

From:  
*SYMPTOMS OF CULTURE*  
by Marjorie Garber  
Routledge, New York 2000

## PART I

### AMERICAN DREAMS

#### I

#### **Greatness**

It is natural to believe in great men.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Uses of Great Men”

The “Great Wall of China” is, some modern scholars suggest, neither great nor a wall. It is a patchwork of sections, only about a third of which are presently standing. It was not built more than 2,000 years ago, despite what guidebooks claim. It did not halt a Mongol invasion. It can’t be seen from the moon. “Let us beware of the myth of the Great Wall,” cautioned Arthur N. Waldron, who has studied the place of the wall in Chinese history.<sup>1</sup> But Chinese leaders since Mao Zedong have made the wall a national icon, and foreign tourists arrive by the busload. “They’ve turned the Great Wall into a tourist attraction,” complained a visitor from the Philippines. “You can’t take a picture that doesn’t include someone else taking a picture.” But this aspect of the wall’s celebrity was not inimical to its cultural power. “You get a sense of history, of greatness,” explained the visitor. “You realize why they call it the Great Wall—because it is great, in size, in power. It’s so impressive a structure that even the crass commercialization doesn’t stop you from feeling its greatness.”

Not only does the commercialization not “stop you” from feeling greatness. It may in fact inspire exactly those feelings, feelings that are, in the world of tourism and celebrity, an aspect of what scholars call imitative or mimetic desire. The greatness of a site is directly proportional to the number of other viewers who consider it great. The tourist is always, in a sense, taking pictures of another tourist taking pictures.

“Greatness” as a term is today both an inflated and a deflated currency, shading over into categories of notoriety, transcendence, and some version of the postmodern fifteen minutes of fame. The modern cultural fantasy about heroes and greatness is a symptom of desire and loss: a desire for identifiable and objective standards, and a nostalgia for hierarchy, whether of rank or merit.

Sometimes today “greatness”—so often linked, in our national rhetoric, with “America”—functions rhetorically as pure boiler-plate (the politician’s statutory “this is a great country”) while at other times it seems to be its own, tautologous, ground of self-evident truth. To give one trivial but telling example: the an-

nouncement of the U.S. Post Office's plan to issue an Elvis Presley commemorative stamp—thus officially declaring Elvis dead, as well as transcendent—was greeted with pleasure by a 72-year-old Vermont woman who had written the Postmaster General almost every week since the King's death, pushing for an Elvis commemorative. "I can't imagine anybody more deserving to be put on a stamp than my Elvis," she told the *New York Times*. "I'm not one of those who believes he's not dead. He's dead, unfortunately. He was a great man, a great American. I knew that the first time I laid eyes on him in that black leather suit."<sup>2</sup>

Bear in mind that "great" in English once meant "fat." Or thick, or coarse, or bulky—take your pick. It was an aspect of physical size, not of moral weight. The "Great Bed of Ware" in Elizabethan England was 10 feet 11 inches (3.33 metres) square. It was not the bed of a "great man," but rather a convenient lodging for several itinerant travelers. Nor, when applied to persons, did "greatness" necessarily imply quality or merit. Shakespeare has more than one joke on this: Shakespearean characters called "Pompey" tend in fact to present themselves as targets for comic undercutting because of their pretensions to greatness. An amateur actor in the bumbling "Pageant of the Nine Worthies" presented before the court in *Love's Labour's Lost* announces, "I Pompey am, Pompey, surnam'd the Big—" and is quickly corrected by a condescending lord: "The Great." Later he acknowledges, with a modesty that would better become his noble audience, "I made a little fault in 'Great.'"<sup>3</sup> A pimp named Pompey in *Measure for Measure* is surnamed "Bum," and his judicial interrogator quips disgustedly that "your bum is the greatest thing about you; so that, in the beastliest sense, you are Pompey the Great."<sup>4</sup>

But "great" also meant "powerful." A "great man" was a mover-and-shaker, a political force, nobly born and to be reckoned with. "Madness in great ones must not unwatched go," declares the politic Claudius about the dangerously unpredictable Hamlet.<sup>5</sup> Hamlet himself, in a phrase that has attracted scholarly attention for its knotted syntax, seeks to find some common ground between the moral or ethical realm and the demands of power politics, observing admiringly of his rival Fortinbras that "Rightly to be great/Is not to stir without great argument" (i.e., strong motivation), "But greatly to find quarrel in a straw/When honour's at the stake."<sup>6</sup> By this reasoning, one can be wrongly as well as rightly great. Significantly, the Shakespearean locus classicus of the concept of greatness is put into the mouth of a social climber rather than a "great man." "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em."<sup>7</sup> The words are in fact already a bromide when the pompous Malvolio finds and reads them: he picks up a letter counterfeited in the handwriting of his noble employer, the Lady Olivia, and imagines that they have direct and unambiguous pertinence to him.

The sense in which "greatness" here means high birth rather than merit is underscored by the counterfeit letter's preceding line, "In my stars I am above

thee, but be not afraid of greatness.” Yet only the second half of the line is commonly remembered in modern citations of this famous phrase, so that, as with so many other Shakespearean phrases taken out of context, the “some are born great” passage is frequently used by 20th-century pundits to mean pretty much the opposite of what the original context implies. As yet another Shakespearean clown will remark of an impostor pretending to be a courtier, “A great man, I’ll warrant; I know by the picking on’s teeth.”<sup>8</sup>

Tooth-picking, warfare, and “marrying up” may be three infallible marks of greatness, not only for the Renaissance but for our own day. But the cultural role of “greatness” has shifted a little in these democratic days. Jane Austen’s Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* is regarded as “so great a man”<sup>9</sup> not because he is brilliant or accomplished but because he has inherited a large estate. “Perhaps he may be a little whimsical in his civilities,” worries Elizabeth Bennet’s city uncle, who is doubtful about whether to trust Darcy’s invitation to fish on his estate. “Your great men often are.”<sup>10</sup> In the same novel the unlikeable but high-born Lady Catherine de Bourgh and her sickly daughter are regarded with awe by the new knight, Sir William Lucas, who “was stationed in the doorway, in earnest contemplation of the greatness before him, and constantly bowing” whenever they deigned to look his way.<sup>11</sup>

With the separation from the old world of rank and status, where inherited titles conferred “greatness,” came a new ideology of the natural aristocrat, the aristocrat of the mind. A sermon preached before the King of England in 1698 raised the question of *Great Men’s Advantages and Obligations to Religion*, where “great men” refers to social rank. But *Great Men are God’s Gift*—the title of a memorial discourse on the death of Daniel Webster in 1852—offers a different notion of “greatness.” The phrase was much on America’s mind. When Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that “It is natural to believe in great men”<sup>12</sup> he meant men like Plato, Goethe, Napoleon, and, indeed, Shakespeare. Their greatness consists, as we will see, in the greatness of their books, or in their presumed exemplary status as models of decorum and achievement.

Emerson’s own example in cataloguing “great men” has been followed in the twentieth century with varying success. Today one can consult volumes on *Great Men of Science*, *Great Men of American Popular Song*, *Great Men of Derbyshire*, *Great Men of Michigan*, *Great Men Who Have Added to the Enlightenment of Mankind Through Endowed Professorships at the University of Chicago*, *Short Sayings of Great Men*, and, my favorite, an instructive fictionalization for children, *Great Men’s Sons: Who They Were, What They Did, and How They Turned Out*. There are also of course, in our enlightened century, lists of great women: *Great Women of the Bible*, *Of Antiquity*, *Of Failh*, *Of Medicine*, *Of India*, and *Of the Press*, as well as *Great Women Mystery Writers*, *Great Women Athletes*, and *Great Women Superheroes*. On library bookshelves F.R. Leavis’s *Great Books*

and a Liberal Education jostles for space with *Great Books as Life Teachers: Studies of Character Real and Ideal*, and the *Great Book of Couscous*.

In short, by the latter half of the 20th century “great” as a term had become an empty colloquial affirmation cognate with other debased terms like “fantastic,” “terrific,” and “awesome,” which have likewise lost their original specificity in fantasy, terror; and awe. “Baby, you’re the greatest,” declares Jackie Gleason’s character Ralph Kramden, enfolding his long-suffering wife in his arms at the end of practically every episode of “The Honeymooners.” Alice’s “greatness” consists in tolerating her husband’s foibles. But “great” has also become a category of popular celebrity, a headline and a cultural diagnosis. “I am the greatest,” announced pugilist and poet Muhammad Ali after a boxing match, crowning himself for our age as definitively as did Napoleon for his.

