

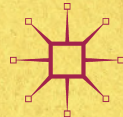
PALGRAVE STUDIES IN CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

THE DREAM OF A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

Mortimer J. Adler and the Great Books Idea



Tim Lacy



PALGRAVE STUDIES IN CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

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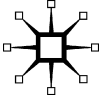
By Tim Lacy

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Great Books Idea

Tim Lacy

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Introduction

Racist, Ignorant, Absurd, Stupid, Sad, “The Belittling Professor,” Curmudgeon, Ineloquent, Out of Touch, and Senile. These are some of the insults used and implied, in 1990, to describe Mortimer J. Adler by intellectuals such as James Loewen, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Irving Louis Horowitz, Leon Forrest, Oba T’Shaka, and Michael Bérubé during a hot point in the Culture Wars.

But in the early 1970s another set of highly respected thinkers—Charles Hartshorne, Étienne Gilson, Norman Cousins, John Murray Cuddihy, George Kateb, and William F. Buckley, Jr.—used an entirely different group of terms for Adler and his work: Genius, Distinguished, Formidable, Audacious, “One of the Ablest Men Alive,” “Most Worth Taking Seriously,” Extraordinary, “A Dogged Philosopher,” “A Monument,” and, last but not least, “The Great Bookie.”

This range of assessment, and emotion, is obviously startling. What do we make of it? Who’s right? Who’s wrong? Why the polarization? What caused the change? Put another way, and with apologies to Walt Whitman, how does one person contain these multitudes? Finally, on Adler as “The Great Bookie,” how does this relate to the so-called “great books”?

The story that answers these questions will satisfy those who care about great books and Mortimer Adler. More importantly and perhaps surprisingly, however, that story will resonate with those who care about larger, pressing topics such as citizenship, democracy, education at all levels, shared or common culture, pluralism, multiculturalism, elitism, anti-intellectualism, literacy, and the life of the mind. This history integrates these points, bringing in a host of significant American intellectuals in the process.

* * *

But what are “great books”? What makes them “great”? Who wrote them? When? Why “books” rather than “works”? What is the difference between “great books” (or “the great books”) and “the canon”?

The phrase emerged in the English-speaking world, around the 1880s, to describe a limited set of books that represented the best ever written—that is, excellence in book form. In an environment where

the printed word had rapidly expanded and mass print culture had emerged, the “great books” designation signaled “must read.” Book lists often identified the greats; they cordoned the greatest from the hoi polloi. It is no accident that Jane Austen’s own great book, *Emma* (1815), contains a reference to the “handsome, clever, and rich” English protagonist Emma Woodhouse drawing up “a great many lists . . . of books that she meant to read . . . well-chosen and very neatly arranged” lists. In general, these lists contained varying, though often even, numbers of works (e.g., 50, 100). And the lists themselves have become objects of discussion and research. Why? As Umberto Eco relates, lists “create order” and “make infinity comprehensible”; they define any “set” of books on hand.¹

A great book can be a work of fiction or nonfiction, and there are no chronological limitations on its publication date. The term “classics” is sometimes used in conjunction with, or as a substitute for, “great books.” That exchange is unproductive, however, because “the classics” often refer to once-famous works from ancient (usually Western) civilizations that hold a static kind of tradition. In his renowned essay, “Battle of the Books” (1698), Jonathan Swift celebrated these texts as more excellent than moderns realized—and he bequeathed a phrase to describe the honey of the ancients that Matthew Arnold would later make infamous: “sweetness and light.” Great books might also be confused with another related, problematic phrase: “the classical tradition” (not singular, “classical” is too loose as an analytic term, and the singular “tradition” implies a continuous visibility though we often celebrate what breaks with tradition). Although there is a common association of Western “excellence” between these denotations, and most every formulation of “great books” contains some texts from ancient Greece and Rome, every “great books” list, by contrast, contains works produced after 1000 CE (Common Era) and up to the twentieth century. In addition, sometimes the word “canon” is also used synonymously with great books. But the former most often refers to *imaginative literature* only (e.g., novels, poetry, plays). Even when a formulation of “the canon” includes biography, memoir, philosophy, or history, it almost never includes the works of Freud, Weber, or the American founding documents. Most “great books” lists do. Finally, although the phrase “great books” arose in the English-speaking world, in the beginning it designated both Western and non-Western works.²

The phrase “great books idea” arose to capture the evident diversity in thinking about the topic—the who, what, where, when, and how associated with the notion of a great book and great books. The word “idea” allows for the abstraction from material circumstances: lists, institutions, book production, particular debates, people, et cetera.

The “great books idea” becomes, then, a singular theoretical tool for dealing with change over time.³

* * *

The topic of this book is the history of the great books idea. That history matters because too few of that idea’s fans, and too few of its critics, acknowledge that it has changed over time. Despite those changes in time, form, and context, many see “great books” in a homogeneous fashion. Given that their opinions are split—they conceive of “it” as either a *prima facie* good or deficient—both use history to justify their views.

To devotees, if the great books idea has any history, it can be nothing but good—or at worst it is something of a cabinet of curiosities. Proponents hold forth sets or lists of great books containing a tradition that is a “foreign country” filled with wonders, mystery, and a sacred venerable tradition. If one is unsettled about the future, comfort can be found in the authentic past through great books, through a communion with classical figures. Other fans see the content of the great books (not the form of each, to be sure) in an almost avant-garde fashion—that is, those works foster the critical faculty (i.e., the liberal arts) that can be turned on the reader and the book at hand. The excellence of each great book rests in its ability to make the reader uneasy with her or his “stock notions”—whether by provoking deep questioning about the past and present, as well as by subverting ideology. To critics, however, that same tradition that gave comfort was synonymous with conscious and unconscious efforts to perpetuate injustices: repress people of color and women, maintain class inequality, and parochialism. To great books’ opponents the past represented by those works is a threatening foreign country filled with burdens and backward thinking. Great books are Nietzschean gravediggers of the present, stymieing creativity. As Nathaniel Hawthorne once observed of the numerous ancient objects in the British Museum, the ever-growing number of great books will cause “future ages . . . to stagger under all [their] dead weight.” As such, critics tamed the great books idea by making it the object of satire and mocking its pretentiousness.⁴ This fan-critic dichotomy, based on competing views of how the great books idea represented history and operated in the present, fueled a few hot points of the late-twentieth-century Culture Wars. And as is usually the case with dichotomies, much is right and wrong with the views of both sides.

This book gets at that historical complexity by, ironically, narrowing the topic’s focus to the life and times of Mortimer Adler. Born in

1902 in New York City to parents of German-Jewish descent, Adler attended public school before spending his college days and graduate school at Columbia University. While at Columbia he published his first book in philosophy, completed his dissertation on the psychology of music appreciation, and taught in the Cooper Union's People's Institute. Adler also became acquainted with the great books through John Erskine at Columbia. In 1930, Robert Hutchins brought Adler to the University of Chicago where Adler gained fame, with Hutchins, as an advocate for the great books, education reform, and philosophical study based on Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. Between 1930 and 1952, Adler published popular and obscure books on the philosophy of law, aesthetic and moral-political philosophy, and Thomistic philosophical problems. Adler's most famous book, however, was a bestseller on adult education, *How to Read a Book* (1940), which advocated for great books reading and helped catalyze a Great Books Movement. This culminated in extensive editorial work resulting in the publication, by Encyclopædia Britannica, of the *Great Books of the Western World* in 1952.

After leaving the University of Chicago in 1952, Adler entered the public intellectual phase of his life as the Cold War heated up. That year he founded the Institute for Philosophical Research in San Francisco, serving as its first director and president. There Adler led a 30-member staff in the research and publication of *The Idea of Freedom* (authored by Adler, 1958, 1961), as well as *The Idea of Justice* (Otto Bird, 1967), *The Idea of Progress* (Charles Van Doren, 1967), and other studies. While engaged in that work, Adler maintained great books activities (e.g., leading discussion groups, discussing the "great ideas" on television). In the mid-1960s, Adler brought the Institute back to Chicago and took a new position with Encyclopædia Britannica. Over the next 30 years, he authored 27 books—not including coauthored works and editorial duties. These books covered topics such as education reform (with a great books flavor), capitalism, the history of philosophy, the nature of man, ethics, politics, language theory, angels, religion, and America's founding documents. This work also resulted in a lengthy association with Macmillan, lasting from the 1970s to the publication of his final, solo-authored book in 1995. This second phase of his life culminated in work toward a second edition of Britannica's *Great Books* set, published in 1990. Adler died in 2001.⁵

On top of these relevant topical associations, the Adler focus is fruitful for other reasons. First, the time frame of Adler's life (1902–2001) provides maximal flexibility in incorporating disparate historical feeder themes while still building the Culture Wars political teleology. The Culture Wars brings the contradictions and tensions

inherent in the great books idea into high relief. Adler brings the story to that point. Second, Adler did not act alone. His community of discourse changed over his long life, including figures such as Scott Buchanan, Richard McKeon, Jacques Maritain, Jacques Barzun, Clifton Fadiman, Robert Hutchins, Mark Van Doren, and his sons John and Charles Van Doren.⁶ This group agreed on the Great Books' virtues—even while underplaying the idea's weaknesses. Third, this group and Adler believed that a liberal education obtained through great books, organized through Britannica's set as a study of the history of Western ideas, would remedy a widespread American anti-intellectualism that grew out of an excessive educational focus on jobs training, or vocationalism.

Fourth, Adler envisioned a public philosophy, rooted in Aristotelian thought and supplementary to the great books idea, that would aid citizens in thinking about complex topics. Fifth, Adler's unabashed association with Christian philosophers and theologians in the 1940s, such as Thomas Aquinas and Jacques Maritain, even while Adler himself was a secular Jew, fostered the perception that the Great Books and Adler's personal beliefs were always compatible with Christianity. This compatibility existed to some degree, but never to the extent imagined by New Right Christians as the movement developed during the 1970s. Lastly, no other work published on the history of the great books idea has focused on Adler's work over his whole life.

Returning to Adler's contradictions and character defects, as evident in the opening descriptors, thoughtful historians seize moments of disjunction, irony, and paradox as opportunities that promise an interesting story. As such, the most intriguing things to me about those descriptors are both their asymmetry with his personal life and what they reveal about the larger history of the great books idea. Adler's incendiary Culture Wars rhetoric about the canon—what the late Daniel Bell called “the most rancorous cultural war”—that resulted in changed opinions about him contrasted starkly with a life lived, for long stretches, in the liberal tradition.⁷ For instance, in the 1940s he and his intellectual community advocated for codified human rights embedded in a world constitution (i.e., world federal government). For this the John Birch Society hounded Adler well into the 1960s. In addition, in the ten years before an infamous 1990 interview, Adler promoted a school reform effort known as the Paideia Program. Intended for both elementary and high school students, Paideia contained a seminar component based only on a recommended readings list. The program was surprisingly attractive to some inner-city public schools populated by minorities. So while nothing about the rest of his life reveals Adler as a racist, his late-life

defensiveness and dogmatism, as well as a shifting cultural environment, created a unique moment for his downfall.

* * *

This book—which is part limited historical biography, part intellectual and cultural history, and part history of American education—explains these inconsistencies, ironies, and paradoxes related to great books, Adler, and his contemporaries. In so doing, a positive assertion becomes apparent: those people, those mid-century intellectuals who promoted the great books idea, shared an implicit, cosmopolitan dream of cultural democratization.

The meaning of this argument is revealed by examining the aspirations and actions of both promoters and reader-consumers. From the promoters' viewpoint, democratization meant redistributing what Pierre Bourdieu called "cultural capital."⁸ Through ideas and knowledge contained in great books, promoters hoped to enlighten the American polis and buttress Western democratic societies against malicious political systems, such as communism and fascism. Moving from the social to the singular, supporters held that the steady accumulation of *individual* intellectual progress obtained by studying great books (not to exclude other means) would create empowered, cosmopolitan citizens comfortable with freedom in a century plagued with totalitarianism. Having sound philosophical foundations, each citizen would be a true free agent in the Western marketplace of ideas. They would raise political discourse and cast the best votes possible. And evidence exists that readers were enthusiastic about the great books' potential to supplement their knowledge of the world—to help them process and act on the ambiguities of modern life. Stating the thesis another way, the dream of great books enthusiasts was that all Americans, all Westerners, and all those living in democratic societies would benefit from some connection to great books.

