation was as if everyone could let down his or her societal guard a bit, as if everyone were on a vacation cruise, taking a step out of time and away from business as usual. Things were said that might never be said otherwise. Women would confront men, and vice versa. Races would clash, or try to come to terms. Students on financial aid might point out what it means to work or to go deeply in debt in order to gain an education. Gay and lesbian students might talk about what it means