In what follows I will be analyzing the mechanisms for producing greatness in a number of different contexts, from a children’s story to a presidential campaign, from the politics of our so-called national pastime to the politics of the so-called Great Books. But let me begin by establishing a couple of quick benchmarks, fairly straightforward instances in which “greatness” is produced as a spectral effect, with consequences that are political, ideological, and cultural, while appearing, to some eyes at least, to be none of these.

In L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz*, the wonderful wizard, appearing variously to Dorothy and her friends as an enormous head without a body, a lovely lady, a terrible beast, and a ball of fire, introduces himself: “I am Oz the Great and Terrible.”<sup>13</sup> Oz is a nice instance of Lacan’s “*sujet supposé savoir*,” the one who is supposed to know—and of course he turns out (perhaps like Lacan’s all-knowing psychoanalyst) to be a humbug and a ventriloquist. “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain,” blusters the voice of Oz in the MGM film, when Dorothy’s familiar, the little dog Toto, tugs away the hangings to disclose a frightened little man pulling levers behind the scenes. (Here we could footnote, were we so inclined, another dictum from Lacan: “the phallus can play its role only when veiled.”)<sup>14</sup> The film (1939) is more cynical than the book (1900) on the question of “greatness”; the Wizard’s main speech, written for W.C. Fields, who declined the part, has him handing out a diploma in place of the Scarecrow’s wished-for brains, a plaque in place of the Tin Woodman’s heart, and a medal in place of the Lion’s courage. Significantly, what are today in politics called “character issues” (brains, courage, heart) are thus here explicitly fetishized and commodified, displayed as assumable attributes of the surface.

Another twentieth-century text in which the fantasy of greatness is enacted as pure theater, pure representation based on no original, is Genet’s *The Balcony*. In that play the phallic reference, muted in *The Wizard of Oz*, is displayed in all its mimetic glory. Published in the same year as Lacan’s essay “The Signification of the Phallus” (1958), Genet’s play could easily bear that title. It takes place in a

brothel in which clients pay to enact their erotic fantasies dressed as pillars of society's institutions: the Judge, the Bishop, the General.

The Chief of Police' also known as the Hero, is disconsolate because no one has yet asked to impersonate him, to play his part, that of the Chief of Police, in a sexual studio of fantasy. To enhance his appeal he is advised to appear in the form of "a gigantic phallus, a prick of great stature." This will enable him, he thinks, to "symbolize the nation." Let this fantasmatic giant phallus, like the giant disembodied head of the Great Oz, stand as a clear example of the representation of greatness, what I am calling here the politics of mimesis. The Police Chief's companions, the Judge and the Bishop, are dumbfounded:

THE JUDGE: A phallus? Of great stature? You mean—enormous?

THE CHIEF OF POLICE: Of my stature.

THE JUDGE: But that'll be very difficult to bring off.

THE CHIEF OF POLICE: Not so very. What with new techniques in the rubber industry, remarkable things can be worked out.

THE BISHOP (after reflection): to be sure, the idea is a bold one. . . . it would be a formidable figure-head, and if you were to transmit yourself in that guise to posterity. . . .

THE CHIEF OF POLICE (gently): Would you like to see the model?

This scheme, in fact, never does quite come off. The fantasy of the Hero unveiled as a phallic figure-head is revised in practice, as the revolutionary Roger does choose to impersonate the Hero, but mimetically, as Chief of Police, dressed in his clothes, even wearing his toupee. Like the other pretenders in the brothel, Roger wears the traditional footwear of ancient tragedy, cothurni about twenty inches high, so that he towers over the "real" Hero and the others onstage. The Police Chief is ecstatic—"So I've made it?," he asks, and declares "Gentlemen, I belong to the Nomenclature."<sup>15</sup>

But Roger (the impersonator) in turn mistakes the role for the real: "I've a right," he says, "to lead the character I've chosen to the very limit of his destiny . . . of merging his destiny with mine." Dramatically he takes out a knife and, according to Genet's stage direction, "makes the gesture of castrating himself." After which the Chief of Police, ostentatiously feeling his own balls, heaves a sigh of relief: "Mine are here. So which of us is washed up? He or I? Though my image be castrated in every brothel in the world, I remain intact.... An image of me will be perpetuated in secret, Mutilated? (*he shrugs his shoulders*). Yet a low Mass will be said to my glory.... Did you see? Did you see me? There, just before, larger than large, stronger than strong, deader than dead?"<sup>16</sup>

This is the apotheosis of the Hero, performed in a place called the Mausoleum Studio, since the dissemination of the Hero's image—as we have already seen with Elvis—is coterminous with his death: "The truth [is] that you're dead, or

rather that you don't stop dying and that your image, like your name, reverberates to infinity."<sup>17</sup> Such is the reality of the brothel, the place of greatness as mimesis. "Judges, generals, bishops, chamberlains, rebels," says the Madame of the House to her customers in the play's closing lines, "I'm going to prepare my costumes and studios for tomorrow. . . . You must now go home, where everything—you can be quite sure—will be falsier than here."<sup>18</sup>

You must now go *home*, where everything—you can be quite sure—will be falsier than here. The instruction, the desire, or the necessity to go home again, to quit the fantasy world of "greatness," is another move that links Dorothy's adventures in Oz, and her longing for Kansas, with the world inside—and outside—Genet's theatrical brothel. "Make-believe" is a term that unites these fantasy worlds. "It's make-believe that these gentlemen want," says the brothel madam, and Oz meekly confesses that he has only been "making believe."

"Making believe!" cried Dorothy. "Are you not a great Wizard?"

"Hush, my dear," he said, "don't speak so loud, or you will be overheard—and I should be ruined. I'm supposed to be a Great Wizard."

"And aren't you?" she asked.

"Not a bit of it, my dear; I'm just a common man."

Or, as the Scarecrow points out, to Oz's evident pleasure, and with a manifest gesture in the direction of P.T. Barnum, a "humbug."<sup>19</sup> That this is what greatness *is*—that greatness is not only not distinguishable from make-believe and from humbug, but is in fact necessarily dependent upon them, is the somewhat tendentious starting point of this essay.

Dorothy wants—or thinks she wants—to go home to Auntie Em, to return from the technicolor splendors of Oz to the sepia "reality" of Kansas. The customers in Genet's brothel are sent home to a "real" world that is a pale copy of their fantasies. I want now to point out that the uncanniness of the return home, the simultaneity, in Freud's by now familiar argument, of the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich*, the homelike and the uncanny, "something familiar and old-established . . . that has been estranged by the process of repression," is persistently literalized in contemporary American culture through the figure of baseball, another fantasy world or *field of dreams*, in which "greatness" is figured as the capacity to control the return home, through the agency of the "home run."

A good and rather unexpected example of this appears in the 1991 film *Hook*, made by America's own Oz figure, Steven Spielberg, as a rewriting of *Peter Pan* for our time. For me, Spielberg's film lost all the magic of the original, not incidentally because of the "normalization" of Pan in the figure of a childish middle-aged male actor, Robin Williams, rather than a woman cross-dressed as the eternal boy. (Though, of course, Williams did his cross-dressing in another film, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, where he played the Nanny, not the child.) But in a crucial

moment in *Hook*, when Peter's son Jack has been captured, Hook attempts to seduce his affections by replaying a scene in which the "real" father, Peter Banning/Robin Williams, failed his son by not showing up at a baseball game. The son struck out; the team lost. Captain Hook restages the baseball game in Neverland, with Jack as the hero, and posts his pirate minions in the crowd with placards. Each pirate holds a card with a letter, and the sequence is intended to spell out the slogan, "Home Run, Jack." But the pirates, being British rather than American, are unfamiliar with the terminology of the game, and get their terms confused. Instead of "Home Run, Jack," the hortatory message that greets the batter at the plate is the subliminal one that surfaces: "Run Home, Jack." Run Home, Jack. A great deal of the film turns on the question of which place *is* home; "I *am* home," the son will defiantly tell his father, flushed with the pleasure of the ball game, and the home run, in Neverland.