The activities and writings of Adler and his community of discourse support this book's revisionary thesis. Adler, Hutchins, Fadiman, Barzun, and other mid- and late-century intellectuals hoped—to the point of fantasy—that the broad accessibility and reading of great books would result in liberal education for all that would bring about a democratized culture. In their idealistic view, the citizens of an American polity, enlightened by the liberal arts through great books, would neutralize the acids of modernity, resist totalitarianism, avoid the hive mentality (e.g., communism), conquer suburban boredom, prevent the fragmentation of multiculturalism and pluralism, and transcend political ideologies. They dreamed that a liberal education would result from joining what Hutchins called the "Great

Conversation” about the “Great Ideas” as promoted in Britannica’s set. This would liberate liberal education from the elites, broadly disseminating the cultural capital of great books. Indeed, the association of great books with elite culture had helped perpetuate the myth of the great books as elitist and “high culture” (setting up, furthermore, the myth of middlebrow denigration).

* * *

The capacious framework of “democratic culture” provides opportunities to think multidimensionally about the historical evidence of the great books idea. Other theoretical and topical approaches, such as those based on cultural hierarchies (i.e., high-, middle-, and lowbrow), leave little room for exploring the full range of behavior exhibited by great books supporters. The goal here is to avoid a rigid theoretical framework that results in an unjust historical narrative, or one that facilitates condescension, false dichotomy, and ad hominem. Democratic culture, I believe, allows for fair play and agency in relation to the hopes, criticisms, failings, and dreams of promoters and user-readers. This paradigm helps readers understand how the great books idea endures, or has a mythical nine lives (depending on your viewpoint), in the face of seemingly withering criticism. Several themes and topics emerge in this work under the umbrella of democratic culture: cultural capital, common or shared culture (past and present), common sense, public philosophy, politics (i.e., liberalism, conservatism), citizenship, education (schools, colleges, adult), anti-intellectualism (and anti-anti-intellectualism), pluralism, multiculturalism, and the Culture Wars.⁹

Speaking generally, what do I mean by democratic culture? Is it merely a mid-twentieth-century, Cold War construct set against communism? Or is it a late-twentieth-century academic construct imposed on mid-century culture? Digital technology hints at answers to both questions. According to Google’s “Ngram Viewer,” which has the ability to quantify phrases in works catalogued by Google Books, citations of “democratic culture” began a steady increase in books published after 1900. Those citations first peaked around 1930, then doubled during World War II, and doubled again from roughly 1990 to the present.¹⁰ Given this ubiquity one cannot hope to provide an authoritative definition of the phrase in a short introduction. What follows, then, covers the concept only as used *in this text*.

The great books idea is often accompanied by discussions of “culture,” defined ages ago, as related to the development of one’s speech tendencies, manners, and taste. And those associations still exist and matter, in certain circles, in discussions about excellence in texts. In that realm “democratization” is synonymous with “the masses,”

kitsch, vulgarization, and degradation. But, in relation to “democratic culture” as a philosophical concept used in this story, the primary meaning of culture is anthropological. It begins with Clifford Geertz, who, in *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), defined culture as follows: “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [people] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.”¹¹ That definition has been particularly useful in relation to education. Indeed, both Adler and Britannica’s *Great Books* are material bodies and symbols embedded in the US education system—from schools to universities and adult education programs.

Adding nuance to Geertz, Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of “cultural capital” provides a means to address the value of great books beyond formal education institutions (i.e., those that provide credentials). Bourdieu seems to have never discussed great books, but cultural capital helps explain the stakes in that, through great books (an “objectified” form of cultural capital), one might acquire the appearance and reality of valuable education outside the formal system of education—in a way that exceeds one’s formal place, via credentials, within that “institutionalized” system. The existence of this other, less-than-transparent system helps us understand how the great books idea endures even when its popularity waxes and wanes within the formal system of schooling. It also helps explain the enduring interest in great books by groups outside the mainstream (i.e., the informal system offers some of the cultural capital required to move up the cultural hierarchy). Bourdieu helps keep the historian as philosopher, as the interrogator of evidence, from falsely separating culture and capitalism in Western societies. The latter is about profit, but it is also a system within which one gains access to ideas and power: readers are consumers, and consumers are readers. In short, Bourdieu and cultural observers inspired by him (e.g., John Guillory) help bridge the gap between Geertz and older, taste-related definitions of culture.¹²

Another gap in the concept map of democratic culture is filled by Daniel Boorstin’s contemporaneous idea of “consumption communities,” as well as Albert Muniz and Thomas O’Guinn’s more recent notion of a “brand community.” Both types of communities aid our understandings of shared and common community in relation to the great books idea. Picking up on Adler’s connection between the Great Books and the liberal arts, Boorstin, Bourdieu, Muniz, and O’Guinn help one think about *from what* consumption and brand communities liberate us? Is it provincialism or parochialism, as Boorstin asserts? Or does the consumer’s integration, by choice, into larger mass communities ironically tie the person to new and larger bonds

of conformity, or create new forms of class stratification? And what of authenticity, or the authenticity of consumer choices in relation to marketing manipulation?¹³ This study cannot definitively answer those questions, but it provides another interesting angle (i.e., great books idea as liberator or jailor?) from which one can think about the problems of liberty, choice, and community in the context of a democracy.

The term “community” also matters in a special theoretical way, particular to the historiography of intellectual history, in this story. To understand intellectuals apart from their biographies and individual writings, this book relies heavily on David Hollinger’s notion of “communities of discourse.” First forwarded at the 1977 Wingspread Conference, he emphasized this mechanism as a way to wrest the focus from singular individuals (great men) identified as intellectuals and situate them among specific social and cultural contexts. Hollinger’s trope anchors books and ideas in a human cultural context while acknowledging that “shared questions” and objects of thought can, and do, transcend individual intellectuals.¹⁴ Adler’s community of discourse is a crucial part of this story about the great books idea.

What of the “democratic” portion of democratic culture? That modifier stresses the relationship of US culture to its particular political system, ideologies, and rights. Herein is a concern for democracy in relation to what Jürgen Habermas called the “unfinished project” of modernity.¹⁵ Fostered by liberal democracies and constitutional republics in the modern West, democratic culture enables the understanding, access, and distribution of civil and human rights. In nominally free societies, that culture is both common and shared, existing in public and private spheres. That shared entity is something more inspired and individually effective than mere “mass culture.” Democratic culture inspires good citizenship, virtue, and a sense of common cause (e.g., “men of good will”) for the good of the polis. This “way of life” may be inherited, but it fosters individual and collective agency—what critical theorists call “human emancipation.”¹⁶ By acknowledging individuals, a democratic culture respects difference. As a collective lived experience, it distributes cultural capital to those individuals via educational institutions (broadly conceived, public, and private). Being a product of education and therefore an “art,” democratic culture is always at risk. It requires an engaged citizenry full of informed, critical voters. It is a responsibility that also urges responsibility; its denizens use it, self-consciously and otherwise, to renew and argue for its existence. Because a democratic culture engages diverse beliefs, meanings, and symbols, political ideology is a part of its orbit. This includes now familiar discourse between American citizens about liberalism, conservatism, individualism, and

communitarianism. Democratic culture is always at risk because it involves arguments, consensus, and compromises.

Although this vision of a democratic culture is rooted in the ideas of US intellectuals, many great books promoters wrote about a larger, more inclusive and worldly cosmopolitanism based on normative, universal goods and a global sense of the common good. That cosmopolitanism could both reject and embrace convention in culture and morals. For instance, several of Mortimer Adler's colleagues and friends believed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to be normative. They thought and published on subjects such as common culture, common sense, and other philosophical topics (e.g., does common sense foster democracy?). This necessarily involved engagements with pluralism, diversity, and multiculturalism. The topics of public philosophy and public intellectuals are bridges into issues such as anti-intellectualism and education (the latter in its general and liberal forms). If this, considered altogether, seems high-minded and utopian, it could be. Notions such as the common good, common sense, and common culture could sometimes cause as many problems as they purported to solve. The historical agents in this story, moreover, did not often write about the messiness of the democratic process. That lacuna would leave them unprepared for the cultural politics of the Culture Wars.¹⁷

Apart from cultural politics and the utopian high-mindedness of this community of intellectuals, other factors complicate our understanding of the democratization of culture. For instance, some cultural democratization occurred on the plane of the *unconscious*. These attended the growth in popularity of cultural forms such as amusement parks, dance, film, music, and even simply using the streets for entertainment. Even the increased demand for mass consumer products aided this change in culture. Few historical agents sought to promote these activities, explicitly and consciously, as the democratization of culture. Rather they simply hoped for popularity among—or consumption and profit from—diverse audiences. Other cultural forms were *consciously democratized*. Literature and education, for instance, fall into this category. Active historical agents hoped to make these cultural forms accessible to the masses.¹⁸ The topic of this story, great books, falls under the “conscious democratization” purview.

What caused the “democratization of culture” in literature and books in general? According to Gerald Graff, the nineteenth-century professionalization of higher education helped move literature away from the cultural elites and “the normal upbringing of gentfolk” (Habermas called books “the bourgeois means of education par excellence”).¹⁹ Alongside that movement the number of books

printed increased over the same century. On the one hand, this increase placed books in more people's hands, effecting a democratization of book ownership. On the other hand, the proliferation was such that the average person could not, without intense study, monitor the quality or quantity of new books published—estimated by one 1881 source at 25,000 annually. Even if incorrect, the estimate conveys a sense of despair felt about keeping up.²⁰ This proliferation necessitated guidance, effecting the creation of agents who could help select books for the overwhelmed communities of consumer-readers. In the United States with its pluralistic culture, the array of mediators included librarians, book critics, publishers (i.e., of magazines and books), public intellectuals, and educators, such as Graff's professors of literature.

Democratic culture necessarily involves a consideration of education, conceived positively, negatively, formally, and informally. Positively and formally, this means education in relation to curricula, teaching, schooling, higher education, and credential requirements. In relation to curricula, great books fall under rubrics like liberal education, liberal arts, and humanism. A paradox exists, however, in relation to formal education and the ideal of equality that is essential to a democratized culture. Teaching necessarily involves some level of hierarchy and paternalism; teachers pass on knowledge and skills to another group lacking both. This fact corresponds with some elitism, and even esoteric mysticism, among great books educator-advocates (and opponents of great books-style education). Other, more charitable great books educator-advocates act as guides by the side, sharing and encouraging full participation in the "Great Conversation." The paradox of haves, have-nots, and states in-between within the realm of great books education points to cultural democratization as a sometimes contentious process. Contentiousness means that sometimes educators and professors are portrayed as elite intellectuals. Advocating for the great books idea, then, could mean fighting against anti-intellectualism, antirationism (i.e., the reliance on ideology), and "agnotology." Working against anti-intellectualism could also mean thinking about philosophy as a public endeavor, fostering a "public philosophy" in the face of extreme ideology.²¹ Indeed, many mid-century great books promoters saw those works as weapons in the extrainstitutional public struggle against ignorance.

