

Introduction: The Money or the Mine

“Milton!” cried Wordsworth, a little desperately, in 1802, “thou shouldst be living at this hour: England hath need of thee.” The England that made him look back to Milton had forfeited, not poetry, not great-souled men who could resist the pressures of the most contrary events, but something harder to describe: the “ancient English dower / Of inward happiness.” Many who teach literature in our own hour seem to feel the same forfeiture. In the past few years, a number of books and essays have been published lamenting the abandonment of traditional canons, the domination of English departments by the proponents of literary theories centered on sexuality and power, the rise of amorphous “cultural studies,” and the subsequent loss of literature itself as an ennobling discipline. Given the sense of loss that motivates these defenders of tradition, it is hardly surprising that they tend to have in common the stance of men looking back at a city still burning after its capture in the culture wars, a Troy whose great walls had seemed impregnable for generations.

In *Who Killed Homer? The Demise of Classical Education and the Recovery of Greek Wisdom* (1998), Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath show statistically that in the past thirty years, publications in classics about specialized topics, often with a postmodern emphasis, have ballooned, while actual enrollments in classical language courses have fallen with alarming speed. John Ellis argues in *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities* (1997) that the current situation is worse than previous ones because, for the first time, new appointees in faculty positions “are for the most part not literary-critical faddists who would normally jump to the next fad when it arrives but true believers in the race-gender-class issue who are not interested in literature” (212). R. V. Young, showing how postmodern literary theory has affected constitutional interpretation in *At War with the Word: Literary Theory and Liberal Education* (1999), writes that “a decline in higher education portends a general moral and spiritual malaise in the culture of a nation” (143).

Ellis’s title, in its allusion to *Paradise Lost*, makes the literature departments of a generation or so ago, when men and women loved the literature that they taught, seem Edenic in contrast to the polarized and suspicious departments of today. His book and the others have amply shown what has happened to education: they have exposed the proud leadership of transgression, the rhetoric of oppression and power and revenge, the ardent constituencies. Perhaps what is needed now is not so much the first two books of *Paradise Lost*, which also deal with these things, as a reminder of the perspectives of Book III. When He spies Satan on his way to tempt Adam and Eve, “Coasting the wall of Heaven on this side Night / In the dun air sublime” (71-72), the Father not only foresees the fallen angel’s complete success at deconstructing the prohibition on the Tree of Knowledge, but calls the still-unfallen Adam “ingrate” for succumbing, when he was “Sufficient to have stood, but free to fall.” Already, however, before the fall that the Father cannot prevent without taking man’s freedom, the Son prepares a countermeasure: He offers to take on the penalty that Adam incurs and to become “a sacrifice / Glad to be offered” (270-71).

By offering to confine his immortality within mortality, to undergo death, the Son transforms the abyss of defeat. Milton's insight is Christian, without question, but it is also epic and profoundly poetic, because, from the largest perspective, the restitution is already deeper and more capacious than the fall itself; in fact, one *falls toward* the ground of a greater good, as Troy falls toward Rome. This idea of the *felix culpa* or "fortunate fall" might seem singularly inappropriate now, when Milton himself, like so many others in the Western canon, is being abandoned. But the greatest poetry in the Western tradition, long before Milton, has found that this power of restitution is neither subject to culture nor ultimately, humbling as it may be, a matter of education—though the best education ought to make us trust in it. Cultures come and go, whereas the freedom that the great poets intuit is hidden in being itself, a paradoxical capacity not simply for renewal after defeat, but for immortal glory.

The current crisis in education has already had one fortunate result: it has made us ask again why literature matters. Asking this question differs in significant ways from asking what to do about restoring English departments. When I read, in John Ellis's last paragraph, that "the road back to a functioning literature program on American college campuses will be long and hard," I doubt that the real problem has been addressed. If all the ministers think that God is dead, but enjoy the life of the pulpit, then the continued existence of churches is a confidence game. Unless literature itself, not the academic industry around it, not the competition for tenured positions or endowed chairs, is the central concern, then perhaps the academy deserves to fall. Harsh as it is to say so, there would be no crisis if departments were not structured in a way that rewarded the very theories and practices now destroying them.