In the 1989 movie *Field of Dreams*, the protagonist's unconscious desire to recuperate his relationship with his dead father is accomplished through the mediation of the father's own baseball hero, Shoeless Joe Jackson, the star player unfairly disgraced, debarred from heroism, greatness, and professional baseball itself by the Black Sox scandal of 1919. Building his baseball field in the middle of an Iowa cornfield ("Toto, I think we're not in Kansas anymore") he too restages an American drama of greatness: Shoeless Joe and the Black Sox get to play baseball again, reversing the ban placed on them by the baseball commissioner, and the dead father returns as a young man in baseball uniform to play catch with his (now-grown) son. (It is of some small interest that the ghostly baseball players, returning to the boundary of the cornfield into which they disappear each evening after the game, jokingly call out to the living spectators in a famous phrase from *The Wizard of Oz*, "I'm melting, I'm melting"—the last words of the wicked witch.)

Furthermore, this configuration of the baseball commissioner, the banned and disgraced hero, and the fantasy-of return ("Run Home, Jack") is not, of course, only a story of the distant past. For the story itself subsequently returned, in the controversy between Cincinnati Reds baseball star Pete Rose, banned from professional baseball for allegedly betting on games, and the Commissioner who banned him, the late A. Bartlett Giamatti. The confrontation between the two men was dramatic, based and grounded (so to speak) in notions of greatness and of mimesis. Could a man be a sports hero, especially for children, when he violated baseball's cardinal rules? Terms like "authenticity," "idealism," and "integrity" were, said Giamatti, at stake, so that it was necessary for Rose to be "banished" from baseball forever. The tough, eloquent stance Giamatti took on the Rose case "elevated" him, wrote James Reston Jr., "to heroic stature in America. By banishing a sport hero, he became a moral hero to the nation."<sup>20</sup>

Seven days after Giamatti's dramatic announcement he himself was dead, of a heart attack. When the news of his death reached the denizens of a Cincinnati

sports bar, flashed over the television screen, Rose fans broke out in a chorus from the *Wizard of Oz*: “Ding, dong, the witch is dead, the wicked, wicked, witch is dead. . . .”<sup>21</sup> (We may notice the gender implications and complications here; as Giamatti is demonized he is also feminized.) But subsequently, the issue of Rose’s banishment from baseball was revived, specifically with regard to the question of “greatness.” Should Pete Rose be forever banned, not only from baseball, but also from its Hall of Fame? *New York Times* sports columnist Dave Anderson, among others, thought not: the “best interests of baseball,” he wrote, citing Giamatti’s own phrase, would be served by Rose’s election to the Hall of Fame.<sup>22</sup>

Bart Giamatti is described on the jacket blurb of his baseball book *Take Time for Paradise* as “a Renaissance scholar and former President of Yale University and of the National League.” (That this can be offered not as a zeugma but as a simple compound tells its own, fascinatingly American, story.) “When A. Bartlett Giamatti died,” wrote *U.S. News and World Report* in a quotation given prominent place on the front cover of the paperback edition, “baseball lost more than a Commissioner. It lost an expositor. A philosopher. A poet. A high priest. Giamatti plays all of those positions with distinction in *Take Time for Paradise*.” Notice, if you will, the nice crossover phrase “plays all of those positions.” Giamatti is both philosopher and utility infielder. And, since his book is published posthumously, he is also, and very effectively, its immanent and ghostly figure of pathos.

*Take Time for Paradise* begins with a quotation from Shakespeare’s Prince Hal (“If all the world were playing holidays, to sport would be as tedious as to work”) which is all the more striking for its relevance to the concept of “banishment” in the *Henry IV* plays (and in *Richard II*). It ends with Aristotle on mimesis, cited, purposefully, in the chatty style of present-tense baseball talk, “the tone and style of our national narrative,”<sup>23</sup> a style, says Giamatti, “almost Biblical in its continuity and its instinct for typology”:

So . . . I’m standing in the lobby of the Marriott in St. Louis in October of ‘87 and I see this crowd, so happy with itself, all talking baseball . . . working at the fine points the way players in the big leagues do, and it comes to me slowly, around noon, that this, *this*, is what Aristotle must have meant by the imitation of an action.

This (*this*) is the end of Giamatti’s book. *Politics* for him—glossed both from Aristotle’s *Politics* and etymologically from its roots in polis, “is the art of making choices and finding agreements in public,”<sup>24</sup> and baseball “mirrors the conditions of freedom for Americans that Americans ever guard and aspire to, so that “to know baseball is to aspire to the condition of freedom, individually, and as a people.”<sup>25</sup> In Giamatti’s reading of baseball not only Aristotle but Western culture



is itself confirmed in its centrality: “Before American games are American, they are Western.”<sup>26</sup> It is, I think, thus highly significant that Giamatti should choose to frame this humanist argument in a selective reading of the concept of *home*.

The crux of Giamatti’s argument centers around nostalgia, around the nostos, the classical figure of return, and its relationship to “home plate, the center of all the universes, the omphalos, the navel of the world.” “In baseball,” he writes, citing the description of this “curious pentagram” from *The Official Baseball Rules*, “everyone wants to arrive at the same place, which is where they start.”<sup>27</sup> And “everyone” is a version of the classical hero. “Home is the goal—rarely glimpsed, never attained—of all the heroes descended from Odysseus.”<sup>28</sup> “As the heroes of romance beginning with Odysseus know, . . . to attempt to go home is to go the long way around, to stray and separate in the hope of finding completeness in reunion.”<sup>29</sup>

Giamatti dramatizes his analogy with the empathic energy of identification “Often the effort fails, the hunger is unsatisfied as the catcher bars fulfillment, as the umpire-father is too strong in his denial, as the impossibility of going home again is reenacted.”<sup>30</sup> “Or if the attempt . . . works, then the reunion and all it means is total—the runner is a returned hero.”<sup>31</sup> “Baseball is a Romance epic . . . finally told by the audience . . . the Romance Epic of homecoming America sings to itself.”<sup>32</sup>

And what is *home*? “*Home*,” says Giamatti, “is an English word virtually impossible to translate into other tongues. No translation catches the associations, the mixture of memory and longing, the sense of security and autonomy and accessibility, the aroma of inclusiveness, of freedom from wariness, that cling to the word *home*. . . . *Home* is a concept, not a place; it is a state of mind where self-definition starts; it is origins—the mix of time and place and smell and weather wherein one first realizes one is an original, perhaps *like* others, especially those one loves, but discrete, distinct, not to be copied. Home is where one first learned to be separate and it remains in the mind as the place where reunion, if it were ever to occur, would happen.”<sup>33</sup> And for Giamatti home is the space of baseball, and middle-America—the Marriott in St. Louis—and of “the Greeks.” “Ancient,” he says, “means Greek, for us.”<sup>34</sup>

*Home*, in short, is *Homer*, a name that has become in baseball parlance both a noun and a verb, signifying the ultimate achievement, the fulfillment of desire. To homer—to hit a homer—is to be a hero, to go home again.

Bart Giamatti was the founder of Yale’s great books course on the Western tradition from Homer to Brecht and the author of a study of the earthly paradise in the Renaissance epic. He was a premier and eloquent defender of the concept of “humanism” in literary studies, and an explicit champion both of the traditional literary canon and—as these quotations will have demonstrated—the capacity of “great literature” to inform and shape “human life.”

The ideology of “greatness”—an ideology that claims, precisely, to transcend ideological concerns and to locate the timeless and enduring, the fit candidates, though few, for a Hall of Fame, whether in sports or in arts and letters—is, in fact, frequently secured with reference to a philology of origins. Yet a specific examination of the relationship of philology to the politics of mimesis yields, as well, some interesting complications.

Consider the case of Erich Auerbach’s landmark study, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, a study that takes as its starting point a sustained meditation on the concept of Homer and “home.” “Readers of the *Odyssey*,” the book begins, without preamble, “will remember the . . . touching scene in book 19, when Odysseus has at last come home.” But where is “home” for Erich Auerbach?

A distinguished professor of romance philology who concluded his career as Sterling Professor at Yale, Auerbach was a Jewish refugee from Nazi persecution who was born in Berlin. Discharged from his position at Marburg University by the Nazi government, he emigrated to Turkey, where he taught at the Turkish State University, until his move to the United States in 1947. His celebrated book, *Mimesis*, was written in Istanbul in the period between May 1942 and April 1945. It was published in Berne, Switzerland, in 1946, and translated into English for the Bolligen Series, published by Princeton University Press, in 1953. The politics of *Mimesis* were thus, at least in part, a politics of exile—and a politics of *nostos* and nostalgia. “Home” was the Western tradition, and the *translatio studii*.

