



POLITICS AND CULTURE

Recently I attended a conference and, amid a discussion of the 2016 presidential campaign, suggested that it was a mark of the diminished cultural awareness of our politicians and journalists that no one had thought to quote Robert Frost's wry lines from "Mending Wall":

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.

It quickly became apparent that politicians and journalists are far more attuned to the current range of public awareness than I: two or three men of my age smiled in recognition, but most were bemused rather than amused. And this was a group of intellectually sophisticated academics (mostly) and professionals.

Doubtless, an expectation that what was once a familiar passage from the work of a famous twentieth-century poet would be instantly recognizable in the twenty-first century was unrealistic. Men and women of my generation are old enough to remember watching the octogenarian Frost struggle to read "The Gift Outright" in a blustery wind during the televised inauguration of John F. Kennedy. Later, when Frost made his ill-fated

"cultural exchange" journey to the Soviet Union a few months before his death, I heard the suggestion—although I don't remember by whom—that the poet ought to have recited the "Mending Wall" lines quoted above in order to taunt Nikita Khrushchev about the Berlin Wall. None of this would be part of the memories of later generations.

Nevertheless, Frost's poetry has more of a claim on our attention than merely his high public profile during my youth. He is certainly one of the greatest American poets, indeed among the greatest poets of the modern era writing in English (or any language that I know). Through the 1960s, and perhaps longer, one could hardly have gotten through high school without reading a few of his poems: "The Road Not Taken," "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," "Fire and Ice," "Nothing Gold Can Stay," and, very probably, "Mending Wall." A not insignificant segment of the American public that went to school forty to fifty years ago might reasonably have been expected to recall some passages, however fleetingly, of Frost's poetry.

What is more, Frost's place in our national literary consciousness has not been filled by more recent contemporary poets. Politicians and journalists are not quoting

Anthony Hecht or Dana Gioia or even Rita Dove. How many would even know these names, although Gioia served as director of the NEA during the Bush administration? This lack of awareness is regrettable, because knowledge of poetry can serve as more than an adornment for the discourse of politicians, commentators, and bureaucrats. I have suggested already in these pages ("Poetry, Politics, and Robert Frost," *Modern Age* 54.1–4: 108–18) that "The Death of the Hired Man" might prove illuminating for the shapers of social policy; I can say much the same about our own David Middleton's "The Latchkey Child" from *The Fiddler of Driskill Hill* (2013).

Of course I do not mean that these poems (or any others) provide superior policy recommendations; poetry ought to bear no resemblance to the report of a "blue ribbon" commission. Rather, poems—along with novels, plays, music, painting, and other works of art—are intellectually and imaginatively refined cultural representations that help us grasp the shape and substance of the larger, somewhat amorphous culture in which we swim as fish in the sea. Politicians, editorialists, and experts who lack this kind of higher cultural awareness are also unaware of the nature of the community they are meant to serve. Worse still, a public devoid of a shared cultural memory transcending the ephemera of the mass media has ceased to be a people and has disintegrated into a congeries of random factions and isolated individuals.

Thus we come to the essays in this issue. Michael Barone and Chilton Williamson both graciously agreed to represent opposing poles in a discussion of immigration, which has been for a number of years one of the most bitterly debated controversies in American—and European—politics. Our two essayists provide vigorous and forthright expositions of their severely opposed perspec-

tives on a theme that, when this issue of the journal appears in the summer of 2016, will undoubtedly be at the center of campaign debates as one of our most heated electoral seasons in recent memory approaches its climax. *Modern Age* has no official position on the immigration dispute, but we hope that the conflicting views will help our readers clarify their own thinking on this critical subject.

Lest the reference to Frost's wry lines about walls be taken to imply a covert position on the argument, let it be noted that the poem is not without sympathy for the antagonist of the poem's speaking persona, although the latter describes his neighbor as looking like "an old-stone savage" who "moves in darkness as it seems to me." The persona teases his obstinate neighbor, because "He will not go behind his father's saying"; still, that saying, "Good fences make good neighbors," is repeated as the poem's last line. I suspect that anyone who takes the trouble to read, or reread, Frost's poem will have little difficulty seeing that the issue between the two characters in the poem is cultural incomprehension. Whatever one's take on the immigration controversy, it, too, is not unrelated to the cultural crisis of our society.

Without arguing quixotically that the fate of American civilization hangs on achieving a critical mass of citizens with a sufficient familiarity with the poetry of Robert Frost, I think it not unreasonable to treat the vanishing of the poet from our public consciousness and conversation as a synecdoche for a larger cultural dissipation. Unlike students of my generation, those of the past few decades have probably not been reading the poetry of Robert Frost in most public school districts. The students whom I taught toward the end of my career at a land grant university showed little knowledge of Frost or any other poet or serious writer.

The problem is pervasive. As I was composing this introduction, news came that undergraduates at Yale University had mounted a petition demanding that the English department “decolonize” the introductory curriculum and abolish the Major English Poets sequence, which “omits the ‘contributions of women, people of color, and queer folk.’” According to a *College Fix* online report (June 3, 2016), the petition also demands that the pre-1800/1900 requirements be refocused and “include literature relating to gender, race, and sexuality”—the usual dreary list.

In varying ways, the literature that both shaped and expresses the culture of the United States and Western civilization, of which our country is one of the more remarkable developments, is suffering either neglect or outright hostility at the hands of those charged with preserving and expounding it. Literature is but one element of a people’s self-understanding and cultural identity, but its slide into oblivion exemplifies the indifference and malice visited upon so many of the institutions that give our nation its distinctive form and social unity. It is our imaginative vision and mores that make us more than a loosely organized crowd of self-interested individuals who, “getting and spending...lay waste our powers.”

Anthony Esolen’s “Exercises in Unreality” takes a look at the attempts to undermine the Western civilization curriculum at his own college and shows that attacks on the culture of the West are in essence an effort to escape from reality. A healthy human culture is founded on an awareness of the basic elements of human nature. The current project of dismantling our civilization and putting the random pieces back together according to the prevailing whims and lusts of the moment posit the construction of a realm of self-indulgent fancy; what destroys human

culture ultimately perverts human nature itself.

My review essay, which deals with two books undertaking to analyze our current malaise, offers a similar assessment, although without Professor Esolen’s passionate eloquence. It is imperative that conservatives recognize that we are no longer dealing with *liberals* in any rational sense of the term; we are, rather, confronted by relentless progressive ideologues, whose ironclad ideology occludes any consideration of contrary arguments or contradictory information. As Professor Esolen demonstrates, they have abandoned reality itself, and with the power and affluence of our uniquely wealthy and dynamic country effectively in their control, there is no way to know how long the illusion can be maintained.

In the light of our dire circumstances, we are especially glad to have two brief essays that provide some sense of a way back toward the decencies of normal life. R. R. Reno and his publisher have allowed us to offer a preview of his new book, *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society*. While acknowledging the good intentions signified in the “god term” *diversity*, Reno maintains that we shall sooner attain our true goal of restoring community by recognizing that what is really wanted is solidarity—a Christian philosophical version of the old-fashioned American virtue of neighborliness. Mark Mitchell, in an address first delivered at the Academy of Philosophy and Letters, reminds us of the spiritual power of art and urges us not merely to appreciate it but also to become involved in its creation.

We hope that these essays along with our usual array of informative reviews and inspiring poems will furnish an oasis of clear thought and imaginative engagement during what promises to be an unsettling summer.

—RVY