Response

Jeremiah Reedy

I. Secular Religions

In 1976, the well-known philosopher and theologian Michael Novak was a Hubert Humphrey lecturer at Macalester College, and in the same year, his book *The Joy of Sports* was published.[1] In this work, Novak analyzed football, baseball, and basketball as secular religions. He called them our Holy Trinity. Imagine that you are an anthropologist from Mars flying over the United States in your spaceship, Novak says, and you notice in most large cities huge oval-shaped structures that are used once a week. When you enter one of these, you find sacred space where the profane are not allowed to walk. There is sacred time and what happens outside of it does not count. The fans (short for "fanatics") are very enthusiastic, which means there is a god in them. Ritual dances and ritual chants enliven the festivities. Sometimes a ritual meal precedes the sacred event itself, and ambrosial drinks are consumed. The whole thing is a battle between the forces of good and evil, an *agon* symbolizing the cosmic struggle presided over by the goddess Fortuna. Those fans who cannot be present at the sacred ceremony itself are at home in a part of the house set apart like a shrine where they are having visions on a box shaped like an altar over which there may be flowers and candles and, in Catholic homes, a crucifix. Nonbelievers are hushed up or driven away. For many, football nourishes a deep human hunger, a longing for perfection and symbolic meaning. They live from game to game; they worship the heroes it creates. For them, football is far from mere entertainment—that's what you have during the halftime. And one could go on and on.

In an earlier book, Novak analyzed politics in this way,[2] and one could easily do a similar sort of analysis on liberal arts education. We have our departments, which fight like denominations; our clergy, to which women have only recently been admitted; our hierarchy; our sacred scripture; etc. We think we know what the human problem is—it is ignorance, and some of

us have gone out full of missionary zeal to speak at meetings of Rotary clubs, Lions clubs, and women's study groups to bring the good news of liberal arts education to the pagans.

In her carefully argued and felicitously written paper, Professor Gamel has done for the study of literature what Novak did for football. "[L]iterature is a kind of religion," she says, "with its high priests . . . , novices . . . , congregations . . . , and heathens."[3] She has reminded us that the word canon was originally a religious term — texts, like saints, are canonized; they have been touched with divine grace. "[I]nterpreting Great Books is analogous to Talmudic scholars investigating the Torah"[4] because the canon constitutes a secular Bible. I think Professor Gamel is absolutely right to see the study of literature as a secular religion, and her analysis explains many things, for example why such strong emotions are involved. Lifelong commitments have been made, and nothing less than salvation itself is at stake. It has been said that there is only one thing worse than *odium theologicum*, namely *odium scholasticum*, the hatred that scholars have for each other. We can now see that the two hatreds are one and the same.

Professor Gamel has stated her case clearly, cogently, and without obfuscation or obnubilation, something for which I, at least, am very grateful; and she has called our attention to "non-Western authors" who use canonical works in strange and wondrous ways, something else for which I am grateful. I disagree with her, however, on what I call "thinking small" and on "focusing on differences rather than similarities." Also, I am puzzled by the charges of elitism. Most important, though, I cannot agree that the canon is an "imaginary entity" in any sense of the phrase or is an outmoded metaphor. I shall try, in fact, to show that Professor Gamel's argument deconstructs itself in the sense that by referring to some thirty canonical authors and works in the course of her talk, she undermines her thesis that the canon is a figment of our imaginations and an outmoded metaphor.

II. Cultural Literacy

Let me, however, present my own views on the Western canon first, something I was invited to do. I am going to talk about E. D. Hirsch's book *Cultural Literacy*,[5] which I consider the most important book on education to have appeared in a hundred years. Hirsch is a professor of English at the University of Virginia who gained fame first as a literary theorist and then as a student of literacy. Here is one of his examples that resonated with experiences I had as a graduate student at the University of Michigan. I had a number of friends from Australia whom I used to see socially. Among many things we had in common was a love of singing, and, of course, we used to sing that wonderful Aussie song "Waltzing Matilda." Here is how the first verse goes:

> Once a jolly swagman camped by a billy-bong,
> Under the shade of a kulibar tree,
> And he sang as he sat and waited for his billy-boil,
> "You'll come a'waltzing Matilda, with me."[6]

But what is this song all about? Like most Americans, I always thought it was about dancing with a girl named Matilda, but in Australia, a Matilda is a kind of knapsack, waltzing means walking, a swagman is a hobo, a billy-bong is a pond, a kulibar is a eucalyptus tree, and a billy is a can for making tea. This is a song about a hobo sitting under a tree by a pond waiting for his tea to boil. Hirsch uses "Waltzing Matilda" to show that anyone who knows English and some phonics can "read" the words of this song, but you can't understand it unless you know something about Australian culture.