In his Epilogue to *Mimesis*, Auerbach is at pains to point out that “the book was written during the war and at Istanbul, where the libraries are not well equipped for European studies.” Thus, he explains, his book necessarily lacks footnotes, and may also assert something that “modern research has disproved or modified.”<sup>34</sup> Yet, he remarks, “it is quite possible that the book owes its existence to just this lack of a rich and specialized library. If it had been possible for me to acquaint myself with all the work that has been done on so many subjects, I might never have reached the point of writing.”

This last sentiment—that reading criticism and scholarship may sometimes impede the creative process—will doubtless be familiar to all graduate students embarking on the writing of a Ph.D. thesis. Yet, as we will see in a moment, it is also strikingly similar to a certain tactical enhancement of “great literature” and “greatness” in general through the evacuation of historical context. I want to suggest that the absence of a critical apparatus in a book on the evolution of the great tradition in Western letters is something more, or less, than an accident of historical contingency. Auerbach’s research opportunities were limited by his circumstances; his choice of topic was not. The scholar who would later write that “our philological home is the earth; it can no longer be the nation,”<sup>36</sup> sustained his argument through a selection of texts that he alleges were “chosen at random, on

the basis of accidental acquaintance and personal preference.”<sup>37</sup> Out of this came a book which claimed, and has been taken, to set forth “the representation of reality in Western literature.”

Edward Said has noted that Auerbach’s alienation and “displacement” in Istanbul offers a good example of the way in which *not* being “at home” or “in place” with respect to a culture and its policing authority can enable, as well as impede, literary and cultural analysis.<sup>38</sup> But what for Erich Auerbach was a war-time necessity became, for a group of U.S.-based scholars in the same period, a democratic principle of pedagogy.

Let us now move, profiting from Giamatti’s and Auerbach’s speculations on home and Homer, to a consideration of the specific kind of “greatness” embodied in the concept of the Great Books, the cultural heroes of our time for pundits from Allan Bloom to Harold Bloom. To study “Greats” at Oxford and Cambridge is to read the ancient classics; for this generation of Americans, however, the greats have been updated—slightly.

In search of some wisdom on this topic—of what makes the great books great—I decided to consult the experts: specifically, the editors of the Encyclopedia Britannica Great Books Series, more accurately described as the *Great Books of the Western World*, first collected and published in 1952 in a Founders’ Edition under the editorship of Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer J. Adler.

Hutchins’s prefatory volume, entitled *The Great Conversation*, makes it clear that, at least in 1952, “There [was] not much doubt about which [were] the most important voices in the Great Conversation.”<sup>39</sup> “The discussions of the Board revealed few differences of opinion about the overwhelming majority of the books in the list,” which went from Homer to Freud. “The set” wrote Hutchins, “is almost self-selected, in the sense that one book leads to another, amplifying, modifying, or contradicting it.”<sup>40</sup> *The Great Conversation*, as Adler and his board conceived it, at the time of the election of President Eisenhower, was, it is not surprising to note, exclusively considered as taking place between European and American men, men who were no long living at the time they were enshrined in the hard covers of “greatness.” The explicit politics of the edition was, nonetheless, aggressively democratic: no “scholarly apparatus” was included in the set, since the editors believed that “Great books contain their own aids to reading; that is one reason why they are great. Since we hold”—writes Hutchins—“that these works are intelligible to the ordinary man, we see no reason to interpose ourselves or anybody else between the author and the reader.”

The assumption here was one of enlightened “objectivity”: given a handsomely produced, uniformly bound set of volumes vetted for “greatness,” the reader—unreflectively gendered male, an inevitable commonplace of the times—would be able, the editors thought, with the help of a curious kind of two-volume outline called the *Syntopticon*, “which began as an index and then turned into a means of helping the reader find paths through the books,” to “find what great

men have had to say about the greatest issues and what is being said about these issues today.” A chief obstacle to this process, apparently, was what Hutchins called, in a phrase later to be echoed by the likes of Bill Bennett and Lynne Cheney, “the vicious specialization of scholarship.” With the help of this completely objective and apolitical edition “the ordinary reader,” we are assured, will be able to break through the obfuscating barrier of “philology, metaphysics, and history,” the “cult of scholarship” that forms a barrier between him and the great authors. For example, despite the huge “apparatus” of commentary surrounding *The Divine Comedy* (an apparatus the “ordinary reader” has “heard of” but “never used”), the purchaser and reader of the Great Books will be “surprised to find that he understands Dante without it.”

The end-papers of the *Great Books of the Western World*, uniform throughout the 54 volumes, are themselves a treasure trove of information. The first pair of end-papers, in the front of each volume, lists the product being sold, and bought: “The Great Books of the Western World” and the three introductory volumes that frame them, *The Great Conversation*, *The Great Ideas I*, and *The Great Ideas II*. But what are the Great Ideas? In case we are in any doubt, the editors conveniently list them for us in the second set of end-papers, the ones that close the book. Remember that this is an objective, non-political list, assembled by editors who “believe that the reduction of the citizen to an object of propaganda, private and public, is one of the greatest dangers to democracy,”<sup>41</sup> and that “until lately” (again, 1952) “there never was very much doubt in anybody’s mind about which the masterpieces were. They were the books that had endured and that the common voice of mankind called the finest creations, in writing, of the Western mind.”

The Great Ideas, the preoccupations of the great authors who wrote the Great Books and participate in the ongoing Great Conversation in which the ordinary citizen is encouraged to think he should also take part—these Great Ideas are listed in the second set of end-papers in alphabetical order, from Angel to World. I will restrict myself to two comments about them, one of which will be quite self-evident, the other, perhaps, less so.

You will notice that in the course of this list, which includes ideas like Citizen, Constitution, Courage, Democracy, and Education, there appear, occasionally, words with a more disquieting ring: “evil,” “pain,” “contingency,” “other,” and the great cornerstone of individualism, and therefore of humanist hero-making, “death.”

But all of these words are tamed and contained—and here we should indeed think of Cold War containment theory—by being presented as part of a dyad. Angel, Animal, and Aristocracy stand alone; but Good and Evil, Life and Death, Necessity and Contingency, One and Many, Pleasure and Pain, Same and Other, Virtue and Vice, Universal and Particular are tethered together like the horses of the charioteer. It is perhaps too much to say that cutting free each of the dark

GREAT BOOKS OF THE WESTERN WORLD		GREAT BOOKS OF THE WESTERN WORLD	
	<b>Introductory Volumes:</b>		
	1. The Great Conversation	28. GILBERT GALLIO HARVEY	41. GIBBON II
	2. The Great Ideas I	29. CERVANTES	42. KANT
	3. The Great Ideas II	30. FRANCIS BACON	43. AMERICAN STATE PAPERS THE FEDERALIST J. S. MILL
	4. HOMER	31. DESCARTES SPINOZA	44. BOSWELL
	5. AESCHYLUS SOPHOCLES EURIPIDES ARISTOPHANES	32. MILTON	45. LAVOISIER FOURIER FARADAY
	6. HERODOTUS THUCYDIDES	33. PASCAL	46. HEGEL
	7. PLATO	34. NEWTON HUYGENS	47. GOETHE
	8. ARISTOTLE I	35. LOCKE BERKELEY HUME	48. MELVILLE
	9. ARISTOTLE II	36. SWIFT STERNE	49. DARWIN
	10. HIPPOCRATES GALEN	37. FIELDING	50. MARX ENGELS
	11. EUCLID ARCHIMEDES APOLLONIUS NICOMACHUS	38. MONTESQUIEU ROUSSEAU	51. TOLSTOY
	12. LUCRETIUS EPICETTUS MARCUS AURELIUS	39. ADAM SMITH	52. DOSTOEVSKY
	13. VIRGIL	40. GIBBON I	53. WILLIAM JAMES
	14. PLUTARCH		54. FREUD
	15. TACITUS		
	16. PTOLEMY COPERNICUS KEPLER		
	17. PLOTINUS		
	18. AUGUSTINE		
	19. THOMAS AQUINAS I		
	20. THOMAS AQUINAS II		
	21. DANTE		
	22. CHAUCER		
	23. MACHIAVELLI HOBBS		
	24. RABELAIS		
	25. MONTAIGNE		
	26. SHAKESPEARE I		
	27. SHAKESPEARE II		

Opening endpapers to *The Great Books of the Western World*.

