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CONCLUSION: WHAT IS NEEDED TO SUSTAIN LITERATURE AND ITS READERS

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The Doubling: Those Influential Writers That Shape Our Contemporary Perceptions of Identity and Consciousness in the New Millennium presents a series of Q&As that compare and contrast pairs of literary authors and their fiction. The scope of this study is extensive, dating back to the late 16th and early 17th centuries and extending into our new millennium. It examines the doubling characteristics of 14 sets of writers by looking at their similarities and their differences and how the historical eras in which they lived and the personal circumstances of their lives formed their distinctive traits. This methodology incorporates literary approaches to consciousness and perceptions of identity.

I hope that *The Doubling: Those Influential Writers that Shape our Contemporary Perception of Identity and Consciousness in the new Millennium* serves as a cultural “reset” button to reengage readers with some of the most important literature ever written. Certainly, I hope this book succeeds in laying waste to the destructive counter-cultural influences of the late 1960s and beyond that collectively have undermined Western civilization. By reexamining some of the great works of literature by a number of our greatest writers, I hope we can shift the educational focus back to our foundational values and the literature that shaped our culture. This renewal of our heritage is essential for developing critical thinking without which we are incapable of understanding and navigating our increasingly complex world.

How exactly, readers sometimes ask me, is literature imperiled today? To answer that question necessitates a brief analysis of events influencing the development of books and literature. Gutenberg’s invention of the movable-type printing press in 1439 is now regarded as perhaps the single greatest event fostering the development of modern history. With the ease of publishing came a profusion of books that could be produced relatively inexpensively. This, in turn, encouraged greater literacy and the increase in the number of readers fostered the development of the novel.

With the dawn of the 21st century, however, literature comes face-to-face with an existential challenge. The Internet altered dramatically how we read and how we “process information” and, indeed, the means by which we access it and even the type of content we seek. Sitting alone in a room and spending hours in seclusion reading a book for many people now seems too slow, too text-driven, too distant from other sensory stimuli. Today, we crave it all: static and moving images, auditory enhancement, as well as the augmented virtual reality that enhances sensations of touch, smell, and taste known as hypertext.

These developments suggest just how prescient Marshall McLuhan was. In 1964 he proposed that “the medium is the message”. McLuhan meant that how we perceive content is influenced by the medium that delivers it. In the Internet Age, the traditional literary novel appears to be an arcane relic harkening back to the Renaissance and its Gutenberg press: too slow, too limited in its visual stimulus (black text on white paper), too taxing on the reader (literary reading is challenging and requires a deep immersive engagement) in comparison with the breathlessly fast, the endlessly banal, the appealingly frivolous entertainment increasingly bombarding us on the World Wide Web. Thus, in the Internet Age when the speed of electronic delivery is measured in nanoseconds and the medium invites multitasking, the novel appears anachronistic. It requires readers to immerse themselves in “slow-time” and encourages them to imagine an abstract world. This necessitates a mastery of sophisticated language and deep thought that today’s readers generally perceive to be tiresome, difficult, and inherently passé.

It should come as little surprise, therefore, that the literary novel since the late 19th century has been attempting to transcend the limitations of its original form. Nevertheless, it has become hopelessly ill-equipped to reinvent itself for the new digital medium, the Internet, unless it morphs into a hybrid form of text that augments words with visual, audio, and intertextual Web content. Ultimately, however, that divests the author of creative “ownership” while devaluating the power and significance of the written word.

Today, the challenges are considerably greater than just the medium that delivers the message and, in so doing, transforms, distorts, and minimizes the original content. For in the 21st century it is not enough to merely be able to read. An educated reader must be steeped in the Western cultural heritage and cognizant of how this knowledge empowers us to understand and navigate the world.

Robert Hutchins, in collaboration with Mortimer Adler, created the 54-volume encyclopedic collection, initially published in 1952, entitled *Great Books of the Western World*. In the first volume, *The Great Conversation: The Substance of a Liberal Education*, Hutchins sought to emphasize that to be intellectually engaged with the world, a reader must master the historical, literary, and philosophical foundations of our culture and that meant, ultimately, sustaining a dialogue between the humanities and the sciences.

An educated man or woman, according to Hutchins, must be immersed in the realm of ideas. That individual should be well read and intrinsically capable of discussing the foundations of Western thought. For Hutchins, the very stature of that individual was determined not by a college or a professional degree or even success in business, but, rather, by an individual’s ability to comprehend and engage in a discussion of the great body of Western culture and its philosophical implications.