Or take this little experiment Hirsch conducted. Two groups were given the following paragraph; one group was given the title to it; the other was not:

> The procedure is actually quite simple. First you arrange the items in different groups. Of course, one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do. If you have to go somewhere else due to lack of facilities that is the next step; otherwise you are pretty well set.[7]

Those who received the paragraph with the title could understand it and recognize sentences from it; the other group could not. The title is "Washing Clothes." The title enabled the first group to put it into context and, hence, make sense of it. Hirsch has discovered, or rather rediscovered, the importance of background knowledge for reading with understanding. I say "rediscovered" since this is something that has been known for millennia, but somehow we lost sight of it during the past twenty-five or thirty years as the educational establishment sought to teach skills without knowledge. The thesis of Hirsch's book is so obvious that he should not have had to write it, as he himself admits.

I have reduced Hirsch's claims to the following five propositions. (1) All writers must estimate what readers know and don't know. (By the way, this applies to speakers too.) (2) Writers explain what they think readers don't know; they don't explain what they think readers do know. Hence, in our culture when writers mention Jesus, they don't say "famous religious figure, founder of a movement called Christianity," and when one mentions Plato, one doesn't have to say "famous Greek philosopher of the fifth century B.C.E." On the other hand, if you mention Trimalchio, you have to identify him, as Professor Gamel did. (3) To read efficiently and with understanding, readers need to know most of what writers don't explain. (4) What writers explain and don't explain is an empirical question that can be answered empirically. Hence, (5) assuming with Hirsch that high-school graduates ought to be able to read newspapers, magazines, and books addressed to the general public, what one needs to know to read such texts can be discovered. This, in fact, is what Hirsch has done; hence the notorious list of 5,000 items that "literate Americans know."

III. The Canon

But what, you may ask, has cultural literacy to do with the Western canon, and why have I spent so much time on it? If you look through Hirsch's list, you will find the Great Books of the Western World and their authors. They are all there: Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Aquinas, Baudelaire, Cicero, Dante, Descartes, Kant, Sappho, George Sand, George Eliot, Tennyson, George

Bernard Shaw, Virginia Woolf. What this means is that to be literate in this culture you need to know something about the works and authors listed in the canon, and we are only talking about high-school level literacy. Note, too, that Hirsch's approach is descriptive, not prescriptive. He nowhere says, "This is what I think Americans should know," but always, "What every American needs to know" and "What literate Americans know." Hirsch discovered empirically the works that make up the canon and the fact that to read in our culture one needs to know at least something about them, and the more the better. There is a canon implicit in every culture, literate and nonliterate, and as long as the public likes lists, such as the Top Forty and lists of bestsellers, scholars will draw up canons. I favor a descriptive canon and one that is multicultural, which is what you will inevitably have in a multicultural society, but in a free country anyone can do as the librarians of Alexandria did during the Hellenistic Age, as Quintilian did, and as Harold Bloom and hundreds of others have done in modern times — draw up a list of works that he or she thinks everyone should read and the schools should teach.

And in fact, I think such canons are of great value to students. Suppose a student comes to me and asks, "What do I need to know to understand and participate in the Great Conversation, as Robert Hutchins called it?" I can refer him or her to the list of Great Books and say, "These are the authors and these are the works scholars are reading, discussing, quoting, and referring to. To understand the dialogue you should read them." Let me say, too, that the word "cultural" in the phrase "cultural literacy" is actually redundant. To be literate is always to be literate in a specific culture or two or three, and the same is true of being educated. Hence anyone who is opposed to cultural literacy is opposed to literacy.