To understand elitism in relation to the great books idea, one must consider the meaning and existence of cultural hierarchies in literature. The predominant way of thinking about cultural hierarchy, in the historical literature of and on the 1880s through the 1940s, came to be in terms of the phrenologic, "pejorative" brow distinctions:

lowbrow (i.e., unrefined), highbrow (i.e., refined, highly cultivated), and middlebrow (i.e., betwixt and between). Lawrence Levine and Joan Shelley Rubin have documented how these “permeable and shifting” categories changed in that period, but the concern here is with mid-twentieth-century cultural critics. These critics, such as New York intellectuals Clement Greenberg and Dwight Macdonald, as well as members of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theorists, argued the following: although “mass produced” can sometimes mean widely accessible and therefore equal opportunity in mass culture, reproduction could also mean something banal, conformist (i.e., falsely standardized), and degraded —“kitsch” and “ersatz culture” in Greenberg’s words—in terms of the original avant-garde art produced. Human dignity and freedom were subverted with these reproductions, leaving behind mere conformity, the perverted twin of democratic equality. Louis Menand summarized the mid-century situation and Macdonald’s thinking as follows: “There was a major middle-class culture of earnest aspiration in the 1950s, the product of a strange alliance of the democratic (culture for everyone) and the elitist (culture can make you better than other people). Macdonald understood how this culture was contrived and which buttons of vanity and insecurity it pushed so successfully.” Menand added that, courtesy of Macdonald, middlebrow has become a term of “disapprobation” today.²²

Joan Shelley Rubin made a sincere attempt to avoid that condemnation, as well as “disregard and oversimplification,” in her formidable 1992 study, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*. She discussed middlebrow culture as based, essentially, on the popularization of books and reading. But she still utilizes Greenberg’s and Macdonald’s sensibilities of cultural corruption when she describes some great books promoters, particularly Adler and Hutchins, as purveyors of a “prefabricated culture.”²³ Rubin does point out the positives of certain middlebrow culture advocates, such as John Erskine and Clifton Fadiman. And positives were possible for, as Janice Radway argued in relation to the Book-of-the-Month Club, middlebrow culture functioned as a space for working out alternative criteria for excellence in books. Yet, to Rubin, some great books promoters worked this out better than others. Fadiman, for instance, “personified middlebrow culture” by balancing low and high exemplars. On the low end, however, was Adler: the rigid, abrasive, dogmatic, rules-laden, and philosophy-centered promoter. To Rubin, he overshadowed and corrupted Erskine’s high-end, flexible, literature-centered approach to making great books a viable middlebrow enterprise. And Hutchins carried Adler’s stain—that is, the commodification of both reading rules and great books.²⁴ In the grand scheme of both the theory and

historiography of the great books idea, Rubin's intervention is brief, yet powerful and provocative.

Whatever the positives of utilizing a brow-based hierarchical paradigm for assessing the great books idea, this study revises that approach both theoretically and empirically. This intervention moves beyond the middlebrow by extending Rubin's concern for "democratic values," reworking the Critical Theory that correlated with Macdonald's thinking, and pushing the analysis far past the 1950s. By prioritizing a full longitudinal approach to Adler's life, his intellectual circle, and iterations of the great books idea, one can see human weaknesses of great books advocates even while acknowledging their dreams, goals, and motivations. Those larger goals highlighted education for good citizenship; to them great books were more of an antidote than a contributor to that bland, conformist mass culture feared by mid-century critics (left and liberal and conservative) and described by cultural historians. With that, the successes and failures of great books promoters will be judged here in relation to the ever-changing historical context of developing a culture that supported democracy. This means that the reception of intellectuals and regular readers will be assessed whenever possible. Overall, this alternate criteria of assessment (in relation to Rubin) is indeed tenable because, as Menand noted, by the mid-1960s "the whole high-low paradigm" would "end up in the dustbin of history," replaced by a "culture of sophisticated entertainment."²⁵

* * *

Apart from Rubin's provocative, abbreviated contribution to the historiography of the great books idea, only a few books, articles, and dissertations have attempted to cover all or significant chunks of that same ground. Most of the dissertations on great books have originated in education departments. The best of them were written by Hugh S. Moorhead and Amy Apfel Kass, but both were published in 1964 and 1973, respectively. Kass covered only the 1925–1950 period and her title, "Radical Conservatives for a Liberal Education," reveals her agenda. Even though Moorhead's chronological coverage is extensive, it does not integrate the great books idea into America's larger historical context. Despite their reliance on archived documents, both are also severely limited in relation to this study by their publication dates.²⁶

Two articles, by W. B. Carnochan and Katherine Elise Chaddock, published in 1999 and 2002, respectively, provide noteworthy contributions to the historiography. Carnochan's piece focuses on the British origins of the great books idea, arguing useful smaller points and one

larger point in relation to the trans-Atlantic Victorian cultural context. On the smaller he relayed, for instance, that “by the late nineteenth century the habit of drawing up lists of books became a mania—or a parlour game . . . with manic overtones.” In covering common British touchstones such as Matthew Arnold, Sir John Lubbock, and Frederic Harrison, Carnochan asserted that the Dean of Canterbury, Frederick William Farrar, “may be said to have brought the category of “Great Books,” capitals and all, into being.” Going larger, Carnochan’s work provides an endpoint for David Lowenthal’s assertion that “many Americans come to Europe to feel at home in time”—to discover their heritage. Carnochan helps us understand how the great books idea infiltrated the trans-Atlantic consciousness, as well as the minds of Gilded Age and Progressive Era American Victorians ranging from Charles Francis Richardson, Elizabeth Harrison, Henry van Dyke, and Charles Sprague Smith, to Emanuel Haldeman-Julius, Charles Gayley, Charles W. Eliot, and George Woodberry. It is Woodberry who brings us to Columbia University and John Erskine.²⁷

Although Chaddock’s article focused on Scott Buchanan’s and Stringfellow Barr’s refounding of St. John’s College in Annapolis, Maryland, on an all-great books-based curriculum, she offered a broad interpretation of mid-century great books promoters that mirrors the argument of this book. Chaddock argued: “Proponents of the great books of Western literature . . . would be surprised by the stridency of [recent] interpretations. There is ample evidence that . . . they sought to democratize education . . . Not only would the realm of “haves” be expanded in terms of who was conversant with important literature, but also liberal education itself might become increasingly appealing and available across the socioeconomic classes.”²⁸ Indeed.

Chaddock recently expanded on that work by authoring a book-length study on George Woodberry’s great student, John Erskine. In *The Multi-Talented Mr. Erskine: Shaping Mass Culture through Great Books and Fine Music* (2012), she debunks myths and clarifies the story around the creation of General Honors at Columbia University and related great books curricula at other institutions. While providing an entertaining, informative, and full narrative of Erskine’s life as a “celebrity professor,” Chaddock also outlines Erskine’s connections to his dynamic students, especially Mortimer Adler. She argued that Erskine bridged Victorian and modern American conceptions of great books, even while he embodied a paradox of the era’s American intellectual elites, namely, an ability to uphold elitist thinking (i.e., fear of vulgarization) while possessing democratic intentions and valuing access. Erskine was a paragon of that “duality.” He was willing to see great texts in the hands of the middle classes and as mass culture products.²⁹

In addition to Chaddock's and Rubin's chapter-length coverage of the great books idea, there are other older books addressing the topic with chapters and chapter portions that focus, in varying fashion, on Erskine, Adler, and Robert Hutchins. These include James Sloan Allen's *The Romance of Commerce and Culture* (1983), Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature* (1987), and Lawrence Levine's *The Opening of the American Mind* (1996). Levine's Culture Wars intervention is part history and part polemic, as evident in the title's refutation of Allan Bloom's 1987 sensation. Levine defended the evolution of multicultural college curricula and was also concerned with the "larger struggle over how our past should be conserved, how our memory should function, and where the focus of our attention should be."³⁰ Despite these larger themes, Levine's work is focused on higher education, then and now.

All three of those books contribute to the dialogue about the great books idea, but as of 2013 only one book has been published focused solely on its history: Alex Beam's *A Great Idea at the Time: The Rise, Fall, and Curious Afterlife of the Great Books* (2008). Beam's generally well-received survey is an important, if flawed, contribution to the historical literature. Beam's goal was to be fun and entertaining, and he succeeds. The book holds forth a present-oriented argument that is, I believe, embedded in both the title and the final chapter of what he called "a brief, engaging, and undidactic history of the Great Books." Beam sees virtues and many vices in the history of the great books idea and shows that a surprising number of past users, consumers, and producers have gainfully participated in the Great Books Movement. Despite the substantial dose of history in the first three-quarters of his project, Beam, as a journalist, becomes a participant-researcher in the last quarter of his book. The book translates Beam's personal journey, wherein he reconciles himself to what he calls an "abstruse, fundamentally Midwestern topic."³¹

Beam's pithy, 200-page story gained reviews in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *Chicago Tribune*. Encyclopædia Britannica's very active weblog dedicated a week-long forum to Beam's book. The *Times* declared it one of 2008's "100 Notable Books." Even so, Beam's work is highly subjective. Indeed, Beam himself wrote that "when it comes to the Great Books, no one is without an opinion." While it is conceded that all histories are subjective, some are more and less so. On the latter, when fairness and objectivity suffer, history becomes caricature. As has been the case in many prior histories of the great books idea, Beam admires the witty, charismatic Hutchins, and Erskine is treated sympathetically. However, numerous passages throughout the text demonstrate that Beam, also like many others before him, developed a strong distaste for Adler's style and personality ("Hobbit-like," "perennial showman

and egomaniac").³² The book, then, despite being entertaining and well researched, falls into some familiar ruts.

This book, in contrast to Beam and in spite of Adler's known flaws, is revisionary in that it rescues Adler from what E. P. Thompson called "the enormous condescension of posterity."³³ One person's provocative jerk is another person's champion. This work aims for a happy medium. And by making Adler the focus, *The Dream of a Democratic Culture* is unique in the historiography of the great books idea.

* * *

Any project more than ten years in the making will result in numerous debts to family, friends, and colleagues. The acknowledgments given, then, will necessarily be partial and incomplete. I take full responsibility for any important omissions.

Conceived and nurtured at Loyola University Chicago, this book began as a graduate seminar paper and evolved into a dissertation. The dissertation committee consisted of Lewis Erenberg (director), Susan Hirsch, and Michael Perko. I thank them all for their support, but Lew and Susan deserve special mention for advice and professional support ranging far beyond dissertation construction and program navigation. At Loyola, I received some financial assistance from the Arthur J. Schmitt Foundation and Loyola's Graduate School, as well as a graduate assistantship with Mundelein College and a summer research grant from the Ann Ida Gannon Center for Women and Leadership.

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As my project progressed I became involved in an effort to revive and organize the field of US intellectual history. That work resulted in a first-rate blog, an ongoing conference, and, eventually, the Society for US Intellectual History. I cannot understate the importance of this community, in person and virtual, as a support group and informal post-doc/finishing school. My S-USIH friends and colleagues include: Andrew Hartman, Paul Murphy, Ben Alpers, Lora Burnett, Ray Haberski, Lauren Kientz Anderson, Mike O'Connor, David Sehat, Julian Nemeth, James Levy, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, Dan Wickberg, Matthew Cotter, Martin J. Burke, Ethan Schrum, Neil Jumonville, James Livingston, George Cotkin, Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, Bill McClay, and Michael Kramer.

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1

The Great Books Movement, 1920–1948

Chicago Mayor Martin Kennelly proclaimed “Great Books Week” for the city late in September 1948. Historians note that Kennelly, known as a “squeaky-clean” reform mayor, had overseen some lean times, culturally, after World War II and into the early Cold War years. Those barren times caused A. J. Liebling to designate Chicago “The Second City” for its lesser achievements in relation to New York City. The down times no doubt fed into enthusiasm for even lesser celebrations such as “Great Books Week.” The *Chicago Tribune* proclaimed the designation recognized “the Great Books Foundation’s cultural and recreational” contributions to the city. Illinois Governor Dwight Herbert Green and President Harry S. Truman endorsed the event. The week’s top attraction was a great books discussion demonstration in Orchestra Hall.¹

That demonstration featured Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins leading discussions of Plato’s dialogues, *Apology* and *Crito*. Attendees included Chicago luminaries such as Marshall Field III, head of the famous department store chain; Ralph Helstein, stockyard union leader; Meyer Kestenbaum, president of Hart, Schaffner and Marx (tailored menswear company now known as Hartmarx); and Robert L. Simons, “proprietor of the Hitching Post restaurants.” Aside from these notables, another 2,500 persons “jammed Orchestra Hall”—with 1,500 purportedly turned away at the door.²

Why were Adler and Hutchins the stars of the show? Due to the prominence of the University of Chicago in the city, and the fact the both men had been in the news fairly often since the early 1930s due to their writings and public speaking engagements, they were very public Chicago intellectuals. They were celebrity intellectuals in a period, noted by Warren Susman, when celebrities and personalities were sources of cultural change—in a decade, moreover, when the notion of “culture” reassured people of a shared

American character. But, more directly, their discussion of Plato probably resembled the routine of Socratic questioning they, as professors and chief raconteurs, had inflicted on their students since the fall of 1930. This involved Adler's acting the straight man to Hutchins' being the "witty interrogator." They sometimes argued "moot points" for "amusement." Adler saw Hutchins (Figure 1.1) as without peer in the art of "repartee." Adler later admiringly recalled Hutchins' "lightning flash rejoinders" that astonished his friends and even Adler at times.³

For his part Adler was no slouch, even if less admired. In his memoirs of Hutchins' presidency, William H. McNeill called Adler a "show-off." Despite his distaste, McNeill recalled Adler's "argumentative skill" and "seriousness." Thomas Aquinas' "scholastic method" of posing questions and raising objections fit "Adler's habit of mind perfectly." McNeill also observed that "Hutchins never disagreed with Adler in public." Hutchins, moreover, seemed "to relish the dismay



Figure 1.1 Robert Maynard Hutchins, 1941.