Neither Shakespeare nor Homer has an importance *bestowed* by literature professors and their universities. The true bestowal flows entirely in the other direction. What professors of literature *can* rightly bestow is honor, because meaningful praise has to come from those who know the excellences of things. In the *Odyssey*, the king of the Phaiakians thinks that his men "surpass all others / in boxing, wrestling, leaping and speed of our feet for running" (8.102-3). Finally taunted into competing by Euryalos, one of the rudest young men, Odysseus sends the discus whistling far past all the other attempts, and the Phaiakians begin to revise their opinion of their own merit; when he challenges any one of them to compete with him in boxing, wrestling, or running, Alkinoos modifies his claim: "always the feast is dear to us, and the lyre and dances / and changes of clothing and our hot baths and beds" (248-49). Not only is Odysseus himself better than they are, but he has known men better than himself. Those who have seen only their contemporaries might think them excellent and give them great honors; those who have known an Achilles cannot help judging by the greater measure. The confusion that now prevails in the humanities lies in the failure to distinguish between honor as a fluctuating, sometimes irrationally exuberant (or morose) gauge of value, like the price of internet stocks, and honor as the reward for an importance and worth established by competition with the best of every age.

Giving honor is a political act so old that it virtually defines the earliest (some would say, pre-political) orders. Hrothgar keeps harmony among his thanes, for example, by giving rings and

the honors associated with them. Agamemnon infuriates Achilles at the beginning of the *Iliad* for being unfair in giving out prizes. Contemporary politics in the humanities is occupied with exactly the same thing. What is called “multiculturalism” is the insistence that all cultures be treated as equals, ostensibly without there being a supervening Hrothgar-culture by which they are granted or permitted this equality. In effect, multiculturalism caricatures the process that has always been at work in any city or culture: the assignment of honors as part of what Aristotle calls “distributive justice.” This kind of justice consists in distributing “honor, wealth, and the other divisible assets of the community” (267) equally. But as Aristotle goes on to point out, “it is when equals possess or are allotted unequal shares, or persons not equal equal shares, that quarrels and complaints arise” (269; 1131a). If Odysseus had to pretend that Euryalos was as good a runner or fighter as Achilles, the truth would still be there. A culture naturally honors what it thinks serves it best, but in some situations, like the one that prevailed in Athens in 399 B.C. or the one in the humanities in recent years, it might not consider itself well-served by what is best, simply. In “identity politics,” the representative character of the author influences what is being praised. Both literary works and the reputations of their authors can sometimes have a cultural utility that has little to do with literature per se or with artistic excellence.

Like the excellence of discus throwers and runners, the measure of literary excellence lies in the doing, but also in the larger context of literature. Robert Frost, in one of his famous digs at his contemporaries, said that writing free verse was like playing tennis without a net. Any good writing, he meant, but especially poetry, had to have technical obstacles to overcome, but he also meant that it was a game; it was play, and with play, there had to be rules and a context provided by players who establish the measure of excellence within those rules. Robert Pinsky writes at the beginning of his new book, *The Sounds of Poetry*, “There are no rules.” He says that there are principles, but not rules. Frost would not find the distinction helpful. Without a net, what would tennis be? Not *tennis*. This sounds like a kind of curmudgeonly comment about free verse: whatever *that* is, it isn’t *poetry*. But I think he means it more seriously. Without a net, without the lines of the court, there would be no way to reveal the difference between controlled and uncontrolled power, force and finesse. The player steps onto the court as a space of measure, and the more he controls his shots and uses the limits of that space, the more intensely the form of the game emerges. At its upper limits, at Wimbledon or the U.S. Open, excellence ultimately has to involve not just athletic prowess but an extraordinary amount of preparatory hard work, a beauty of performance and a certain greatness of soul that not only withstand the measure but actually shine because these qualities have a form that can reveal them.