To illustrate all of this, I have done what you could call an "E. D. Hirsch job" on Professor Gamel's paper. She was asked to direct her talk to an audience of bright undergraduates. She assumes that such an audience knows who Homer is and who Virginia Woolf is, also who Shakespeare, Dante, T. S. Eliot, Voltaire, Cervantes, Vergil, James Joyce, Sophocles, Euripides, Plato, Tertullian, Horace, Milton, Racine, Marlowe, Ovid, Toni Morrison, and Juvenal are. She also assumes we are acquainted

with the following works: *King Lear*, *The Aeneid*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, *Antigone*, *Medea*, *The Bacchae*, *Beloved*, *The Symposium*, and the Torah. She also mentions without explanation Afrocentrists, new historicists, Marxists, and Deconstructors.

On the other hand, she tell us who Petronius is, who Hannibal is, who William Gibson is, what *Mimesis* is, what polyvocality means (thank goodness), what the *Satyricon* is, and who Pentheus, Dionysos, Agave, Kadmos, and Tiresias are. This is by no means a complete analysis, but I think you get the idea: the canon constitutes the background knowledge and the context one must have in our culture to understand serious books or serious lectures.

When I came to Macalester in 1968, there was a member of the Philosophy Department named Alston Chase. Alston became disgusted with the way things were going in those days — the radical student movement, marches, sit-ins, drugs, etc. I think it was Alston who used to wear a button that said "Students are revolting." In any case, he gave up a tenured position, left academia, moved to Montana, and became a sheep rancher. But he didn't abandon the intellectual life completely, because within a short time, he wrote a book about higher education based on something he had learned from the sheep.[8] You see, if you have had a flock of sheep for many years, and there is an unusually harsh winter, the flock will survive because they know where to go for food and shelter. But if your flock is wiped out by disease and you replace it and immediately there is a bad winter, it won't survive. Sheep and other animals have what is called "group memory," learned behavior that is passed down from generation to generation and is analogous to human culture. The humanities, Chase argued, represent the group memory of the human race, and in the West, those memories are contained in the works of the canon. If these works cease to be studied and taught and known, our tradition, as we have known it, will die. It is that simple. This would be an unmitigated disaster for the human race, as I will try to show, yet this is apparently what is sought by the canon-busters and nihilists of the "School of Resentment," as Harold Bloom calls them.[9]

IV. Democratization

A couple of years ago during a visit to the Twin Cities, the philosopher Christina Sommers explained what she calls "Parisian determinism." It holds that whatever they are discussing in Paris now, we will be discussing in five years. And guess what the "in" topic in the salons, cafés, and classrooms of Paris is these days? Not poststructuralism, nor neostructuralism, nor deconstruction, nor semiotics, nor new historicism, nor even postmodernism. It is the founding fathers of the United States! Jefferson, Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, and so forth. Some of you may, in fact, have seen the article in the November 23, 1994, issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled "A New Wave of French Thinkers."[10] Princeton University Press has begun publishing a series called "New French Thought" containing the works of young French thinkers who came to prominence in Europe in the 1980s. They represent "a pulling back from some of the excesses of postmodernism and poststructuralism," according to the *Chronicle.* The new wave of thinkers are preoccupied with liberal democracy — "how it developed and its nature and potential." Hence their interest in American history. They don't expect liberal democracy to "be replaced by something else." Three events, in particular, obliged this generation of French thinkers to reevaluate their allegiance to Marx, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Freud, Foucault, and Derrida, namely Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, the murder of millions by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and the collapse of communism in 1989. American radical intellectuals, the *Chronicle* observes, have thus far "avoided this reappraisal."

Democratization was mentioned by Professor Gamel as one of three major historical processes operating in the world today. As more and more nations adopt democracy and as more and more scholars attempt to understand how it evolved and how to make it work, they will inevitably be drawn back from the founding fathers to Locke and Machiavelli, to Aquinas and Augustine, to Plato and Aristotle, and to the invention of democracy in ancient Athens. Thus, I expect the philosophical works of the Western canon to be widely read in the global culture as time goes on. As for the literary works, Harold Bloom

and Jan Gorak may be right — English departments are doomed.[11]

V. Science, Human Rights

Besides democracy, there are two other products of the Western philosophical tradition that we should be proud of and very grateful for. The one does not require promotion—it has spread everywhere and has been adopted by every society that has encountered it. "Its propositions and claims are translatable without loss of efficacy into any culture and any milieu," as Ernest Gellner says.[12] It is "cumulative and astonishingly consensual."[13] It constitutes "real, culture-transcending knowledge."[14] It and its offspring, technology, are transforming the human condition. I am speaking, of course, of science.