Source: University of Chicago, Special Collections Research Center, Photographic Archive.

Adler's pugnacious arguments aroused" among his opponents, at the University and beyond.⁴ It was with these contrasting styles that both offered the public, ironically, a singular, unachievable paradigm for discussing great books. Both in the classroom and their Orchestra Hall event, it was a performance and a lesson in critical thinking. On the latter, despite their singularity and personality, their subsequent writings point to something larger: they hoped the applicable aspects of their model for vigorous discussion would be emulated across America. It was a vision of democratized culture that consisted of challenging oneself with reading and thinking about great books. They wanted an educational movement, and their models were limited, but there is no indication that they wanted ideological purity or philosophical tidiness.⁵

Kennelly's fete for the Great Books Foundation likely seemed old news for the few Chicagoans who were up-to-date on the city's intellectual scene. By 1948, the Great Books Foundation had been in operation in Chicago for almost a year. The University of Chicago's "University College," in cooperation with Chicago's Public Library, had already experimented with free great books classes around the city since 1944. The success of that program had led to extensions in Cleveland, Indianapolis, and Detroit in 1946. By the next year, the program had spread to 17 cities, necessitating the formation of the Foundation.⁶

During the period from the 1920s to the 1940s, the great books idea began as an experiment in New York City and ended as a national phenomenon based in Chicago. Promoters transformed the idea from a small-scale educational novelty housed in a few elite universities to an adult education movement concerned with democratizing the larger culture through great books. Although Hutchins was important to this, it was Mortimer Adler (Figure 1.2) who enabled the transition. Adler first came into contact with the great books idea when he took John Erskine's General Honors course at Columbia University in 1920. The People's Institute, which operated in the mid-1920s, proved to be an influence for Adler in the long term. But it was *How to Read a Book*, published in 1940, that promoted the General Honors strain within the Great Books Movement. Thereafter Adler and his intellectual community would come to purposely promote a high-level, less-formal educational program of uplift not bounded by rules of higher education institutions. While this community began its discourse over the merits of the great books idea in New York, Chicago became the accidental, if happy, launching ground for the Great Books Movement.



Figure 1.2 Mortimer J. Adler, very young, undated.

Source: University of Chicago, Special Collections Research Center, Photographic Archive.

How to Read a Book: The inspiration

When Adler left Columbia University for the University of Chicago in 1930, at the invitation of Robert Maynard Hutchins, he went from relative obscurity to basking in Hutchins' afterglow as a minor Chicago celebrity. Hutchins and his wife Maude had become members, according to Mary Ann Dzuback, of the city's "intellectual aristocracy" as soon as Hutchins was inaugurated as the University of Chicago's president, in November 1929. Dzuback noted that Maude was attractive, and that "men and women alike found Robert's good looks and sharp wit irresistible." Although less charismatic and attractive than Hutchins, Adler was grafted into that aristocracy.⁷ Adler built on Hutchins' afterglow to become a public figure in his own right.

When he came, Adler brought the great books idea with him. While introduced to great books in Erskine's aforementioned General

Honors course, it was Adler's experience at the People's Institute that instigated and reinforced his—and his friends'—belief that great books could be accessible to all readers. Formed during the Progressive Era, in 1897, by Columbia University professor Charles Sprague Smith, it was an offshoot of the Cooper Union mechanics school. The People's Institute existed under the assumption that all deserved, or needed, educational and cultural uplift. As Leon Fink wrote of that period, "education ranked...high on the agenda" of Progressive intellectuals and reformers. Considering the logic of reformers he added: "If the people were to seize their democratic birthright for the greater good...they must engage their higher faculties of reason" and be "schooled in sense of civic duty." This would make them a "democratic public."⁸

The great books idea became a part of the Institute's story during the directorship of Everett Dean Martin. He became director in 1921 and shortly thereafter articulated his view of the Institute's educational philosophy. In his 1926 work, *The Meaning of a Liberal Education*, he argued that education's task is to "reorient the individual, to enable him to take a richer and more significant view of his experiences, to place him above and not within the system of his beliefs and ideals." To Martin a liberal education meant "the kind of education which sets the mind free from the servitude of the crowd and from vulgar self-interests." He added, "Education is simply philosophy at work. It is the search for the 'good life.'" The structure that would mix Martin's liberal arts program with the great books idea was an Institute subsidiary called "The School of the People's Institute," or simply "The School." Its mission included teaching philosophy, psychology, biology, and literary criticism. A grant from the Carnegie Foundation, given around 1925, enabled the hiring of Scott Buchanan, a Harvard-trained philosopher and Rhodes Scholar, to run The School.⁹

Buchanan's work as a teaching assistant at Columbia, in turn, brought him in contact with Mortimer Adler and other Columbia graduate students, whom Buchanan eventually solicited as lecturers for The School. At one point, the book enthusiast Clifton "Kip" Fadiman served as secretary for the staff of lecturers. Mark Van Doren, already a Columbia professor, taught during the first year of the experiment. Recruited by Buchanan, The School also hired the Aristotelian philosopher Richard McKeon. He had studied under the historian-philosopher Étienne Gilson at the Sorbonne in France. But, most importantly, the Columbia connection also involved educational ideas. To wit, sometime in The School's first year Buchanan and Adler proposed to Martin the idea of conducting General Honors-style classes. Martin agreed and the Institute's School began its great books experiment in 1926 with a series of seminars.¹⁰

The Institute's School formed 13 total discussion groups averaging 15 working-class New Yorkers per group, each with one discussion leader. The groups were explicitly organized "to represent a cross-section of educational and social level, age, and race." Six of the 13 groups studied "general interest," great books-like programs—involving about 90 of the 150 total participants. Little is available, from the working-class reader's perspective, on the effectiveness of these groups. Adler and Whittaker Chambers taught the "Renaissance and Modern Thought" seminar. For a November 1926 report, Adler relayed that their group was "lively in discussion," "likely to read," and "shockable"—but "untrained intellectually" and "full of prejudices and 'ideas.'" After another December session, Adler reported that the "discussion of Descartes was better than I expected." The discussion of Shakespeare, in another meeting, resulted in Adler's highest praise: the worker readers were "as good as my Columbia groups."¹¹ Aside from Adler's word, the great books' effectiveness in the Institute's School can be inferred from the continuation of the democratic experiment another year through 1928.

Even after moving on to new ventures nearly all of this cohort—Adler, Buchanan, Fadiman, Van Doren—cited their experiences with the Institute's great books program in two ways. First, as proof that the great books could in fact be taught and learned outside the academy. And second, as their source of optimism about the possibilities of great books-style reading groups.¹² Their experience at the Institute's School caused them to believe in the accessibility of great books among unschooled but enthusiastic readers. The experiment with ethnically diverse working-class New Yorkers seeded a movement based on fostering a more unified, shared, and democratic life of thought.

Returning to Chicago, Hutchins welcomed Adler's transmission of the great books idea. Prior to his arrival, internal studies by the university had concluded that the same highly specialized professors who ran successful and powerful graduate programs were not translating that success into a good undergraduate college. Hutchins had been hired, in part, to change this. After discussions with Adler, he became convinced that bringing a General Honors-like program to the undergraduate college would fix the problem. Indeed, in his history of the Hutchins years at the University of Chicago, William McNeill asserted that "Adler did more than anyone else to shape Hutchins' mature ideas about education." Adler was Hutchins' most important advisor during this period, articulating for Hutchins a philosophy of education. Hutchins compiled those ideas in a few books, most notably *Higher Learning in America* (1936). Despite Adler's influence, at the time Hutchins himself received much of the credit and blame

for great books-related changes at the university. Hutchins' charisma overshadowed his staff and the University itself during his tenure.¹³ If Hutchins provided the style, Adler helped give the administration its substance.

A great deal of descriptive and analytical scholarship exists on the controversy, known as "The Chicago Fight," that surrounded the curricular changes proposed and implemented by Hutchins and Adler at the University of Chicago. Those internal changes matter less here, however, than the external perception of them, that is, what those changes meant for the reputation of the great books idea. Those perceptions were manipulated by Adler and Hutchins in that, as coteachers of the General Honors course, they regularly invited prominent observers, guest examiners, and guest discussion leaders. These also included author-philosopher Gertrude Stein; actresses Katharine Cornell, Lillian Gish (twice), and Ethel Barrymore; the actor-director Orson Welles; and Eugene Meyer (publisher of the *Washington Post*) and his wife, Agnes. These staged appearances resulted in newspaper coverage through the 1930s.¹⁴

During the Chicago Fight, Adler worked to develop a philosophy that grew out of his 1920s explorations of great books, particularly Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*. Adler's affinity for the philosophy of Aquinas (i.e., "Thomism") proceeded such that Adler would become one of the best-known neoscholastic philosophers in the United States by the 1940s. That relationship also afforded Adler opportunities to promote the great books idea at Catholic colleges. Later he would call this his "Thomistic Period." Despite the earlier introduction to Aquinas, Adler claims that it was only after the Chicago Fight that he developed a "dissatisfaction with modern philosophy." Fueled in part by the lack of an intellectual connection with his Chicago colleagues, Adler looked elsewhere for community. Beginning in 1932 he found it with the American Catholic Philosophical Association (ACPA). He would eventually deliver addresses at ACPA conferences in 1934 and 1937. This period resulted in at least two books aimed at neoscholastics, as well as many articles published in *The Thomist*, *Thought*, and *Commonweal*. Adler also first encountered the philosophical writings of the French Thomist, Jacques Maritain, in the 1930s. After some correspondence Maritain would become a long-distance member of Adler's community of discourse in the 1940s and 1950s. Many years later, in 1976, all of this work resulted in Adler being presented with the ACPA's "Aquinas Medal" for outstanding contributions to Thomism.¹⁵

Adler's interest in Thomism corresponded with what Lewis Perry described as a "renewed interest among intellectuals in traditional Christianity." Adler's actions paralleled Catholic intellectuals who

criticized John Dewey and defended the idea of “unchanging fundamentals.” Philip Gleason, who has written on the history of Catholic higher education, argued that neoscholasticism formed the “central element” in a 1930s Catholic revival. It provided Catholic colleges with a means to integrate their curricula and “critique modern educational trends.” When those colleges were receptive to Adler, via speaking engagements and otherwise, Adler’s neoscholasticism provided those institutions a connection to popular, secular culture. Inspired by Adler’s philosophy of education and work on the great books idea, a few Catholic schools even instituted some form of a great books curriculum in the 1940s, namely St. Mary’s (Moraga, California), Milwaukee’s Marquette University, and Notre Dame University in 1950.¹⁶ Adler’s Thomism, in the end, provided an intriguing wrinkle to the persona developed in the shadow of Hutchins. And it opened new audiences for the Great Books Movement.

How to Read a Book: The production

As time progressed, however, Adler sought to more than just put the great books idea to work in his philosophical endeavors. He wanted to spread the good news beyond the University of Chicago, much as he had at the People’s Institute. Adler accomplished this dramatically, in 1940, with *How to Read a Book*. This book more than any other catapulted the great books idea into the Great Books Movement.

Adler reflected that his motivation to write *How to Read a Book* derived from practical and theoretical, if not entirely altruistic, forces. On the theoretical plane, in his memoirs he recalled that the 1938 lectures he had given “on the art of reading” inspired him to write in more detail on what it meant to be a deep, close reader. The book’s subtitle, “*The Art of Getting a Liberal Education*,” pointed to a philosophical goal. Practically speaking, Adler later confessed that he also wrote the book “to make money.” He requested and received (with help from Clifton Fadiman) a sizeable, by 1939 standards, \$1,000 advance from his publisher, Simon and Schuster.¹⁷ Despite the material gain, the book appears much less contrived, or consumer-driven, when viewed in the context of his more than 15 years of conducting “general honors” seminars for undergraduates, his and Hutchins’ exertions in the Chicago fight, and his utilization of great books in writing. The great books idea forms the foundation for *How to Read a Book* in that reading great books acts as the final cause—the end goal—for one’s exertions, to become the best reader she or he can be.