Or consider the batter facing the pitcher in baseball. Over home plate, what is called the *strike zone*, a supple volume of air that differs with any given batter, makes it possible to see the artistry and courage of the duel. Think of what happens, say, between Greg Maddux and Mark McGwire or between Orlando “El Duque” Hernandez fresh from Cuba and Tony Gwynn, returning to the World Series with the same Padres team after fourteen years. Power and control and character and personal history and city pride and cultural expectation are revealed in their pathos or glory

because of that agreed-upon, heavily focused space. It brings together two acute acts of attention, two men in the mastery of two different physical acts that converge in the one space of their opposition. I don't want to make extravagant claims for sports. Donald Hall writes in *Life Work* that, when he isn't working on his poems, he cannot read mysteries (as T. S. Eliot did) or watch movies with any pleasure, but that "for sports, intellectually equivalent to *The Price is Right* or Judith Krantz, I sit with my mouth open, witlessly enraptured." The point I want to stress is that games like tennis and baseball create intense spaces and become capable of revealing engaging things about human excellence or failure within the boundaries of established and agreed-upon rules. Hall's rapture isn't entirely witless, in other words, and it relates directly to poetry, and through poetry to literature in general. Part of the pleasure of reading a sonnet is knowing, not so much the rules, but what the rules make it possible to see. The pleasure of watching sports is very similar. For someone who doesn't understand the rules of baseball—what constitutes an "out" or what "bases" are—it's meaningless when, in the last inning of the World Series, Jeter smoothly fields a grounder and flips it underhanded to Knoblauch on second base, who turns in one motion and jumps over the sliding runner to make the throw to Martinez at first for the double play. The play is over in perhaps three seconds: beautiful, fluid and exact, from a scoring threat to two outs. But suppose one has to explain it to a Russian guest who doesn't know the game. One is plunged into abstraction: a runner coming from first base (wait, what is "first base"? "base"?), a runner coming from first base is "out"—that is, he must leave the field of play without having completed a circuit of the bases—if someone in possession of the ball touches second base before he does, but only if a batter has hit the ball and is therefore forcing the runner to leave first.

The rules are obviously not what anyone enjoys in watching good baseball. Nobody ever enjoyed the fact of there being ten syllables in a line of iambic pentameter, either, or fourteen lines consisting of three quatrains and a couplet in a Shakespearean sonnet. The rules are work. Even to understand them is work, because they usually suggest a difficult and initially artificial level of consciousness. For example, there is a first level of difficulty simply in getting someone to hear a pattern of sounds that apparently has nothing to do with the meaning of the words. A sentence, "I can't believe he hit the ball to Jeter," when you scan it, becomes a pattern of unstressed and stressed syllables, analyzable into feet. At first, with this awareness comes a kind of uneasiness, a sense of intrusion on natural language. The act of deliberately writing fourteen lines that make sense in this kind of self-conscious pattern—and then getting the end words to rhyme—seems absurdly artificial. I still remember how taken aback I was when a teacher in my freshman year of college casually mentioned that Shakespeare had varied the stresses and used words hard to enunciate together in order to underscore the sense of his lines in Sonnet 73. It was a revelation about dimensions of language new to me:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs where late the sweet birds sang.

Nothing particularly remarkable, it would seem. A note on the poem, as I recall, mentioned that Henry VIII had despoiled the English monasteries and that many were roofless and empty, a fact which explained the reference to “Bare ruin’d choirs.” But what impressed me was the teacher’s point that the poem leads its reader to expect an unstressed syllable at the beginning of the fourth line, but instead Shakespeare uses a stressed one.