THE GREAT IDEAS, Volumes 2 and 3		THE GREAT IDEAS, Volumes 2 and 3	
	FAMILY	MATTER	RELATION
ANGEL	FATE	MECHANICS	RELIGION
ANIMAL	FORM	MEDICINE	REVOLUTION
ARISTOCRACY	GOD	MEMORY AND IMAGINATION	RHETORIC
ART	GOOD AND EVIL	METAPHYSICS	SAME AND OTHER
ASTRONOMY	GOVERNMENT	MIND	SCIENCE
BEAUTY	HABIT	MONARCHY	SENSE
BEING	HAPPINESS	NATURE	SIGN AND SYMBOL
CAUSE	HISTORY	NECESSITY AND CONTINGENCY	SIN
CHANCE	HONOR	OLIGARCHY	SLAVERY
CHANGE	HYPOTHESIS	ONE AND MANY	SOUL
CITIZEN	IDEA	OPINION	SPACE
CONSTITUTION	IMMORTALITY	OPPOSITION	STATE
COURAGE	INDUCTION	PHILOSOPHY	TEMPERANCE
CUSTOM AND CONVENTION	INFINITY	PHYSICS	THEOLOGY
DEFINITION	JUDGMENT	PLEASURE AND PAIN	TIME
DEMOCRACY	JUSTICE	POETRY	TRUTH
DESIRE	KNOWLEDGE	PRINCIPLE	TYRANNY
DIALECTIC	LABOR	PROGRESS	UNIVERSAL AND PARTICULAR
DUTY	LANGUAGE	PROPHECY	VIRTUE AND VICE
EDUCATION	LAW	PRUDENCE	WAR AND PEACE
ELEMENT	LIBERTY	PUNISHMENT	WEALTH
EMOTION	LIFE AND DEATH	QUALITY	WILL
ETERNITY	LOGIC	QUANTITY	WISDOM
EVOLUTION	LOVE	REASONING	WORLD
EXPERIENCE	MAN		
	MATHEMATICS		

Closing endpapers to *The Great Books of the Western World*.

great books; but it is *not* too much to say that the last forty-odd years of literary and cultural theory have explored, precisely, the dangerous complacencies of these binarisms, the politics of their masquerade as opposites rather than figures for one another, the master-slave relation that informs them.

My second observation about “The Great Ideas” is one that addresses the question of packaging. On one page of this list the ideas run alphabetically from Angel to Mathematics, and on the other they run from Matter to World. In each case the list fills up the entire page, with one decorative squiggle at the beginning, and one at the end. Angel to Mathematics, Matter to World. It is of some small interest, however, that the two series volumes that contain the Great Ideas, the *Syntopticon* Volumes I and II, choose slightly different moments to begin and end. Volume I ends not with Mathematics but with Love; Volume II thus starts with Man.

Volume I: Angel to Love; Volume II: Man to World. You’ll have to admit this gives a somewhat different spin to the alphabetical iconography of greatness. Matter and Mathematics are worthy enough categories in themselves, but seem somehow so material, lacking the humanist grandeur of Love and Man. Nor is this an accident of division based upon the length of the individual articles. Angel to Love, Chapters 1 to 50, the contents of volume one, covers 750 pages; Chapters 51 to 102, Man to World, in the second volume, covers 809 pages. It seems reasonable to think that an editorial decision has been taken—and a perfectly appropriate one, given the presumptions of the Great Books project. The titles of the prefatory volumes will be an icon of the whole.

The very trope usually ascribed to deconstructors, and to a deconstructive playfulness, the trope of chiasmus, is here quietly employed to anchor the ideology of the series; the relationship of “Man” to “Love” (*not* the relationship of “Matter” to “Mathematics”) will serve as a fulcrum, a micro-relation mediating the macro-relation of “Angel” to “World.” Readers of Tillyard’s *Elizabethan World Picture* and Lovejoy’s *Great Chain of Being* will here recognize a familiar structure. But what I find so scandalous about this whole enterprise is its blithe claim that the absence of a scholarly apparatus is *preferable* because, apparently, *non-ideological*.

I quote again from Hutchins’s Preface: “We believe that the reduction of the citizen to an object of propaganda, private and public, is one of the greatest dangers to democracy. . . . The reiteration of slogans, the distortion of the news, the great storm of propaganda that beats upon the citizen twenty-four hours a day all his life long mean either that democracy must fall a prey to the loudest and most persistent propagandists or that the people must save themselves by strengthening their minds so that they can appraise the issues for themselves.”<sup>42</sup> And again, “The Advisory Board recommended that no scholarly apparatus should be included in the set. No ‘introductions’ giving the Editors’ views of the authors

should appear. The books should speak for themselves, and the reader should decide for himself.”<sup>43</sup> *Angel to Love; Man to World*.

I want now to turn to another crucial text of the same year, 1952, a work not included in Hutchins and Adler’s Great Books series, but one that I myself consider a foundational mid-century American text for the making of the hero—and the theorization of fame and greatness— through an effectively placed, media-wise sound-bite: the book is E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*.

You will recall that in White’s tale Wilbur, the innocent, unworldly pig, is threatened by a “plot”<sup>44</sup> to turn him into smoked bacon and ham. “There’s a regular conspiracy around here to kill you at Christmastime,” an old sheep tells him, complacently. “Everybody is in on the plot”—the farmer, the hired hand, and, unkindest cut of all, the allegorically named John Arable, whose daughter Fern was Wilbur’s first foster-mother, and who is himself now—according to the old sheep—about to arrive, shotgun in hand, to slaughter Wilbur the pig in time for the holidays.

As we shall see, Wilbur’s story is a classic fable of nature and culture, or of the transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic. The dyadic, prefallen, and pre-oedipal world inhabited by Wilbur and Fern Arable, in which the infant Wilbur is fed with a bottle like a human baby and wheeled about in a baby carriage, is disrupted by farmer Arable’s decision that ‘Wilbur is not a baby any longer and he has got to be sold.’ The purchaser, a near-neighbor and relation, is John Arable’s brother-in-law, Homer Zuckerman.

Nature and Homer were, he found, the same, says Pope of the poet of the *Georgics*, but for Wilbur the move down the road from Arable’s farm to that of his brother-in-law *Homer*, is precisely a move from nature to culture.

With the threat of impending death, Wilbur is translated into a far more dangerous—but also potentially more heroic—world of language: a world, in fact, in which philology does produce a politics of mimesis. For it is in Uncle Homer’s barn that he meets Charlotte the spider, whose instincts for publicity—and understanding of the way signification follows the sign—will be his salvation. Charlotte has a plan.

“Some Pig!” she writes neatly, in block letters, in the middle of her web, to be discovered in the morning by the hired hand. “Some Pig!” The word spreads quickly.

“Edith, something has happened,” farmer Zuckerman reports to his wife “in a weak voice.” “I think you had best be told that we have a very unusual pig.”

A look of complete bewilderment came over Mrs. Zuckerman’s face.

“Homer Zuckerman, what in the world are you talking about?” she said.