On the work itself, *How to Read a Book* was part doomsday, part cheerleader, part informative, and part professorial. It instructed in the art of reading and made suggestions on what to read, namely,

great books. After introducing several ideas about reading, including reading for information, reading for knowledge, and the failure of the schools to teach good reading, *How to Read a Book* provided rules for reading. The rules constituted the book's heart: (1) reading from the whole to the parts, designated as the "structural or analytic reading"; (2) reading from parts to the whole, or an "interpretive or synthetic" reading; and (3) deciding to agree or disagree, the "critical or evaluative" reading. Adler then addressed "the rest of the reader's life," including reading's relation to "free minds and free men," and a list of the great books. The latter contained 130 authors, and was longer and more inclusive than the great books lists derived from Columbia's General Honors courses (see appendix for Erskine's 1927 General Honors list).¹⁸

Adler received help from his community of discourse, particularly Fadiman, in constructing *How to Read a Book*. Their relationship began when Adler, along with Mark Van Doren, instructed Fadiman in General Honors. Fadiman claimed, however, that it was really Erskine who first taught him "how to read properly." And Fadiman was indeed an excellent reader. Adler noted that he could take "the class away from me any time he wanted by asking better questions or interjecting more sophisticated comments." Adler compromised by seeking "Kip's" help in the classroom. For his part Fadiman recalled, in his characteristically self-deprecating fashion, how he "read, talked, and floundered" through the great books in General Honors. Upon graduation he earned Phi Beta Kappa honors from Columbia. It was during this period that he also began teaching at the People's Institute. As testimony to the tightness of this great books community, Fadiman gave the eulogy at Erskine's death in June 1951.¹⁹

After graduation Fadiman engaged in various book-related ventures. He served as "top editor" for Simon and Schuster's fledgling publishing house until 1933, and then as *The New Yorker's* book editor for the next ten years. He acquired his greatest name recognition, however, by hosting the *Information, Please!* radio program, which began in 1938. Fadiman's work with the Book-of-the-Month Club has been ably traced by historians. Beginning with his appointment to its board in 1944, Fadiman would serve as a senior judge for over 50 years. At Adler's behest his relationship with Britannica began in the 1940s, deepened in the 1950s, and lasted through the 1990s.²⁰

Despite holding professional positions that required deep reflection, as well as first-rate skills in reading and editing, Fadiman did not see himself as "a profound thinker." Others knew him, however, to possess an encyclopedia-like memory. He was also something of an epicurean, loving fine wines, cheese, and cigars. The *New York Times* reported in his 1999 obituary that Fadiman "prided himself on his

skill as a popularizer," as well as "on his ability to make lofty subjects accessible to people who lacked his education and acuity." Adler later wrote, of both Fadiman and Jacques Barzun, that "I cannot recount all the ways in which [my] friendship with them has influenced my life and my work." Only Adler's more "brief" friendship with Hutchins, which lasted over 40 years, exceeded his affinity for Fadiman.²¹

Adler first wrote to Fadiman with the idea for *How to Read a Book* late in February 1939. At the time Fadiman worked for Simon and Schuster. By the first week of March, Adler had already predicted to him, tongue-in-cheek, that his idea might be a "best seller."²² In the same letter, which was also meant for other staff at Simon and Schuster, Adler wrote,

I have talked to you frequently about doing a book on liberal arts which would explain to the public what Hutchins is driving at in his attack on American education, and what St. John's scheme really means. I think I have at last found the ideal way of writing a sound popular book on the subject, a book that will appeal both to that large audience already excited by the controversies [surrounding] Hutchins and St. John's, and also to that even larger audience of Americans who are interested in their own further improvement, who want to better themselves. The key to the whole matter is contained in the single word "reading." I have discovered from years of popular lecturing that everybody wants to know what to read, and even more how to read.²³

A few weeks later M. Lincoln Schuster approved Adler's idea with an advance and a contract.

The contract letter revealed that *How to Read a Book* would be a team project. Schuster mentioned that he had fantasized about just such a book as early as 1932, and had a number of suggestions related to the title, tone, and even potential coauthors. He also had suggestions on the dangers of "over-reading," as well as on topics such as taking notes, using a library, classifying books, and skipping around in books.²⁴ Further emphasizing the team nature of Adler's project, Adler received a warning from Fadiman, on May 16, about problems with early drafts of the manuscript:

I want to emphasize...that the writing will have to be considerably more interesting...All the material has been carefully read by the entire S & S staff and while they all respect the aim of the book, they are unanimous in feeling that your stylistic approach is pretty dull...Remember: Short paragraphs, shorter sentences,...[and the] absence of polysyllables...Introduce humor

wherever possible . . . [And] have more and shorter chapters, rather than fewer and longer ones.²⁵

Adler heeded Kip's advice. Indeed, for this and every future book he wrote for larger, popular audiences he would increasingly follow Fadiman's prescriptions.

Even so, Adler had difficulty learning to write in a popular idiom. Although nearly all of his community of discourse read *How to Read a Book's* early drafts, including Hutchins, Arthur Rubin, and Van Doren, Adler made a special effort to save comments from Fadiman and his wife, Polly. He clearly valued their advice. In August 1939, Polly offered the following: "One of the most irritating, though minor, faults in this book is the barrage of unnecessary rhetorical phrases of formal logic. They often make the text seem heavy." She continued, "Sometimes Mort's tone is needlessly contentious"; "Most of the references seem to be to 'Summa Theologica' and Aristotle's 'Ethics' and 'Poetica' etc. The general effect is unattractive." Her final analysis was that "[i]n spite of [my] carping, I enjoyed reading this book enormously . . . But if it is a *popular* book as it now stands, then I'm—just mistaken." Adler did not find Polly's criticisms easy to take, and said so in a letter to Kip.²⁶

Whether or not it was the result of an impulse to defend his spouse, Fadiman was also blunt. His own salty comments on Adler's text were more pointed: "Tone a little insulting"; "Your reader doesn't give a damn about your distinguished friends"; "Don't be so fucking *moral*"; "Please throw out *all* cute Latin or French phrases"; "To hell with all of these distinctions"; "Gets wearisome"; and "The effect is schoolmasterish."²⁷ After some reflection Adler replied with some sweetness and a confession. He wrote: "Please, please apologize to Polly for me. When I finished revising, I found that I had made all the corrections and revision[s] which she originally suggested. She was right on almost every point. I'm a dope for not having seen it at once." Then Adler offered a startling admission: "Worse than a dope, I'm guilty of needing you to reinforce Polly's criticisms before I was willing to see their soundness. I am really contrite, and I want Polly to know it."²⁸ This is one of the only confessions of sexism evident in Adler's letters. Returning the manuscript, the first lesson was hard for Adler. But if any ill will was felt by the Fadimans, it seems short-lived. Fadiman would continue reviewing drafts of Adler's books for another 40 years. Fadiman helped Adler be a better popularizer.

After publication in February 1940, *How to Read a Book* propelled Adler to the forefront of the Great Books Movement and into a position now referred to as a "public intellectual." The book's publication provided Adler with a tidy vehicle for broadening the appeal of great

books beyond academia. It was a number one bestseller for several weeks in 1940, and ended the year second in nonfiction with 72,000 copies sold.²⁹ The book's title would cause a stir with some booksellers and reviewers. Lincoln Schuster addressed the issue, somewhat weakly, in a memo to booksellers. He acknowledged that the title implied a "Dale Carnegie contribution to the how-to genre," but the author and publisher meant it to be "partly ironical, partly affirmative and educational." Title notwithstanding, the book's popularity was such that by July one daunted reviewer declared that the book "has been a consistent best seller week after week from Maine to California and has had multitudes of reviews." The reviewer added that "it is hardly possible for this leisurely quarterly journal to say a great deal that . . . is not well known to the average reader."³⁰ A consideration of the intellectual and cultural context of *How to Read a Book's* reception helps explain the phenomenon.

How to Read a Book: The reception

Good marketing partially explains the populace's familiarity with *How to Read a Book*, but good reviews cemented its success. Some of the sales can be credited to serendipitous, storefront marketing by Scribner's bookstore in New York City, as well as in Chicago's Marshall Field store and Kroch's Bookstore. Simon and Schuster also took out a half-page of advertising in the *New York Times*, pointedly downplaying potential "Carnegie-esque" dismissals. Most important to *How to Read a Book's* fame, however, were the "large number of early and favorable reviews."³¹ From the prestigious and cosmopolitan *New Yorker* to the parochial *Cleveland Open Shelf*, reviewers introduced *How to Read a Book* to a wide audience in terms of class and literary savvy. In the first month alone, the *Saturday Review*, the *New York Times Book Review*, *Time*, and *America* reviewed Adler's book. An unsigned, reportorial review in the *New York Times Book Review* stated, "This is not one of those how-to books which beckon to a royal road that doesn't exist, or offer guidance to a goal that is not worth seeking: it is a serious and valuable invitation to an enrichment of personal life and an abler meeting of public responsibility." Notice the allusion to citizenship in that final clause. *Time's* exuberant review called the book "useful" and accessible. While affirming Adler's newness to the national scene, it also remarked that his "philosophic essays respectful of St. Thomas Aquinas" made him "one of the most scintillating, *least adored*, thinkers in the US."³² These assessments from national publications built on the storefront marketing received by Adler.

Jacques Barzun's careful assessment in the *Saturday Review* was at once laudatory and cautious. A former student of Adler's, at the

time of this review Barzun was a member of Columbia's history faculty. He was not yet within Adler's immediate circle of discourse, as he would be in the 1970s and 1980s, so this review is more than logrolling. It takes on a degree of independence from Adler's own aims. Starting with the topic that became a favorite one for reviewers, Barzun implored readers to "not be misled by the modest title of this skillful book." The work, he argued, tackled bigger tasks, as well as the grandest of all themes for Americans: "The book is in reality a tract for the times, beginning with the problem of literacy and ending with the relation of critical-mindedness to democratic institutions." As for execution in the context of larger aims, Barzun argued that "despite a great deal of intentional and effective repetition," the book is "packed full of high matters which no one solicitous for the future of American culture can afford to overlook."³³ The book then, in Barzun's view, was fighting anti-intellectualism while fostering the dream of a democratic culture.

The great books idea does not escape Barzun's notice. He noted that the book established Adler's continuity with what he and Hutchins had advocated in Chicago, as well as the recreation of St. John's College in Annapolis as an all-great books school (beginning in the 1937–1939 period). Speaking to the shared intellectual culture that great books provide, Barzun affirmed Adler's view on the accessibility of great books while also offering a few cautionary notes. In his first note of caution, Barzun argued that "the student of great books—and they alone constitute the materials of reading as an art—will find that like all arts, it is not quite so simple as mastering the multiplication table, though, contrary to common belief, it is equally within the reach of ordinary brains." This point echoed that of Joan Shelley Rubin, who later lamented that *How to Read a Book* reduced "the reading process to the anxious mastery of a table of rules." But Barzun would not assert that Adler cheapened great books by underselling their complexity—or that he acted nefariously as a popularizer. Barzun "enthusiastically" agreed with Adler's "main thesis," which was to provide people with a system for reading and to raise their aspirations for books read. Of Adler's system he said it was "by turns winning, provocative, sensible, utopian, familiar, and original." To Barzun that system helped one navigate the paradoxical accessibility and complexity of great books.³⁴

Barzun's second note of caution expanded on the first by arguing that the book and Adler were "haunted" by an intellectual relativism. Barzun's ghost was not meant to be scary, despite the high-minded primacy Adler gives to reason in forming a unity of wisdom. Relativism in reading, to Barzun, did not mean "anything goes" or an abandonment of excellence but merely "relating truth to the observer of it." It

was one thing to be wary of total relativism in terms of the hierarchy of literature, as well as moral relativism, but Barzun affirmed that we are all partial relativists in our pursuit of life's truths. To extend this a bit using a term not present in Barzun's review, the lesson was that even if by superior reading skills "culture" became attainable by all, uniform conclusions by enlightened readers would not necessarily result.³⁵ A democratic culture did not mean homogeneity necessarily, nor conformity.