The other product of Western thought is one we should be promoting with all the energy and resources we can muster. I am thinking now of the doctrine of human rights. The evolution of democracy, science, and human rights can be traced in the books of the Western canon.

The doctrine of human rights as set forth in the United Nations' "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" is really quite simple. If there's anything we can be absolutely certain of regarding humans, it is that an infant, if it does not receive proper nourishment and nurturing, will die. Likewise, if a person is abused, tortured, forced to work for nothing, or denied freedom, equality, education, and a chance to seek happiness, he or she will not find fulfillment in life. It is good for everyone to have their fundamental needs met, and it is bad for them not to have them met. This is the meaning of "good" and "bad," and human rights are nothing but fundamental human needs.[15] This doctrine, which is the glory of the Western tradition, can be traced back through Locke and Aquinas to the Stoics, Aristotle, Plato, and, ultimately, to the Logos of Heraclitus.

There have been two great international conferences on human rights in the past three years, one in Vienna in 1993 and one in China in 1995. The headlines after the Vienna conference proclaimed that "[w]omen were the biggest winners of the World Human Rights Conference,"[16] and last summer as women from Tibet sang "We Shall Overcome" in English, the battle cry

was "Human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights." I was especially pleased to read that the Beijing conference in its last official act affirmed that "women's rights should supersede national traditions." This was called by the *New York Times* the "most far-reaching stance on human rights ever taken at a United Nations gathering."[17] Women have more to gain than any other group from the doctrine of human rights. We should never forget that, among other abuses, 5,000 girls are mutilated each day in cultures that practice so-called female circumcision. The doctrine of human rights provides us with grounds for condemning such practices, but such a doctrine can only be based on and defended by a philosophy that recognizes our common humanity, that focuses on the similarities found in all cultures and not on the differences, and that has a moderately optimistic epistemology, all of which the School of Resentment not only lacks but also opposes with the full force of its rhetoric.

My thesis, then, is that because of democratization, science, and the doctrine of human rights, the philosophical and scientific works of the Western canon have a crucial role to play in the emerging world culture, and I am confident that they will do so.

I want now to comment briefly on three points made by Professor Gamel. The first I will call "the practice of thinking small;" the second, "the practice of emphasizing differences rather than commonalities;" and the third, "elitism." Then I will conclude with an insight I had while I was working on this paper, one I found absolutely shocking and which you may also find so.

VI. Three Common Errors

I am frankly puzzled by those who oppose "totalizing schemes," as Professor Gamel calls them. Most scholars think that the more comprehensive a theory is, the better it is. This is why we admire the Big Bang theory and the theory of evolution, the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics; this is why some of us admire arguments for the existence of God based on the *eros* of the mind, i.e., the human mind's longing to know the infinite. Rather than advise students to think small, I would urge them to think big, to aim high, to fashion theories that have the widest

possible scope. Try to understand and explain everything. Seek what is universal and timeless and absolute. Don't be satisfied with anything less. Be the first to devise a theory of everything. Better yet, devise a theory like the doctrine of human rights that will benefit the whole human race.

Professor Gamel suspects that the metaphors that will prove most appropriate in the future will be those that focus on difference rather than unity and on particularity rather than universality, all the while assuming that there will be a global culture! I would urge just the opposite: every minute spent discussing differences and diversity should be balanced with a minute spent discussing our common humanity. How will we ever build communities, large or small, if we focus only on differences? We should remember always that we are all brothers and sisters; that we share a common human nature; that we have common needs, common rights, and common aspirations; and that what unites us is infinitely more important than what separates us. As I say this, however, I am thinking that in order for us to unite, what the human race really needs is something like a threat of invasion from outer space for, as Montaigne said, "Necessity draws people together and only necessity."