Today, we are far less likely to achieve moral authority based on our mastery of the Western canon. Indeed, the emphasis has shifted away from knowledge to an advocacy of “social justice”. Thus, the historically hierarchical notion of learning has been jettisoned. It has been replaced by the leveling standards associated with mass culture: first, the radio; then, the movies; followed by television and now, of course, the Internet.

In the new millennium we read less and less. It’s almost impossible these days to have a conversation about important literature given that few people read books. Fewer still are capable of discussing the Great Books critically, which is hardly a surprise given that students are no longer educated in the foundations of Western culture. If literary fiction is read at all today, it’s embraced primarily, if not exclusively, to affirm one’s cultural identity and/or to

demonstrate one's advocacy of social justice. Small wonder, then, that as a nation and a people we have become culturally, historically, philosophical, and scientifically impoverished.

Here's where politics becomes inexorably embedded into our discussion of literature. I believe that literature, history, and philosophy must be understood and appreciated in conjunction with the mathematical sciences that now serve as the bedrock of modern, post-industrial civilization. Sustained efforts must be undertaken to understand this vast repository of knowledge founded on the intersection between the humanities and the sciences or what British scientist and novelist C. P. Snow referred to as "the two cultures". This cross-disciplinary immersion deepens our analytical understanding of the world and minimizes, rather than accentuates, our differences.

Today, however, grievances—actual or perceived—based on identity politics and a particular notion of social justice displace intellectual content in the humanities with politically disgruntled righteousness. Increasingly these values also threaten to subjugate the primacy of scientific knowledge that enables us to navigate our world. Consequently, we venture into disputatious territory whenever we insist on the importance of intellectual ideas associated with the Western canon, as well as the inimitable ties between Western science and the West's cultural dominance in modern times.

Nevertheless, I believe that literature, history, philosophy, and scientific understanding constitute the fountain of knowledge that quenches our thirst to understand who we are, how we developed, and why events impacted the course of civilization, both then and now. Certainly, I prefer to live my life not as a "beast", always surprised by the outcome of events. Rather, I want to understand the circumstances impacting my life. I also want to have the cultural foundations that will allow me to predict the historical trajectory of civilization in order to anticipate and, ideally, support the political, social, economic, and scientific influences that oppose the destructive forces threatening to harm our society. And, I believe, I'm not alone.

My intellectual perspective reveals that I'm a "cultural" conservative. As such, I feel the current preoccupation with gender, class, and ethnic identity obscures the larger framework of history and ideas that should unify our culture. Our civilization is founded on Judeo-Christian beliefs. Modern science is an outgrowth of our religious heritage. To jettison our foundational principles, I believe, is a conscious act of nihilism, a "death wish" that sets into motion the suicidal values that sociologist Émile Durkheim characterized as *anomie*. As I pointed out in my essay on Balzac and Houellebecq, *anomie* undermines civilization. To appreciate our Western heritage and understand its importance in shaping our past, present, and future, we need to read and understand our literary classics.

The writers selected in this collection are by no means exhaustive. But this sampling, shaped by the important questions posed by Professor Shaughnessy, will, I hope, elicit a meaningful conversation among readers about Western civilization. Our modern literary beginnings can be traced back to Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, one of the great pioneering works of modern literature. Our modern literary terminus, I would argue, is represented in Kafka's *The Castle*. Certainly, other "great" literature followed *The Castle*. But these works could be interpreted as an extended epilogue, the sum of which, arguably, never surpasses Kafka's literary masterpiece. It's my belief that examining pairs of writers and their significant contributions, as I did with Cervantes and Kafka, allows readers to gain a broader understanding of literature and the circumstances that shaped its creation and development.

Professor Shaughnessy and I hope our sustained “conversation” will assist our readers in interpreting literature in a new and meaningful way. We believe that this book will encourage them to read deeply, nurturing a critical awareness of what shapes a brilliant story or what motivates an author to pioneer a new approach to literary fiction.

I don’t expect readers to agree with all my perspectives, but I hope that we can accommodate our differences. Culture, in any case, should never be about uniformity. The new, the challenging, and the provocative thinkers of any era resist designations associated with conformity. Ideally, our differences foster a broader, more comprehensive understanding of literature and society. Conversations across divides should enrich, rather than impoverish, our engagement with the world of ideas as embodied in the literary novel. My purpose is not to “convert” readers to my individual worldview, but rather to broaden and deepened their perspectives so that they discover new connections, new interpretations, and new approaches that enhance their quest for knowledge. Above all, I hope that this book heightens their love of literature.