A last caution arose in relation to the guardians of high culture (e.g., the "bearers of light" in Barzun's terms). Barzun spoke to both them and his review readers when he affirmed, tongue-in-cheek, that *How to Read a Book* "may also stiffen [read: empower] not a few in the belief that industry and method [alone] make an artist." Becoming an artist of interpretation, however, required a certain individualized, relativized, and self-administered "salt." So, while subtly acknowledging naysayers about the notion of democratizing a great books-based education, Barzun agreed that those possessing the requisite industriousness could, in fact, become high-level artisans of reading. The necessary corollary was that culture can be attained, via reading great books for insight and meaning, by those lacking the requisite accidents of birth; it can be democratic.³⁶

Building on Adler's devotion to Thomism, as noted in *Time*, Catholic praise accompanied secular acclaim for *How to Read a Book*. Nine Catholic periodicals reviewed it in the summer of 1940. Three bulwarks—*America*, *Commonweal*, and *The Catholic World*—gave *How to Read a Book* excellent reviews. But the most intriguing assessment came from *Interracial Review*. Founded in 1934 by Rev. William M. Markoe, S. J., in St. Louis, Missouri, *Interracial Review* was a monthly magazine of the Catholic Interracial Program. The liberal Program fought race prejudice and held that "prejudice on the part of Catholic laity is a barrier to the conversion of the Negro and a trial to the new found Faith of the Negro convert." They believed "Catholic principles... [that uphold] the sanctity of the Negro's natural rights, [also] impose upon all Catholics a rule of conduct which must be followed, regardless of any temporary inconveniences, apprehensions, or difficulties."³⁷

Dr. Harry McNeill's June 1940 assessment in *Interracial Review* was positive, but with an interesting twist. Feeling that Adler's ethnicity and religion would be important to African-American audiences, he remarked that "Professor Adler is a brilliant young non-Catholic philosopher of Jewish birth who is one of the outstanding students of St. Thomas Aquinas... Mr. Adler comes from afar." McNeill added that Adler has "never attended a Catholic school and... never taught

at one." After summarizing the book, McNeill brought the African-American tradition(s) of uplift through education into focus:

Mr. Adler's books should have special significance for thoughtful Negroes. The schooling available to Negroes has never been as ample as that for whites. Dr. Adler consoles Negroes with the thought that they have not missed much. Moreover, he brings them the same message of hope that he brings to all groups who feel the need of a liberal education. Why cannot Negroes start reading clubs and discussion groups throughout the country? These will be better than nothing and may ultimately prove superior to what is offered by the educational system. Dr. Adler assures us from *experience* that the beginnings can be extremely modest and professional guidance very limited. Self-help has characterized the great Negro advances up from slavery. Perhaps Dr. Adler has hit upon the crucial means of implementing the freedom of the Negro.³⁸

McNeill appealed to the tradition of W. E. B. Du Bois over that of Booker T. Washington. It would be liberal education, not mere skills training, that freed African Americans from their spiritual and intellectual chains. McNeill does not specify whether he believed that content or process was more important. But it seems clear that he believed an education through great books could serve as the stepping stone to a more democratic and socially just society.

On the negative side, the implication of McNeill's review (including its specific racial audience) was most likely the *exact* fear of other reviewers. An anonymous review in *The Atlantic* touched on the same snobbish fear addressed by Barzun:

Mr. Adler's notion that "almost all of the great books in every field are within the grasp of all normally intelligent men" seems to us to need a deal of sifting. We do not know what he means by "normally intelligent," but if he means the average run of intelligence in our population, or in the student body of our schools and colleges, we believe he is *deplorably wrong*. So also... the book's subtitle, "The Art of Getting a Liberal Education," savors strongly of quackery.³⁹

Acting as guardians of culture, *The Atlantic* added, "These few observations [of the book] are enough to show that while Mr. Adler's work may do some good... it may also do some harm... A liberal education is not to be got on any such easy terms as he proposes."⁴⁰

American culture could not be democratized so easily. Apparently *The Atlantic* chose to de-emphasize what *Commonweal's* C. R. Morey and several other reviewers noted: "Effort is stressed by Professor Adler."⁴¹

Despite *The Atlantic's* poor opinion *How to Read a Book* marked the beginning of the rest of Adler's career. Its success cemented for him a place in American popular culture. The book catalyzed Adler's future efforts in promoting philosophy and great books. He later claimed that *How to Read a Book* was his "only book... that gained worldwide attention." Editions emerged in Great Britain and Australia, and translations were made into "French, Spanish, Italian, Swedish, Japanese, and German." The book resulted in Adler's increased popularity on the lecture circuit, and he wrote corollary articles entitled "How to Mark a Book" and "How to Read a Dictionary."⁴²

Conclusion: The Great Books Movement

On top of helping Adler personally, it is no exaggeration to argue that *How to Read a Book* started what could be called "The Great Books Movement." That movement grew rapidly in the early 1940s. In Chicago, one catalyst for that growth—as a kind of public symbol and tacit approval from the business community—was "the Fat Man's Class," which had begun meeting in 1942–1943 at Chicago's University Club. The moniker derived, according to some, from the group's "affluence rather than the girth of its members." Members of this class included Chicago notables such as Harold and Charles Swift, Marshall Field, Jr., Walter Paepcke, Hermon Dunlap Smith, William Benton, Hughston McBain (president of Marshall Field and Company), and Laird Bell. This group caught the "fancy" of the populace, causing the University of Chicago's University College to partner with the Chicago Public Library in 1944 to set up great books courses around the city.⁴³

If there were any questions about Adler's national ambitions for the great books idea, as well as his democratic dream for cultural dissemination, they were answered in June 1946. That month he spoke at the American Library Association's annual meeting, in Buffalo, New York, before 2,500 delegates, to advocate for the creation of "a universal adult education program involving 60,000,000 men and women." The program would extend the great books experiment to the public libraries of "every city and town in the country." The *New York Times's* Pulitzer Prize-winning education editor, Dr. Benjamin Fine, reported on Adler's speech. Fine attributed to Adler the notion that "education in a democracy must be as universal as citizenship." If "every man and woman" is not "helped to get a basic adult liberal

education” then “you cannot make democracy really work.” At the same meeting Adler announced that pilot great books projects had already been held in Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Indianapolis, and Washington. Hutchins later reported that experimental classes in the fall of 1946 involved 20,000 people from 17 American cities.⁴⁴

After the completion of these experiments, which lasted over a year, plans for the Great Books Foundation were announced in the summer of 1947. Lynn A. Williams, Jr., would be the Foundation’s first president after resigning from the Stewart-Warner Corporation. Walter P. Paepcke, chairman of the board for the Container Corporation of America, served as the Foundation’s first vice president. While Adler and Hutchins served on the Foundation’s board, the backgrounds of Williams and Paepcke underscore the fact that the Foundation would not approach its work as an institution of higher education. The Foundation’s concerns would be with adult education, not with college credit, degree-seekers, or the formal education establishment as such. Its activities would commence in the fall, and Hutchins expected 30,000 to participate in Foundation-sponsored, free great books classes. By 1948, the Foundation’s presence would be felt across the continent, from Seattle to Wichita to Detroit, with over 50,000 participants. The overall goal was to enroll 15,000,000 people. One can see why Chicago’s Mayor Kennelly may have felt it necessary, obligatory even, to fete the Foundation’s Chicago roots the same year.⁴⁵

What enabled these high aspirations in the 1940s? Stepping back from the efforts of Adler, Hutchins, and Foundation participants, great books reading groups, apart from imparting knowledge about great works and high culture, likely helped citizens cope with numerous pressures, the responsibilities, of living in a complex global democracy. During World War II, the groups no doubt helped distract those on the home front. Great books might also provide contact with a world of ideas closed to many working in factories (i.e., enrichment)—a welcome respite from the daily barrage of war news. After the war and in the early years of the Atomic Age, great books continued to present a way to understand the West, to think about its problems relating to the world, and to help make the reader more of a Western cosmopolitan. If great books were a stand-in for “the past” then, in David Lowenthal’s words, they helped readers “make sense of the present” by providing lessons from the past. Great books gave readers a sense of “meaning, purpose, and value” in a fear-filled world. Readings groups provided comfort and communal sharing in the midst of hardship, whether direct and material as during World War II, or more emotional and indirect as during the Cold War.⁴⁶

Returning to 1947 and 1948, in a promotional statement for the Foundation, Adler argued for some of the deeper goals related to

reading great books. He maintained that great books “are concerned with the relatively few basic ideas through the discussion of which men have gained insight, clarified their common problems[,] and directed their thinking in every field of subject-matter.” Hutchins reiterated this assumption of discussion about “great problems and ideas” in an August 1947 announcement published in the *New York Times*.⁴⁷ They were on the same page because they both had become involved in another corporate endeavor to bring great books to the masses. Their community’s dream for democratizing culture through the great books idea had turned to fostering a community of enlightened consumer readers.

2

Branding the History of Ideas: Adler, Lovejoy, and Britannica's *Great Books*, 1943–1952

On April 15, 1952, a few years after the formation of the Great Books Foundation, the Encyclopædia Britannica Corporation hosted a celebratory banquet, in New York City's lavish Waldorf Astoria Hotel. Its purpose was to announce the publication of what the *New York Times* dubbed a "literary leviathan." That monster was the 54-volume *Great Books of the Western World*—the set that by 1965 would fill living rooms and dens at an annual rate of 50,000 units sold and gross annual revenues of approximately \$20,000,000. The distinguished guest list for the 1952 event included Hollywood film "Code" enforcer Will H. Hays, Simon and Schuster publisher M. Lincoln Schuster, Book-of-the-Month-Club editor Irita Van Doren, and prominent businessmen Alfred Vanderbilt, Marshall Field, Jr., and Nelson A. Rockefeller. Dinner speakers included University of Chicago Chancellor Lawrence Kimpton (as master of ceremonies) and the French philosopher Jacques Maritain, as well as Clifton Fadiman, Robert Hutchins, Mortimer Adler, and Connecticut Senator and Britannica Publisher, William Benton. Other members of Adler's community of discourse, old and new, in attendance included Jacques Barzun, Scott Buchanan, William Gorman, Richard McKeon, and Mark Van Doren.¹ Never before—and never again after—would one spot hold so many influential and sophisticated supporters of the great books idea.

The gala dinner provided a moment for sanguine great books enthusiasts to look forward and backward. Attendees feasted on prime rib and inspected a "Founders Edition" of the set's two-volume *Syntopicon* and introductory volume, *The Great Conversation*. Subscribers had earned a place at the table by helping purchase the necessary 500 sets, priced at \$500 each, to bring the set into publication.² In his memoirs, Adler recalled the event deliberately: "the excellence of the food

and wine," the speakers' "eloquence," and the prominent attendees. For his part, beginning in 1943 he had worked nine years directly on the project—from conception to personally hustling the numbered Founder's Editions. The banquet capped the hardest labor, intellectual and otherwise, of the first half of his life.³

All speakers feted the occasion's *cause célèbre*, spending a great deal of time meditating on the meaning of tradition and history in relation to the great books idea. Kimpton opened by noting that Hutchins, Adler, and Benton were "zealous missionaries of the intellectual salvation...attained through the study of the Great Books."⁴ Temporary French expatriate, Princeton and Columbia University faculty member, and pre-eminent Thomistic philosopher, Jacques Maritain (Figure 2.1), followed Kimpton. Maritain's familiarity with the Britannica project derived from Adler, with whom he had formed



Figure 2.1 April 1952 Waldorf Astoria Dinner (NYC), Jacques Maritain at the lectern.

Source: University of Chicago, Special Collections Research Center, William Benton Papers.

a connection in the 1940s due to shared philosophical interests. At the dinner, Maritain addressed aspects of the set's "European heritage":

Allow me, as a European, to stress the significance of [the] . . . faithful attention of this country to the European tradition it has inherited. It seems remarkable to me that the notion of tradition, in its living and genuine sense, is now being rehabilitated, and the task of saving and promoting the best of this very tradition taken over by the pioneering spirit itself of America. This is a sign [that] . . . the historic process . . . [of] intellectual and spiritual struggle on which the destinies of the world depend [have] shift[ed] to this country. Yet this . . . struggle remains universal in nature, and the European mind is involved in it as deeply as the American mind . . . The Atlantic is now becoming that which the Mediterranean was for thirty centuries, the domestic sea of Western Civilization.⁵

Maritain's pleasure in the set clearly centered on its mooring in Western traditions and history—its Western cosmopolitanism. His words no doubt satisfied American traditionalist conservatives in the audience.⁶

He next covered the *Syntopicon*, a set of 102 introductory essays on the same number of "Great Ideas" identified as common topics of thought by the collection's authors. Maritain called it "an instrument for, and a harbinger of, the new endeavor of critical examination and creative synthesis through which alone the tradition of the Western world can survive."⁷ The history of ideas captured in the *Syntopicon* would help maintain a critical link to Europe for American thinkers.