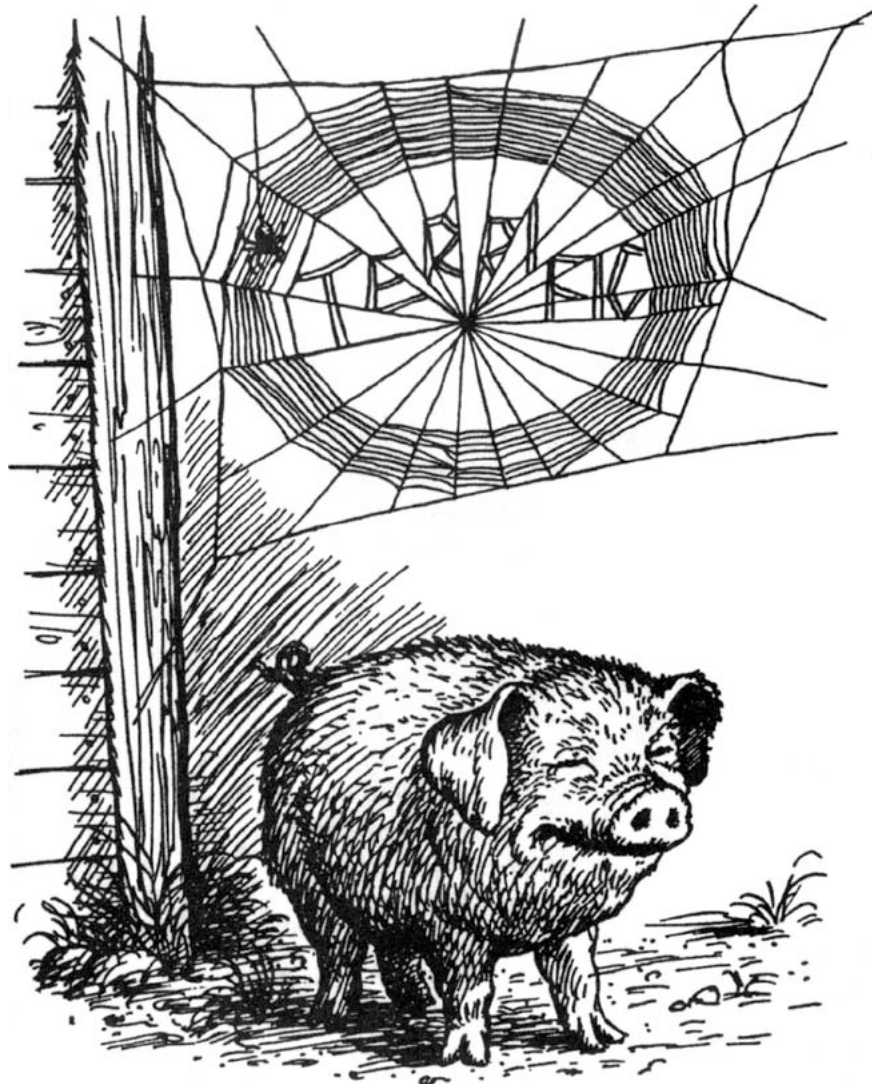
“This is a very serious thing, Edith,” he replied. “Our pig is completely out of the ordinary.”

“What’s unusual about the pig?” asked Mrs. Zuckerman....

“Well, I don’t really know yet,” said Mr. Zuckerman. “But we have received a sign. . . . [R]ight spang in the middle of the web were the words, ‘Some Pig.’ . . . A miracle has happened and a sign has occurred here on earth, right on our farm, and we have no ordinary pig.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Zuckerman, “it seems to me you’re a little off. It seems to me we have no ordinary spider:”

“Oh, no,” said Zuckerman. “It’s the pig that’s unusual. It says so, right there in the middle of the web.”<sup>45</sup>



Wilbur the pig in E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*, illustrations by Garth Williams.



Such is the power of publicity. “Some Pig” is, of course superbly chosen as an epithet of praise, since it could mean anything, and shortly does. “You know,” muses Mr. Zuckerman this time in “an important voice,” “I’ve thought all along that that pig of ours was an extra good one. He’s a solid pig. That pig is as solid as they come.”<sup>46</sup> “He’s quite a pig,” says Lurvy the hired hand. “I’ve always noticed that pig.” “He’s as smooth as they come. He’s some pig.” In days, the rumor has spread through the county and “everybody knew that the Zuckermans had a wondrous pig.”

Philology enters the story explicitly through the quest for new signs, new slogans, since “Some Pig!,” though a good, all-purpose characterization, soon begins to seem stale, and other suggestions are sought from the barnyard animals. What should appear next written in the web? “Pig supreme” is rejected as too culinary in association—“It sounds like a rich dessert,” says Charlotte—but “terrific” will do, even though Wilbur protests that he’s *not* terrific. “That doesn’t make a particle of difference,” replies Charlotte, “Not a particle. People believe almost anything they see in print. Does anybody here know how to spell ‘terrific’?”

But the chief agent of philological instrumentality is the barn’s resident research assistant, Templeton the Rat, whose nocturnal foraging in the local dump produces scraps of paper, advertisements torn from old magazines, that will provide Charlotte with something to copy. Not every piece of research pays off. “Crunchy” (from a magazine ad) and “Pre-Shrunk” (from a shirt label) are both discarded as inappropriate to a discourse of fame and transcendence. “Crunchy,” says Charlotte, is “just the wrong idea. Couldn’t be worse. . . . We must advertise Wilbur’s noble qualities, not his tastiness.” But a package of soap flakes in the woodshed produces a winner: “With New Radiant Action.”

“What does it mean?” asked Charlotte, who had never used any soap flakes in her life.

“How should I know?” said Templeton. “You asked for words and I brought them. I suppose the next thing you’ll want me to fetch is a dictionary.”

Together they contemplate the soap ad, and then they send for Wilbur and put him through his paces. This is the mimesis test. “Run around!” commanded Charlotte, “I want to see you in action, to see if you are radiant.” After a series of gallops, jumps, and back-flips, the brain trust of the spider and the rat decide that, if Wilbur is not exactly radiant, he’s close enough.

“Actually,” said Wilbur, “I *feel* radiant.” “Do you?” said Charlotte, looking at him with affection, “Well, you’re a good little pig, and radiant you shall be. I’m in this thing pretty deep now—I might as well go the limit.”<sup>47</sup>

In sequence, then, the web declares Wilbur to be “Some Pig!” “Terrific,” “Radiant,” and finally, “Humble,” a word Templeton finds on a scrap of folded newspaper, and which Charlotte glosses for him: “‘Humble’ has two meanings. It means ‘not proud’ and it means ‘near the ground.’ That’s Wilbur all over. He’s not proud and he’s near the ground.”

Charlotte the spider, indeed, is the book’s learned philologist, the erudite definer of terms like “gullible,” “sedentary,” “untenable,” and “versatile,” a scholar whose Latin is as good as her English. She describes her egg sac as her *magnum opus*, explaining to Wilbur, whose Latin is weak, that a magnum opus is a great work. (Neither Wilbur nor Charlotte seem to speak Pig-Latin, the obvious lingua franca for the great conversation in the barnyard.) And as this concept of a great work implies, Charlotte is also, ultimately, the book’s figure of humanist aesthetic pathos, a self-described writer for whom “Humble” is “the last word I shall ever write,” whose own death displaces Wilbur’s and preserves him as a hero, as “Zuckerman’s Famous Pig.”

We noted a moment ago that the name of Wilbur’s new owner, Homer Zuckerman, introduced into this little fable a tonic note of culture and, indeed, of both the Great Books and the paternal Law. That this Homeric nomination is not entirely trivial—that I am not entirely wasting your time with these onomastic skirmishes—may be discerned by considering again the identity of the media agent in Wilbur’s story, the resourceful Charlotte, a spider with a magic web.

For Charlotte, this uncanny precursor of the modern “spin-doctor,” the media-manipulator for political figures, is also, classically, a Penelope, weaving and unweaving her web, creating headlines that guarantee Wilbur not only his fifteen minutes of fame but also his life.

“The dissimulation of the woven texture can in any case take centuries to undo its web; a web that envelops a web, undoing the web for centuries.” This is Derrida at the beginning of “Plato’s Pharmacy,” an essay that also begins with philological explorations, with the multiple meanings of *histos*, which means at once *mast*, *loom*, *woven cloth*, and *spider’s web*. Both mast and loom; that is, both the story of Odysseus (bound to the mast, hearing the Sirens) and the story of Penelope (weaving and unweaving her web).<sup>48</sup> (Is it an accident that this is also the design of Auerbach’s *Mimesis*—from “Odysseus’ Scar” to Mrs. Ramsay’s “Brown Stocking”? A coincidence, certainly; but perhaps not altogether an accident.)

Recall, if you will, the completely disregarded observation of Mrs. Zuckerman, on hearing the news of the miraculous web, that what they had was “no ordinary *spider*,” not, as her husband claimed, “no ordinary pig.” Oh no, he assured her; the spider was quite ordinary, a common gray spider. It was the pig who was remarkable, terrific, radiant. It said so quite clearly in the web. The text is indeed dissimulated behind the self-evidence of its message.

Ever since the spider had befriended him, [Wilbur] had done his best to live up to his reputation. When Charlotte's web said SOME PIG, Wilbur had tried hard to look like some pig. When Charlotte's web said TERRIFIC, Wilbur had tried to look terrific. And now that the web said RADIANT, he did everything possible to make himself glow.