Professor Gamel seems to disapprove of elites, and again I am frankly puzzled by the charge of elitism we hear so often these days. What is surprising about the fact that Petronius wrote for those who could read and who had the leisure to do so? Would anyone expect otherwise? Of course, the fact is that Roman authors of the first century of our era frequently published their works by reading them at what were called *recitationes*—something like the readings our own Hungry Mind Bookstore sponsors. Some of these readings were held at the emperor's court, that is true, but some were in public places and the general public was invited. Obviously, those who were well educated enjoyed and appreciated the reading more than those who were less well educated.

Professor Gamel observes that the Internet is used by a "tiny elite." Again, is this surprising? I am happy to report, though, that St. Paul, Minnesota, plans to have computers available in all its public libraries for anyone who wants to get on the Internet, and the government is contemplating the same thing in post offices. I fear, however, that classes are an inevitable aspect of

the human condition, and it is odd, to put it mildly, to hear academic elites constantly leveling the charge of elitism against others.

VII. Conclusion

Finally, the thought that shocked even me, a classicist. Harold Bloom thinks that everything of value in Freud was already present in Shakespeare 400 years ago along with a critique of it.[18] But Allan Bloom has outdone him. He thinks that Plato's psychology is, in some respects, more profound than modern psychology.[19] Allan Bloom's teacher, Leo Strauss, thought that the political science of Plato and Aristotle was superior to modern political thought. Could it be that, although there has clearly been progress in the natural sciences, there has been little or none in the humanities and the social sciences although the succession of schools of thought (structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, etc.) might lead one to think there has been a real increase in knowledge?[20] Alasdair MacIntyre, called the greatest historian of ethics who ever lived, argues that Aristotelian ethics is rationally superior to all other traditions of moral inquiry.[21] Is there a historian alive today who would claim that modern historians are writing better histories than Thucydides? Is there a literary critic alive today who would claim that tragedies superior to those of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides have been written in modern times? As far as philosophy of education is concerned, in my humble opinion, the philosophy of the Greeks, the Romans, and that of the Medieval and Renaissance periods is more realistic and more effective than the naïve, romantic philosophy that stems from Rousseau and Dewey and is regnant in all too many schools today. There are distinguished thinkers such as Kathleen Wilkes, Henry Veatch, and Mortimer Adler who defend Aristotelian epistemology and metaphysics over and against contemporary theories of knowledge and ontology. And what should we say of the Bible compared to modern religious and theological works? Could it be that there is, in reality, more wisdom in these ancient canonical works than in the works of our contemporaries? Not only could this be; there is no shortage of scholars prepared to argue that this is indeed the case. If this is so, what a loss it would be, what a cata-

strophe it would be for the human race, as I've already said, if the anticanonists were to win the *Kulturkampf* and the canonical works I have been discussing ceased to be read, studied, and known. It would mean nothing less than a reversion to barbarism.

Notes

1. Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports: End Zones, Bases, Baskets, Balls, and the Consecration of the American Spirit* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

2. Michael Novak, *Choosing Our King: Powerful Symbols in Presidential Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1974).

3. Mary-Kay Gamel, "Genuine Corinthian Bronze: The 'Western Canon' in the Age of Global Culture," *Macalester International* 3 (Spring 1996): 89.

4. Ibid., 89.

5. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, with an appendix by E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Joseph Kett, and James Trefil, "What Literate Americans Know" (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

6. Ibid., 17.

7. Ibid., 40.

8. Alston Chase, *Group Memory: A Guide to College and Student Survival in the 1980s* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980).

9. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994): 527.

10. "A New Wave of French Thinkers," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 23 November 1994: sec. A, p. 7.

11. See Bloom, *The Western Canon*: 519; and Jan Gorak, *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea* (London: Athlone Press, 1991): 235 ff.

12. Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1992): 58.

13. Ibid., 59.

14. Ibid., 77.

15. John Wild, *Plato's Modern Enemies and the Theory of Natural Law* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953): 132; Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987): 287.

16. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 27 June 1993: sec. A, p. 5.

17. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 16 September 1995: sec. A, p. 1.

18. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon*: 25.

19. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*: 237.

20. Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion*: 46.

21. Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Press, 1990) and *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Press, 1984).