Maritain shared with Adler, and other great books supporters, the belief that cultural progress will occur only when the history of a culture's ideas is studied. This would become a creed for those future, faithful defenders of the viability of the great books: namely, that progress is possible only if great books are the foundation of a society's education system and intellectual community. This belief and the "Great Ideas" essays in the *Syntopicon* helped cement a *Great Ideas Approach*, or strain, in the dynamic history of the great books idea. Maritain capped his address by saying, "At the core of the work undertaken in publishing the *Great Books of the Western World*, there is abiding faith in the dignity of the mind and the virtue of knowledge. Such a work is inspired by what might be called humanist generosity. Those who struggle for the liberties of the human mind have first to believe in the dignity of the human mind, and to trust the natural energies of the human mind."⁸ Dinner guests rained applause on Maritain.

Fadiman then addressed the guests with witticisms and profundities. He joked deprecatingly about how a "dancing bear" like himself

did not deserve the company of such “scholars” and “distinguished public servants.” But he too took stock of the history of ideas. Fadiman stated that “this brief shelf of books, placed against the mind, makes audible...the living voices of 3,000 years of my civilization.” The books free the mind “from the thralldom of the current” and break the “trance of the transient.” The *Great Books* were an antidote to “the curse of the contemporary.”⁹ To Fadiman, a sense of one’s intellectual history granted much-needed perspective. Both he and Adler believed in the great books’ ability, if critically read via the method outlined in *How to Read a Book*, to emancipate readers from the myopia of the present.

Next came Hutchins. He began lightly by thanking the guests, particularly the set’s prime mover and publisher, Senator Benton, and Mortimer Adler, constructor of the *Syntopicon* and “vital center of the operation.” In red-herring fashion, Hutchins praised superficialities. He reflected on the *Great Books*’ appearance, calling the set “handsome” and “elaborate.” He noted that “it was put together by the finest designer,” Rudolph Ruzicka—seated merely a few tables away.¹⁰ Getting more serious, Hutchins continued, with an evangelical zeal, on the themes of education, freedom, materialism, history, and Western civilization: “*Great Books of the Western World* is an act of piety. Here are the sources of our being. Here is our heritage. This is the West. This is its meaning for mankind. Here is the faith of the West, for here...is that dialogue by way of which Western man has believed that he can approach the truth. The deepest values of the West are implicated in this dialogue. It can be conducted only by free men. It is the essential reason for their freedom.”¹¹ Like the rest of the speakers, Hutchins clearly saw this as more than a mere Britannica business venture. To them the great books evidenced an elusive, immaterial quality—something spiritual. Hutchins’ talk of Western heritage, history, and values sounded similar to the rhetoric of conservative traditionalists like Richard Weaver, Leo Strauss, and John Hollowell.¹²

Hutchins concluded with a celebratory sense of history and an ominous touch of Cold War urgency. There were limits to his intersections with conservatism. At the time, as associate director of the Ford Foundation and its Fund for the Republic, he had been concerned about the chilling effects of McCarthyism on free speech—continuing his 1940s work as a defender of academic freedom at the University of Chicago.¹³ In concert with Maritain, he noted America’s obligation to its European roots and general Western character:

Great as other civilizations may be and may have been, no civilization can compare with that of the West in the range and variety and depth of the conversation that has characterized and defined

the West for more than 2000 years... But arms and money cannot preserve the spirit of Western civilization. That has to be done by a convinced and understanding people. America, while it says that it is defending Western civilization, can actually destroy it by terminating the dialogue. This it can do either by suppressing the free voices that would carry it on or simply by forgetting it. You can burn the books, or you can leave them unread. The result is the same... If America is to do her duty by Western civilization, she cannot be simply a passive, devout receiver or consumer of what the West has created for her. The main point about the dialogue is that it must be carried on.¹⁴

As with Maritain, applause ensued for Hutchins.

Introduction

Was this all mere bluster, or purple prose? One scholar seemed to imply as much, writing, in 1992, that the “rhetoric flowed as freely as the wine.” But if their intentions and hopes, as outlined above, were even half as honest, high-minded, and sober as they appear, how did the great books idea devolve into the cultural commodity despised by the Left that the Britannica set would become? This is not to say that the great books alone garnered derision from cultural critics. Contemporaries like Dwight Macdonald and Clement Greenberg sneered at all sorts of middle-class efforts to assimilate high culture. To them, the lesser products they actually consumed were “masscult” or “kitsch,” respectively. Later in the 1950s, even a future Adler ally, Jacques Barzun, would criticize Mortimer Adler’s “intention to provide the liberal arts for all”—this after he had praised the same in 1940 with *How to Read a Book*. Lessons from the history of ideas could not be obtained by easy reading, or by osmosis. Hutchins memorably feared from the outset that the books might become mere “colorful furniture for the front room.”¹⁵ High praise did not imply an ignorance of the risks.

There is no doubt that the great books idea could be abused as a mass cultural commodity. The idea’s transition to commodity had already happened in the United States with Charles W. Eliot’s “Five-foot Shelf of Harvard Classics.” Both Eliot’s set and Britannica’s *Great Books* came to be forms of mass culture subject to the concerns of business—including sales, marketing, production, profits, standardization, and efficiency. Once a fixed form was assumed, critics could rightly target it as a kind of ossified commodification of culture. Using Michael Kammen’s framework, one could say that the great books idea devolved from existence on the Great Plains of high culture (via excellence and its literary content) and popular culture

(via Adler and the 1940s clamor for reading groups), to a less distinguished, fossilized presence in the avalanche of cultural commodities. The Britannica transition, however, was qualitatively different. Eliot and his editors at P. F. Collier and Son controlled selections for his set, and Eliot's philosophical influences for choosing books are not as clear.¹⁶ But Mortimer Adler's influences, goals, and dreams have been established here already. And his thoughtful, sometimes contentious 1940s-era Britannica editorial board colleagues did not always agree with him. Because of these differences greater care must be taken in examining the roots of the 1952 publication.

As a foundational belief, the community of discourse that comprised Britannica's editorial team imagined the great books idea, manifest in the *Great Books of the Western World*, to be a kind of complex-but-popular collection of works that could foster an enlightened populace. The key for Adler and his cohort was the creation of a deep thinking citizenry. This accompanied their mid-century political liberalism, even though their rhetoric could sometimes sound as if it came from the 1950s "new conservatives."¹⁷ The conservative-seeming pronouncements of the 1952 dinner were balanced by the fact that mid-century great book promoters backed several liberal causes: world government, nuclear disarmament, free speech, and racial and economic equality. They sought the redistribution of cultural capital for a more democratized culture, not the total reification of an old, inflexible order. An exploration of the conception, production, and reception of Britannica's *Great Books* reinforces that argument.

Mortimer Adler was the central figure in this effort. Although Hutchins was editor in chief of Britannica's project, Adler's official—and unofficial—leadership role made him one of the project's most important figures. Adler edited the *Syntopicon* and chaired most of the meetings of the Advisory Board that selected the texts for the set.¹⁸ This does not detract from Hutchins' enthusiasm for, and promotion of, Britannica's project. It also does not mean that Hutchins did not influence the outcome. Rather, it means that Adler's concerns, intentions, strengths, and weaknesses permeated the entire process of creating the set. Speaking generally, he, Hutchins, and their associates sought the commodification of the great books idea not in the hope of achieving a "universal swindle" (selling art as trinkets), but for the practical purpose of instilling individual intellectual virtues by a thorough exploration of the history of Western ideas.¹⁹ They were academics working loosely under a business framework, not businessmen pretending to culture.

Particularly important in the *Great Books'* conception and production was the set's intellectual command center, the *Syntopicon*. A neologism derived from two Greek words signifying "a collection

of topics," the *Syntopicon* embodied both the effort to democratize culture and the contradictions inherent in that effort.²⁰ The two volumes consisted of 102 carefully chosen "Great Ideas" (topics), each beginning with an "Introduction" and followed by an "Outline of Topics," "References," and "Additional Readings" (appendix). By identifying the genre of these essays, it becomes clear that a key weakness in Britannica's execution of the great books idea, via the *Great Books' Syntopicon* volumes, lies in Adler's somewhat paradoxical philosophy of history. His philosophy at once celebrated Western tradition and shortchanged the nature of history and the history profession. Another weakness, by extension, existed in the tension of constructing the set from either inductive (*a posteriori*) or deductive (*a priori*) criteria. Would the *Great Books* and the ideas that the set celebrates, as consistently discussed topics in Western history (i.e., the Great Conversation), arise inductively from a circle of very good and great books themselves? Or would the set and the *Syntopicon's* discursive nodes deductively result from the particular ideas of a relatively small community of discourse (i.e., Adler and his colleagues) about what constitutes excellence and the liberal arts? Could a balance be achieved?²¹ Can notions of a democratized culture and cultural greatness coexist? These questions and others vexed Adler and his community of discourse during this period, and informed the building of the *Great Books of the Western World*. Adler looked for answers by reflecting on and extending his own philosophy of history.

The conception

Britannica's particular version of the great books idea evolved from two key factors. The first was William Benton's participation in the University of Chicago's University Club great books classes that started in 1943. The second was Adler's notion of an "idea index," which eventually became the *Syntopicon*. His idea derived from three sources: preparatory work in the writing of *How to Think About War and Peace*, a quixotic quest to construct a *Summa Dialectica*, and a definite philosophy of history.

William Benton drove the business end of the creation of Britannica's set with a Madison Avenue man's sales sensibility and a fortuitous investment. But first: how did he come to be involved with the University of Chicago? An old "debating teammate" of Hutchins at Yale, Hutchins had contracted Benton in April 1936 to "survey the university's problems and suggest approaches" in the wake of what was known as the "Walgreen case."²² This case began when Charles Walgreen accused Chicago faculty of subversive teaching in connection

with his niece's learning about Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*. Because of Benton's advertising savvy (he had headed the profitable Benton and Bowles ad agency during the Great Depression), Hutchins hoped he could rebuild the University's public and alumni relations, as well as increase fund-raising.²³ Toward those ends Benton conducted a consumer research project on perceptions of the University completed in December 1936. Hutchins' positive assessment of the report earned Benton a part-time University vice president position, basically in charge of public relations, in January 1937. Benton remained in that position, "cooking up things" Hutchins recalled, until 1945. Benton "made the University sound like the most interesting place in the world." Benton left the University of Chicago in August 1945 to serve as assistant Secretary of State. He returned in 1947 as a University trustee, actively serving in that capacity until 1965. He was named a "life trustee" from 1965 until his death in 1973.²⁴

Benton was equally successful with Britannica. Beginning in 1941, he became involved in negotiations with Sears, Roebuck and Company's chairman of the board, General Robert E. Wood, to acquire the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The complicated agreement took a few years to complete. But in February 1943 both the University and Benton owned Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. Benton served as Britannica's key figure, taking on the roles of publisher and chairman of its board of directors until his passing. In that time, overall sales revenues increased from 3 million in 1942 to approximately 150 million in the late 1960s. His board included members from the inner and outer circles of Adler's community of discourse: Hutchins, Paul G. Hoffman, Max Lincoln Schuster (of Simon and Schuster publishers), Henry Luce, Jr., and Beardsley Ruml. Benton's first personal encounter with the great books idea coincidentally occurred in the same year as the Britannica purchase. He and his wife had enrolled in the "fat man's" great books class offered through the University Club. The class catered to University trustees, Chicago business leaders, and "eminent citizens," and their wives.²⁵

Benton encountered problems in acquiring the necessary texts for the "fat man's" class. Although some could be obtained from libraries and various publishers, he called the trouble a "conspiracy against his time." Because of the *inefficiency* in obtaining the books, by May 1943 he began thinking that Britannica should "publish a set of the great books." A few weeks later he wrote Hutchins, saying that "we'd like to start work at the Britannica on the proposed set of Hutchins 'Great Books'." At that point Benton wanted to model the *Harvard Classics*.²⁶ The original impetus, then, for concretizing a set of great books was born in a movement characteristic of Western modernity: *the efficient use of time*. The quintessential American response to this

kind of problem was the corporation. Benton's coincidental interests in both Britannica and a popular culture phenomenon (viz., great books reading groups inspired by Adler's popular *How to Read a Book*), as well as his desire for an efficient means of book acquisition, set in motion a number of processes. Benton tapped into what the historian Roland Marchand argued was characteristic of Benton's former profession, advertising. Advertisers were "apostles of modernity"—"the most modern of men" who understood the "mystique of modernity." In a small way Benton "dramatized" a particular corner of the "American dream," in this case the democratization of high culture.²⁷ This began the corporate formalization of the great books idea as a brand that could, in the dreams of its creators, instigate the formation of communities of consumption—meaning the consumption of an educational ideal.