I suddenly *felt* the word “bare,” how it cuts across an established expectation, the way a good tennis player catches his opponent leaning the wrong way, or a pitcher throws only fastballs, then gets the batter to swing at a change-up. Thinking about this play with expectation, I understood what a “line” was, or again, better to say I *felt* it, the way a child playing baseball first feels the significance and exact location of second base when someone is on first; I felt the way one line influences and plays off the previous one and the next one. With games as with art, understanding precedes the capacity to feel accurately, and accurate feeling includes understanding. In its current usage, “feeling” usually means something vague and not susceptible to much scrutiny. I will have more to say about this in a later chapter, but I mean by feeling an extremely acute mode of intelligence, the “quick” of the whole intellect, Pascal’s “spirit of finesse” from the *Pensées*—the source from which most of our insights are unfolded. When I understood that Shakespeare was not expected to make every line a succession of unstressed and stressed syllables, but that he was allowed and expected to make all kinds of variations—to substitute spondees, trochees, pyrrhics, even anapests, for iambs—or in other words, to vary his pitches—I felt it, and formal poetry immediately became interesting to me.

But perhaps that way of putting it is too abstract. What interested me was much more complicated. This was the first male English teacher I had ever had, a man who always held an unlit cigar, who wore cardigan sweaters and work boots, and who spoke with sardonic, impatient intelligence in a slow, dry, middle-Georgia accent. This man knew and cared deeply about the arts of language and wrote both poetry and novels himself, I discovered later. He was middle-aged, and strange to say, his physical presence made it plausible that Shakespeare could write three lines of more or less regular iambic pentameter about getting old, that he could be deliberately indecisive about those leaves and get the word “hang,” after all those changing-his-mind commas, to hang there, that he could emphasize “cold” with the rhyme, and that he could suddenly, at the beginning of the fourth line, write on purpose, “Bare ruin’d choirs, where”—a glutinous sound clump, a gobbet of near-rhymes full of r’s that have to be laboriously pulled apart. I still do not know how the visual metaphor—the stripped boughs of a tree as the roofless choir—can be so clear and airy while the sound is thickly dissonant yet perfectly appropriate for what a “ruined choir,” having lost its art, might sound like. This sound, “Bare ruin’d choirs where,” then this one overlapping it, “where late the sweet birds sang”: how can the end of the line call up so effectively the way that choirs ought to sound, as though breaking free and ascending, a bird-flock of words?

To the extent that literature is a serious game, a form of high play, a *ritual*, it has rules that focus attention, set up expectations, allow surprising meanings to emerge in the revelatory space

of its structure, and enable its readers to feel with the greatest range and accuracy. What is true of the meter and form of a sonnet is true also of works within the Aristotelian genres, as Louise Cowan has explored and expanded them in her theory of lyric, tragedy, comedy, and epic. But with genres, Cowan would argue, Pinsky's dictum about principles rather than rules is more accurate. Shakespeare was chided by neoclassicists for breaking the supposed rules of tragedy, when in fact he was expanding the range of the genre. Establishing the right kind of praise for him means not only understanding the particular play, but the genre that informs and is informed by it, not to mention the context of his fellow Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights, and the prevailing opinions of his age, political, religious, and otherwise. Most of all, though, it means acknowledging, if it is true, how fully the work in its revelation of a spiritual landscape intuits what is hidden in one's own life, how well it provides a measure for one's own time, and how completely it gives form to the very way certain kinds of complex character and experience can be thought.