It is not easy to look radiant, but Wilbur threw himself into it with a will.<sup>49</sup>

"Ladeez and gentlemen," blared the loud speaker at the County Fair, "we now present Mr. Homer L. Zuckerman's distinguished pig. The fame of this unique animal has spread to the far corners of the earth. . . ." "In the words of the spider's web, ladies and gentlemen, this is some pig." "This magnificent animal," continued the loudspeaker, "is truly terrific." "Note the general radiance of this animal! Then remember the day when the word 'radiant' appeared clearly on the web. Whence came this mysterious writing? Not from the spider, we can rest assured of that. Spiders are very clever at weaving their webs, but needless to say spiders cannot write."<sup>50</sup>

Now, if Charlotte is a humanist, she is also a feminist. Wilbur naively but unerringly recognizes the physical stigmata of feminism, as described in the popular magazines of today. "You have awfully hairy legs," he says to her soon after they meet.<sup>51</sup> Feminist theologian Mary Daly has claimed Charlotte as a fellow Spinster, tracing her ancestry from Arachne and the Spider Woman of Navaho myth, and lamenting the apparent role of the mythic female spider, however powerful, as merely the accomplice and the public relations agent of the male hero's fame

Daly's chief target here, and one worth attacking, is Joseph Campbell, the arch-archetypalist who is also the source for her account of the Spider Woman myth. "Spider Woman with her web can control the movements of the Sun," writes Campbell. "The hero who has come under the protection of the Cosmic Mother cannot be harmed."<sup>52</sup> Mary Daly would prefer a more female-affirmative fable. "Is Wilbur worth it?" she asks. And "what if the aided pig had been Wilma or Wilhelmina?"<sup>53</sup> For her, Spinsters, taking their cue from "the complex and fascinating web of the spider," can spin ideas about such interconnected symbols as the maze, the labyrinth, the spiral, the hole as mystic center . . . to weave and unweave, dis-covering hidden threads of connectedness.<sup>54</sup>

Reference to the figure of the female spider (who weaves and unweaves; who mates and kills) appears over and over again, symptomatically, in stories of the making of cultural heroes, from Freud's essay on "Femininity" to *The Wizard of Oz* to Darwin to *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*. Despite Joseph Campbell, it is clear that the spider's transgressive and sexualized power, and, indeed, her relationship to the psychoanalytic figure of the phallic woman, renders her potentially threatening as well as nurturant. The cultural permutations of the Spider Woman myth in

the twentieth century have been manifold, from individual erotic power (the vamp of German expressionism and film noir) to communal social healing (the AIDS quilt). Shakespeareans will recognize the uncanny and ambivalent power of magic in the web, and of the spider in the cup. In Genet's *Balcony*, the powerful fantasmatic Queen, who never appears, is described as "embroidering and not embroidering," "embroidering an invisible" (and an "interminable") "handkerchief." In Manuel Puig's novel *The Kiss of the Spider-Woman*, the "spider woman" is a powerful, transgendered storyteller, an imprisoned gay man who sometimes calls himself a woman, and who "embroiders" (the word is literally used) the movie plots which are his own version of Penelope's web.

But my point here is that Charlotte's web, like the prisoner Molina's, frames the sign: produces an object of desire, Wilbur, who seems to stand free of all the apparatus that produces him, like the Wizard of Oz, like the apparently free-standing Great Books that are, similarly, showcased as self-evidently great, de-contextualized and made into icons. Wilbur—TEIRRIC, RADIANT, AND HUMBLE—emerges as something like the ideal political candidate, with only invisible strings attached.

Wilbur himself, we might note, makes one vain attempt to spin a web, to become himself the self-sufficient spider-artist (albeit with string attached), under Charlotte's indulgent direction, climbing to the top of a manure pile with a string tied to his tail. "You can't spin a web, Wilbur," counseled Charlotte after this sorry adventure, "and I advise you to put the idea out of your mind. You lack two things needed for spinning a web.... You lack a set of spinnerets, and you lack know-how." Here again nature and culture, or biology and destiny, are linked together. Pigs, it seems, can't fly.

Or can they?

For a generation brought up on *Charlotte's Web*—for my generation—the intuition that Wilbur resembled a political candidate, and, in a way, the ideal political candidate, was literalized in one glorious gesture by Jerry Rubin and the Yippies. At the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968 the Yippies—the Youth International Party—nominated a pig for president, with the campaign pledge "They nominate a president and he eats the people. We nominate a president and the people eat him."<sup>55</sup> Perhaps significantly, in the context of the rhetoric of nostalgia and the politics of mimesis, this pig had a classical name: "Pigasus." Who says that pigs can't fly? ("The time has come, The Walrus said /To talk of many things,/Of shoes—and ships—and sealing wax—/And cabbages and kings,/And why the sea is boiling hot,/And whether pigs have wings.")

The tangled web of philology and mimesis was actualized in the media-conscious sixties through a metonymic figure, that of the "network," an electronic web. As in all those old movies and newsreels, in which the concentric circles of radio signals were seen to spread out across the country in a widening ripple effect, the spin-doctors of media culture dissimulated their messages.

“*We have to be very clear on this point,*” wrote Richard Nixon’s speechwriter Raymond Price, “*that the response is to the image, not the man. . . . It’s not what’s there that counts; it’s what’s projected.*” “Carrying it one step further,” Price continued, “it’s not what *he* projects but rather what the voter receives. It’s not the man we have to change, but rather the *received impression*. And this impression often depends more on the medium and its use than it does on the candidate himself.”<sup>56</sup>

As we have just seen in the case of Wilbur.

To us this is no longer a surprise. The use of advertising in political campaigns is by now a commonplace; the *Boston Globe*, for example, currently features a regular column called “Advertising Watch” in which campaign commercials are described, named (each has a title, like that of a short subject or a feature film) and analyzed for truth and political effectiveness. The work of Michael Rogin, among others, has described “Ronald Reagan, the Movie” as a commodified, empty fiction. But there was a time when political advertising, and the involvement of ad men in political campaigns, was not only surprising but transgressive—and, if you were an ad man, both exciting and lucrative.

Journalist Joe McGinniss himself became a “nonfiction star of the first rank”—according to the bio-blurb on his book—when he wrote *The Selling of the President*, the book that exposed to the general reading public “the marketing of political candidates as if they were consumer products,” “selling Hubert Humphrey to America like so much toothpaste or detergent.”<sup>57</sup> Or, again, remembering the radiant Wilbur, like soap flakes. McGinniss chronicled in fascinated—and fascinating—detail the machinations of men like Raymond Price, Roger Ailes, Leonard Garment, and Frank Shakespeare in the packaging of Richard Nixon. (For me there is a certain pleasure even in the accident of these names: Price, Garment, Shakespeare, the very allegorical structure of hero-making.)

The element of “Some Pig” in the Nixon success story is considerable; the back-room boys’ work on Nixon’s “personality problems,” on his “lack of humor,” on his need to concoct some “memorable phrases to use in wrapping up certain points,”<sup>58</sup> and so on. Sound bites are very much at issue, as are their visual counterparts, “photo opportunities.” At the end of a staged television panel discussion—one of a number scheduled coast to coast throughout the campaign—“the audience charged from the bleachers, as instructed. They swarmed around Richard Nixon so that the last thing the viewer at home saw was Nixon in the middle of this big crowd of people, who all thought he was great.”<sup>59</sup>

Once again, as with the words in Charlotte’s web, as with Angel to Love and Man to World, let us focus on the framing of the sign.

Advertising executive Harry Treleven, a mastermind of Nixon’s first successful campaign, submitted a passionate memo explaining “Why Richard Nixon Should Utilize Magazine Advertising in the State of New Hampshire Primary.”

“This writer believes firmly that the chances of overcoming Richard Nixon’s cold image and the chances of making him loved and making him glamorous via commercial exposure on television (where admittedly he has not been at his best) are far less than the chances of *making* him loved and *making* him glamorous via saturation exposure of artfully conceived and produced four-color, full-page (or double spread) magazine advertisements. . . . Are women going to vote for a Richard Nixon they currently believe to be cold, unloving, unglamorous? No. . . . But rich, warm advertising in a woman’s own medium, the service magazine, next to her cake mixes and her lipstick advertisements will go a long way, I believe, toward making Mr. Nixon acceptable to female viewers. . . . Warm, human, four-color magazine illustrations depicting Dick Nixon the family man, perhaps even surrounded by his beautiful family, will allow the women of America, and, initially, the women of New Hampshire, to identify with him, and his home life. . . . This warm visual image . . . will sell his qualifications to voters who can study the advertisement leisurely in their home.”<sup>60</sup> Here is that American “home” again, full of “warm, human, four-color . . . illustrations.” Run home Dick. (Even real estate agents now sell “homes” rather than “houses”—at least in ads targeted to the middleclass “homeowner.” This too, I think, is part of the contemporary rhetoric of nostalgia.)