Sometime in 1862, perhaps around the time that she wrote a letter to

Thomas Wentworth Higginson telling him that the idea of publication was as foreign to her thought "as Firmament to Fin," Emily Dickinson composed a poem demonstrating that immortality—the same kind of immortality in art that concerned Shakespeare in some of his sonnets—was very much on her mind:

Some — Work for Immortality —
The Chiefest part, for Time —
He — Compensates — immediately —
The former — Checks — on Fame —

Slow Gold — but Everlasting —
The Bullion of Today —
Contrasted with the Currency
Of Immortality —

A Beggar — Here and There —
Is gifted to discern
Beyond the Broker's insight —
One's — Money — One's — the Mine — (Johnson, #406)

"Time" offers immediate compensation, the metaphorically literal "Money," to his employees. Those who labor for "Immortality" and its "Slow Gold — but Everlasting —" might have to do so, like Dickinson, in complete obscurity. Why? Not because they lack "the Broker's insight," but because they want freedom—even if it has to be a beggar's freedom or a monk's or, like Faulkner's Ike McCaslin, the freedom of the deliberately dispossessed. Those who want

immediate fame eventually get the gold for their very coins from the few who work for Immortality. Higginson, once a famous activist and editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, is now largely a footnote to the woman whose verses he found too “odd” and “delicate” to publish. By the time that she wrote him, Dickinson was already deep in her fabulous mines, not leading a “starved life,” according to Allen Tate, but “one of the richest and deepest ever lived on this continent” (286). To change the metaphor and adopt the language of James Joyce that Seamus Heaney imagines speaking to him in “Station Island,” she was already well past the boundaries, sending out “‘signatures on [her] own frequency, / echo-soundings, searches, probes, allurements, // elvergleams in the dark of the whole sea.’”

Her whole *habitus*, in a sense that I will discuss later, was the freedom of her art. The posthumous uses of Emily Dickinson can serve, for that reason, as a compelling illustration of the ironies at work in the distributive justice of literary praise. Dickinson’s poems were discovered after her death neatly bound in “fascicles”—groups of poems written on letter paper into which Dickinson had punched holes and bound the pages with string. Along with her longtime correspondent Higginson, her first editor was “the wife of an Amherst professor,” as Dickinson’s editor Thomas Johnson describes her, Mabel Loomis Todd, who unbound and shuffled the fascicles in selecting poems for the first edition of the poems, dividing them into four comfortable categories: “Life,” “Love,” “Nature,” and “Time and Eternity.” Todd and Higginson altered many of the poems, conventionalizing punctuation and substituting a more comfortable diction to make Dickinson seem a little less odd. Mabel Todd was also, as it turned out, the lover of Dickinson’s married brother Austin, and therefore the mortal enemy of Dickinson’s sister-in-law and closest friend, Susan, to whom many of the poems had been written. A rival edition to Todd’s was published by Susan Dickinson’s daughter in 1914, as well as a counter-edition by Todd’s daughter in 1945. Family honor, in other words, dominated the early stages of the quarrel: to whom should Emily Dickinson’s fame redound?

Thomas H. Johnson’s 1955 variorum edition established texts of the poems that restored their original diction and punctuation, including the famous dashes, and introduced a much edgier, more potent poet than one could have suspected from Todd’s version. This freshly emerging Dickinson coincided after the 1960s with the rise of deconstructive and feminist criticism, not to mention a new emphasis on sexuality. By 1990, Camille Paglia’s notorious chapter on Dickinson in *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* had transmogrified the prim, Victorian image of Dickinson by comparing her—not altogether without reason—to the Marquis de Sade.¹ But the texts themselves became the burning question. In his 1960 one-volume edition, Johnson had imposed his editorial decisions about definitive texts on Dickinson’s deliberate undecidability, according to later critics. If Dickinson refused to publish, did she not thereby express a suspicion of the male-dominated literary world of the time? If she left various versions of the poems, did she not therefore intend to deconstruct the idea of poetic closure and of definitive texts? If she left the poems privately bound in fascicles, might those orderings not provide important clues about her real intentions?²

In 1998, R. W. Franklin published a 1664-page variorum edition of Dickinson's poems that presents all the versions of the poems and attempts to honor contemporary concerns with Dickinson's "private" intent. In an appraisal of it for *Women's Review of Books*, Vivian Pollak, author of *Dickinson: The Anxiety of Gender*, wrote that some years before, she had first met Franklin at the Houghton Library at Harvard, where he "was using a small instrument—was it a micrometer?—to measure puncture marks [in the paper of Dickinson's manuscript pages] for the string [that bound the fascicles]. The size of the punctures entered into his calculations as he reconstructed these conceptually baffling units." For all the scholarly care that one might conceivably admire in Franklin's efforts, the scene strikes me as something out of Jonathan Swift. Pollak, I think, means to make the male scholar's positivist concern with little measurements look absurd. But for that matter, Pollak's overly intimate defense of Dickinson's privacy might also have a place in Book III of *Gulliver's Travels*:

to those who identify with a woman poet unseen and unheard in her own time, *the disciplinary function of typographical reproduction* is suspect. Those who honor Dickinson's resistance to institutionalized norms of literary and social and gendered behavior want to experience her realities and not anyone else's. Yet despite a widely shared desire to draw closer to the reclusive poet's actual hand and body, few of us would wish to restrict ourselves to photocopies of her manuscripts, which are notoriously difficult to decipher. For most practical purposes, we need to take the journey Emily Dickinson took as a reader—into *the more disciplined world of print*. (My emphasis)³

"Discipline" in Pollak's usage goes back, not to Emily Dickinson, but to Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*; typography becomes a "gendered" social mode of converting the personal presence of the "actual hand and body" into formal print—a standardization that eradicates or imprisons individual (female) identity.

Given her perspective, Pollak's concern is not absurd: lovers, for example, prefer the peculiarities of handwriting to a perfect typescript. "Typography," writes Pollak, "can never replicate the unprecedented appearance of Dickinson's poems on the page. Her handwriting, including the size and spacing of individual words and letters, is unique. Its genre is intimate and personal." But the question is exactly what we are talking about. It is true that Dickinson began a poem, "This is my letter to the World / That never wrote to Me —." But when she implicitly trusts that the poem will someday be known by the "Sweet countrymen" she addresses later in it, does she also expect them to read her "letter" in manuscript?

In honoring Emily Dickinson, then, should one "honor" (in the modern ideological sense) the intensely private, feminine reclusiveness out of which the poems were handwritten, or the poems themselves?⁴ She obviously knew from experience that poems, even without the actual handwriting of the author, have an uncanny ability to engage a reader. She seems to have anticipated that her own poems would establish such intimate bonds, but their ability to do so would depend on a respect for *her* conventions, her own particular freedom inside the rules of the game. She must have hoped, when she imagined being published, not for an escape from

typography per se, but for an editor who would leave her punctuation alone and try to approximate the halts and emphases and rhythms it suggests. Johnson, for example, restored the dashes and capitalizations that Todd and Higginson had removed from this poem:

What Soft — Cherubic Creatures —
These Gentlewomen are —
One would as soon assault a Plush —
Or violate a Star —

Such Dimity Convictions —
A Horror so refined
Of freckled Human Nature —
Of Deity — ashamed —

It's such a common — Glory —
A Fisherman's — Degree —
Redemption — Brittle Lady —
Be so — ashamed of Thee — (Johnson, #401)

Dickinson's dash after "Soft"—implying a pause before the exact metaphor comes to mind—leaves the "Cherubic Creatures" hovering, but the capitalization makes them considerably more looming and ominous than the plump, sexless baby-angels of sentimental paintings. Like Mrs. Newsome from Henry James' *The Ambassadors*, they are formidable, entirely proper, full of exactly this refined horror at "freckled Human Nature." Dickinson imagines the Gentlewomen's haughty rebuff-in-advance of all unruly desire, a rebuff so effective that "One would as soon assault a Plush," but she also recognizes the Gentlewomen's *shame* that any self-respecting Deity would actually adopt that freckled nature—then employ that *Fisherman*, for heaven's sake, who had never attended Harvard! Common salvation without an earned Degree!