“It’s not what’s there that counts, it’s what’s projected,” wrote Raymond Price about candidate Nixon. This is a pronouncement strikingly similar to a remark by rock star George Michael: “It’s not something extra that makes a superstar,” opined Michael, “it’s something missing.”

For me the question is really not one of elegiac loss, but of the political uses of nostalgia. Are great books most in need of being called “great” when their link with the culture is most tenuous? Has political life as we commonly understand it—from Wilbur to Nixon to Reagan and Bush and Clinton—become an arena in which what is *imitated* is mimesis? (Bush pretending that he buys his socks at JC Penneys in an attempt to stimulate the economy? Reagan “remembering” wartime events that he saw, or acted, in Hollywood B-pictures? Bill Clinton gaining political momentum from a photograph of him as a young boy shaking the hand of JFK, as if the ghost of the slain president were literally “electing” or choosing his successor?) Is “greatness” largely or entirely an effect—and if so, what kind of effect? A stage effect, a psychoanalytic effect—or an effect of nostalgia? It’s not something extra, but something missing.

What is at issue is overcompensation, and an anxious fantasy of wholeness. As with Oz the Great and Terrible; as with Genet’s Chief of Police and his fantasy of the giant phallus. Mortimer Adler, updating his list of “Great Books, Past and Present” in 1988 lists 36 new white male authors who published between 1900 and 1945, and an additional 18 authors—also all male and all white—for the period 1945 to the present. But he is worried about his capacity to see clearly: “Could it be that my nineteenth-century mentality . . . blind[s] me to the merit of

work that represents the artistic and intellectual culture of the last forty or so years?”<sup>61</sup> Adler’s concern is that he may fail to identify some of the great works; but he is entirely convinced, not only that they are there to be found, but that “greatness” can be pinpointed, however tautologous the test. “If we say that a good book is a book that is worth reading carefully once, and that a better book than that—a great book—is one that is worth reading carefully a second or third time, then the greatest books are those worth reading over and over again—endlessly.” And, he implies, we can make a list.

Wilbur, Oz, the Great Books, the Great Tradition. Greatness is an effect of decontextualization, of the decontextualizing of the sign—and of a fantasy of control, a fantasy of the *sujet supposé savoir*, of a powerful agency, divine or other. “If you build it, he will come.” “A miracle has happened and a sign has occurred here on earth, right on our farm, and we have no ordinary pig.” Someone knows; someone—someone *else*—is in control. The political logic of this is as disturbing as its psychology. It’s a lesson that has not been lost on contemporary political “spinmeisters” from Reagan’s Peggy Noonan to Bush’s Lee Atwater to Clinton’s technocratic masters of the Web.

“Good” books, like “competent” politicians, are in our inflated culture somehow not good enough. From the canon debate to the political arena, “greatness” has become an increasingly problematic standard. If we have greatness thrust upon us in either sphere, we should recognize it as an ideological category, a redundancy effect, a “recognition factor,” as the pundits say. It seems clear that anxieties about greatness in literature are closely tied to anxieties about national, political, and cultural greatness, and that the more anxious the government, the more pressure is placed upon the humanities to textualize and naturalize the category of the “great.” This is no reason to discard such a category entirely’ even if it were possible to do so. But it is a good reason to be wary, and to pay some attention to that man behind the curtain—or, if anyone tries to sell you one, to be cautious about lionizing “some pig”—however terrific, radiant, and humble—in a poke.

#### NOTES

1. Seth Mydans, “A Great Wall, Alas, of T-Shirts and Baseball Caps,” *The New York Times*, July 9, 1997, p. A4. See also, Arthur N. Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

2. B. Drummond Ayres, Jr. “Millions of Elvis Sightings Certain in ‘93.” *The New York Times*, January 11, 1992, p. 6.

3. Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, 5.2.545–46; 55. *The Arden Shakespeare*, ed. Richard David (London: Methuen, 1968).

4. Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* 3.1.214–16. *The Arden Shakespeare*, ed. J.W. Lever (London and New York: Methuen, 1987).

5. Shakespeare, Hamlet 3.1.190. *The Arden Shakespeare*, ed. Harold Jenkins (London and New York: Routledge, 1982).
6. *Hamlet* 4.4.52-56.
7. Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* 2.5.145-46. *The Arden Shakespeare*, ed. J.M. Lothian and T.W. Craik (London: Methuen, 1975).
8. Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale* 4.4.740-2. (The Clown is here describing the rogue Autolycus dressed in Prince Florizel's clothes.)
9. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1985; orig. pub. 1813), 96. The phrase is Elizabeth Bennet's; she is wondering, early in the novel, "how to suppose that she could be an object of admiration to so great a man." p. 96.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 278.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 194.
12. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Uses of Great Men," in *Representative Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903).
13. L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), p. 127.
14. Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus," in *Ecrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W.W Norton, 1977), p. 288.
15. Jean Genet, *The Balcony*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 92.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
19. Baum, p. 184.
20. James Reston, Jr., *Collision at Home Plate: The Lives of Pete Rose and Bart Giamatti* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 308.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 312.
22. Dave Anderson, "Pardon Rose, and Put Him in Hall." Reprinted in *The Miami Herald*, January 5, 1992, p. 3C. The "Hall of Fame" whose members are often nominated by special interest or chosen by vote is another distinctive institution of this century (though the Pageant of the Nine Worthies, like Raphael's School of Athens, attests to a much earlier interest in the canonization of great men). Since the founding of the original Hall of Fame at the Bronx campus of New York University in 1900, the concept has proliferated. The marble portico of the Bronx Hall celebrates great Americans in politics, invention, and the arts from Washington and Franklin to Emerson and Hawthorne to Audubon and Samuel F.B. Morse. Subsequent Halls have included the following, all with edifices to commemorate the honorands: the International Boxing Hall of Fame, Teddy Bear Hall of Fame (Teddy Bear Museum, Stratford-Upon-Avon), Accounting Hall of Fame (Ohio State University, Columbus), Pro Football Hall of Fame, Hockey Hall of Fame, Basketball Hall of Fame, Women of Nebraska Hall of Fame, National Cowboy Hall of Fame (Oklahoma City), International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame, International Space Hall of Fame (Alamogordo, N.M.) and numerous other Halls, including several more devoted to sports heroes and to the dignitaries, especially, of the Southern states.
23. A. Bartlett Giamatti, *Take Tirne for Paradise: Americans and Their Games* (New York: Summit Books, 1989), p. 101.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*



32. Ibid., p. 95.
33. Ibid., p. 92.
34. Ibid., p. 27.
35. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1957), p. 492.
36. Erich Auerbach, "Philology and Weltliteratur," trans. M. and E.W. Said, *Centennial Review*, 13 (Winter 1969), p. 17. "Culture often has to do with an aggressive sense of nation, home, community, and belonging." Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 12.
37. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 491.
38. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, p. 8.
39. Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Great Conversation*, in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer J. Adler, 54 volumes (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica), p. xvii.
40. Ibid., p. xvi.
41. Ibid., p. xiii.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., p. xxv.
44. E.B. White, *Charlotte's Web* (New York: HarperCollins, 1952), p. 49.
45. Ibid., p. 80.
46. Ibid., pp. 81–82.
47. Ibid., p. 101.
48. Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 63.
49. White, *Charlotte's Web*, p. 114.
50. Ibid., pp. 157–58.
51. Ibid., p. 55.
52. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Bollingen, 1949; 1968), p. 71. Campbell's reading of the place of "woman" in the heroic scheme of things can be deduced from the listing under that heading in the index: "symbolism in hero's adventures; as goddess; as temptress; Cosmic Woman; as hero's prize; see also mother."
53. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 399.
54. Ibid., p. 400.
55. Abbie Hoffman, *Soon to be a Major Motion Picture* (New York: Perigee Books, 1980), p. 144.
56. Joe McGinniss, *The Selling of the President* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988 [orig. pub. 1969]), pp. 193–94. Italics in the original.
57. Ibid., pp. xiv–xv.
58. Ibid., pp. 73–75.
59. Ibid., p. 72.
60. Ibid., pp. 218–19.
61. Mortimer J. Adler, *Reforming Education: The Opening of the American Mind*, ed. Geraldine Van Doren (New York: Collier Books, 1988), p. 350