In this poem, Dickinson seems to me to draw an analogy between God and sex and poetry in the sense that poetry, too, affords what the "Brittle Lady" would scorn as "a common — Glory." Far from being exclusive and recondite, this glory comes, it seems, almost despite the Gentlewomen's efforts to suppress it. But for poetry to be effective, thoughts need to be seen in their freedom, outside their usual fabrics. Dickinson once wrote to Higginson about her poems, "While my thought is undressed, I can make the distinction; but when I put them in the gown, they look alike and numb." If even her own way of writing seemed a conventional "gown," one of Mabel Loomis Todd's dresses would have seemed to her a Plush indeed. Her poetry's oddities are surely meant to reveal a world everywhere accessible and everywhere cloaked by a little too much learning. Its common access might require the removal of one's Dimity Convictions. But to be ashamed of reality for offering "a common glory," as a woman might, or God, is to lose the possibility of essential rescue.

The cherubism of nineteenth-century respectability almost rivals the darker

angelism of Dickinson's contemporary defenders, different as their fabrics might make them look. Today, sexuality in any unusual form—the body having been made a kind of self-theorizing construct—earns high academic praise in some circles, but Dickinson's acutely Christian understanding of the contradiction between intellectual pride and redemption, none at all. The unassailable Plush of contemporary correctness has its own Dimity Convictions, and I cannot go farther than Dickinson herself does in confuting them. It is strange to think that she would approve the champions of her privacy who build their careers by publicly exhibiting their every speculation about the details of her carefully hidden life. What exactly is being honored? Dickinson as poet, or Dickinson as sacrifice? The great problem with the loss of poetic form as the measure to which criticism looks is that the author's life, without the protections of that form, becomes an endlessly violable corpus for academics charged with appeasing the more ravenous idols of fashion.

This book attempts to show why literature matters in giving us “manners, virtue, freedom, power,” as Wordsworth thought Milton might do—though, with John Crowe Ransom, I confess some reservations about the efficacy of the great Puritan in that regard. Beginning with the novelists and poets now attempting to bring literary form out of the tensions of our contemporary cultural situation, I shall move toward the permanent contemporaneity of the greatest poetry. My approach is like the one that Shakespeare describes in *The Rape of Lucrece* when Lucrece sees a painting of the Trojan War: “for Achilles' image stood his spear, / Griped in an armed hand; himself behind / Was left unseen, save to the eye of mind” (1424-26). What follows will be synecdochic, in other words, rather than comprehensive. For contemporary writing stand Tom Wolfe, Seamus Heaney, and Toni Morrison; for Shakespeare and the tradition of English literature, *Othello*; for the ancients, the *Iliad*. In each case I am concerned with the way that literary merit, both within the works and as a question about them, is affected by the kinds of cultural pressures that decide what will or will not be honored.

I will be looking first at those honored in different ways by contemporary culture—Wolfe with the money and immediate fame of the bestseller, Heaney and Morrison with the Nobel Prize. Then, in turning to Shakespeare and Homer, I will be asking about the kind of honor that should still be given to permanent excellence, especially given the demands of multiculturalism. I will circle back, when the time comes, to consider Emily Dickinson. She seems the fitting figure both to introduce and conclude a book that concerns itself with those put to the test of extraordinary prominence. How sardonic the one photograph of her seems, to the mind's eye, beside the white-suited figure of the first of these other writers, Tom Wolfe. Wolfe toughly faces the demands of his own notoriety and takes on the reality of globalization that has now entangled everyone from the most retired scholar to his Charlie Croker in bottom-line thinking. But the question is whether Wolfe—or Heaney, or Morrison—has faced the excruciating demands of Immortality as

unsparingly as Dickinson did. The first half of this book will be an attempt to discern, like a gifted beggar, beyond the “Broker’s insight” of contemporary valuation. The latter half is all the Mine.