These dreams were not unaccompanied by doubts. A subsequent, June 1943 meeting included Benton, Hutchins, Adler, Walter Yust (Britannica's editor in chief), and Elkan "Buck" Powell (Britannica's President). Therein Hutchins expressed reservations about Benton's project. Hutchins had been particularly enthused about great books discussion groups (the General Honors approach), and these groups could not be reproduced with sales of the set. Adler recorded that Hutchins "had no interest in providing American homes with books" that would impress "as colorful furniture." Even Benton had a few reservations. His biographer Sydney Hyman articulated them as a "lack of time and the eyesight... [needed] to expend on a vast amount of reading." Benton echoed Hutchins, saying an "allure" was needed to "induce people to take the great books off the shelves."²⁸ The group commissioned Adler to write a report, due in September, that would solve these problems. As the summer progressed, Adler was also writing *How to Think About War and Peace*. It was that work that inspired the "idea-index." Later dubbed the *Syntopicon*, that idea convinced Hutchins that his utilitarian ideals for the set might be approximated.²⁹ These doubts and Adler's solution show that although high ideals and a lavish setting accompanied the *Great Books'* kickoff, practical issues drove the set's conception.

With the *Syntopicon*, however, abstractions mattered. Adler consciously anchored Britannica's *Great Books* in the field we know today as the history of ideas. Understanding Adler's philosophy of the study of ideas in history is the key to understanding the *Great Books'* place in America's intellectual and cultural history. Adler's philosophy of history explains the difference between Britannica's set and other saleable manifestations of the great books idea, as well as it helps in understanding criticisms of the set. He had realized while researching *How to Think About War and Peace* that his own historical method

consisted of reading great books specifically for enlightenment on certain topics—with “the activating push” of a particular question. That kind of research represented only one side of a professional debate on how ideas should be understood historically.³⁰ Adler’s philosophy existed in, and was formed by, his unresolved methodological problems with the historical profession.

The “Non-historical Study of Ideas”: Adler’s philosophy of history

Considering his love for philosophy, it is not surprising that Adler’s earliest, most rudimentary leaning in his philosophy of history was to err on the side that ideas can transcend, or translate out of, historical context. In a 1926 review of Will Durant’s *The Story of Philosophy*, Adler claimed that “Mr. Durant has been so anxious to interlace philosophy with life... that he has completely missed the possible contrary perception that philosophy has had an isolated intellectual status, [uninfluenced by]... the social and economic nexus.”³¹ The great books idea, especially the “Great Ideas” approach to the same soon to be developed by Adler with Britannica, favored a less environmental, more objectivist approach to history promoted by the philosopher-historian Arthur O. Lovejoy. Lovejoy also championed philosophical realism and was an enemy of “historical relativism.” Realism reinforced the notion that ideas were neither constructed by himself nor conditioned by any other idealist, subjectivist, pragmatic inquirers into their past.³²

Lovejoy’s most famous work, *The Great Chain of Being* (1936), best illustrates his approach to ideas in history—an approach Adler adopted. *Great Chain of Being* exemplified an “internal” rather than “external” (or “environmentalist”/contextual) method of thinking and writing about the history of ideas. This view of history freed Lovejoy to put thinkers across generations in conversation. Lovejoy also maintained that Western thought contained a number of basic “unit ideas” deserving of independent historical study.³³ Lovejoy also argued that these unit ideas were “decidedly limited” in number. This made the whole of the history of philosophy and ideas “a much more manageable thing.”³⁴ Adler encountered Lovejoy’s thought at Columbia University. There he first read Lovejoy’s 1916 address to the American Philosophical Association. Therein Lovejoy criticized philosophers for failing “to join issue and engage in well-conducted disputation.” Adler took that message to heart. He also encountered Lovejoy’s writings on realism at this time. That realism would flower, for Adler, in the 1930s when he melded it with the Jacques Maritain’s

Thomistic-infused “common sense realism.” Proof of Lovejoy’s lasting influence, however, came when Adler dedicated *Idea of Freedom* (1958) to him, writing that Lovejoy “opened [his] eyes [first] to the possibility and necessity of the kind of dialectical work which this book tries to exemplify.”³⁵

Adler groped for his own philosophy of history through the 1930s and 1940s. But as late as 1941 he could only bring himself to paraphrase the Irish Thomist, Father Vincent (Joseph) McNabb, O. P. (1868–1943), to argue that “in the history of philosophy you have history at its best, but in the philosophy of history you have philosophy at its worst.” Adler did not see the philosophy of history, as a subject, as “respectable itself.” He could not recognize the fact that when historians order and arrange events, a set of philosophical choices, consciously acknowledged or not, directed the process. By the time he became the editor of Britannica’s *Syntopicon*, Adler had reduced the historian’s role, when acting philosophically, to finding patterns and inductively constructing limited generalizations. Adler’s arrested philosophical development in this area both explains and foreshadows his failure, when he would act as a historian in tracing the “great conversation” about “great ideas,” to acknowledge that his own dialectical vision of ideas constituted a philosophical system—a philosophy of history.³⁶ As a philosopher he became engaged in a Herculean historical task without, ironically, a well-defined philosophy of history.

Adler must have sensed this because, by 1952, he finally constructed a more detailed, if still imperfectly definitive, statement of his philosophy of history. He did so anticipating reader questions about his historical “Introductions” for each of the *Syntopicon*’s 102 “Great Ideas” (appendix). His statement appeared in the *Syntopicon*’s appendix and was titled “The Principles and Methods of Syntopical Construction.” Therein Adler acknowledged that his “dialectical” aim for each Introduction was “to report . . . basic intellectual oppositions” for each topic. He conceded the potential for “partiality,” but asserted that one merely needed a “firm intention to avoid” the problem (i.e., willpower). Adler claimed that a balance was sought between too much and too little context in each Introduction. In light of these extremes, it is tempting to see Adler’s position as moderately presentist in the historicist/antiquarian-versus-presentist debate. But in 1958, he would say that his philosophy could be summed up as the “nonhistorical study of ideas.”³⁷

The proposal

It was with this philosophy of history that, late in the summer of 1943, Adler approached the construction of his formal proposal for

Britannica. He communicated with Yust several times, as well as with Milton Mayer, before finalizing the proposal. An August letter to Yust, for instance, contained three enclosures: a list of Adler's suggested authors for the set, a list of volume suggestions (some authors merited more than one volume), and a list of potentially acceptable English translations. Adler consulted with Mayer about translations. Mayer had become associated with Adler and Hutchins at the University of Chicago in the mid-1930s, serving as Hutchins' public relations aide. By the early 1940s, Mayer was a "close friend" to both men. Despite Mayer's contribution, at this point Adler claimed sole responsibility in his correspondence with Yust, writing that "all the omissions represent my *personal* judgment."³⁸ He added, "Mr. Mayer thinks that some of the items I have omitted should be included—not because they are really as good as what is included, but because they have secondary reasons to justify them; such as, they are by Americans; or their authors are famous; or inclusion of these things would raise the sales appeal of the set; etc. I have refused to allow such considerations to influence my judgment."³⁹ Adler also "omitted some items . . . because they would be unreadable by the ordinary man: mathematical and scientific works mainly."⁴⁰ Because the eventual inclusion of these works in Britannica's set perplexed later critics, his initial opposition is noteworthy.

Adler completed the formal proposal in September, and then met with Yust, Hutchins, Benton, Max Schuster (a Britannica Board member), Louis G. Schoenewald, and "Buck" Powell to discuss the project. Powell hired Schoenewald in the 1930s, when Sears still owned Britannica, to revamp sales during the Depression. The proposal included a list of 85 authors and their works, some commentary, and another list detailing which books existed "in the public domain and which raised copyright problems."⁴¹ Adler's lists still excluded scientists and mathematicians but contained other names omitted later from the 1952 Britannica set, including Cicero, Erasmus, Calvin, Molière, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Ibsen, and Mark Twain.⁴² Adler's list of 85 became the "starter" list for an Advisory Board formed later by Hutchins.⁴³

In the report's commentary, Adler devised four stipulations to distinguish Britannica's efforts from prior collections. These were the rules for Britannica's canon. First, whole works rather than excerpts were to make up the selections. Second, like the selections of St. John's College, the *Great Books* would include classics in natural science and mathematics (contrary to Adler's August correspondence with Yust). Third, "scholarly prefaces" and "scholarly apparatus" were to be minimized. In Adler's words, great works ought to "be presented to the reader without the intervention of second-rate minds." Finally, any

“auxiliary materials...or guidance for the ordinary reader” ought to “be isolated from the great works and put in separate volumes.” These consisted of “a volume of introductory essays (writers and content as yet unspecified)” and “a general index of ideas.” The index “would collect for each main theme or topic of all the passages in the great books in which that theme or topic was discussed.” By doing this, Adler believed the index would demonstrate “the existence of the great conversation across the ages.”⁴⁴ At this point, no plans existed for narrative “introductions” to each idea in the index, nor was there a preconceived notion about the ideas that would arise: “no one had any idea of what the index would really involve.”⁴⁵ The project existed as an inductive, *a posteriori* endeavor. Britannica heeded Adler’s stipulations.

These initial, fall 1943 conversations also included a smaller body of materials eventually referred to as the *Opuscula*. Powell decided, “largely at the behest of Schoenewald,” that the “great books should be accompanied by a smaller set—say, six volumes—which would provide an additional sales gimmick.”⁴⁶ It would be a set of “little great works.” These were “works as great in value as the books included in the set, but too slight in volume to be integrated along with the more voluminous works.” Essays by authors such as Anselm, Mendel, and Einstein fit into this category. Adler’s opinion was mixed. Although he called the *Opuscula* a “gimmick” early on, he later noted that the editors “reconciled themselves to the omission of certain authors and works from the main set” because they “would appear in the auxiliary set of *Opuscula*.” The *Syntopicon* was also to reference works in it. By February 1944, a list of *Opuscula* candidates was constructed.⁴⁷ Its existence highlights the conventional nature of even the term “book” in the story of the great books idea.

Production and appearances: The Advisory Board and the idea index

Production of the *Great Books* involved two streams of concurrent labor by an Advisory Board and a group of indexers. The paid Advisory Board, formed in October 1943, constructed a list of authors and titles and planned an introductory volume. As editor in chief of the entire project, Hutchins finalized all decisions and appointed the Advisory Board. Adler began as editor in chief of the *Syntopicon*, but later graduated to the role of associate editor. This was an after-the-fact recognition of the numerous times he also led the Advisory Board.⁴⁸

The Board contained a number of influential members from Adler’s community of discourse. In addition to Adler and Hutchins,

it consisted of Scott Buchanan, John Erskine, Mark Van Doren, Stringfellow Barr, Clarence Faust, Alexander Meiklejohn, and Joseph Schwab. Barr, Faust, Schwab, and Meiklejohn also require some introduction. Barr was a Rhodes scholar with Buchanan in the 1910s, and Adler met him in the 1920s before Barr went on with Buchanan to found St. John's College. Faust first taught in the University of Chicago's English department under Hutchins, but rose to the deanship of the undergraduate college. The less prominent Schwab was a biology faculty member and participated in the newly created Committee on Social Thought. Meiklejohn was chairman of San Francisco's School of Social Studies by the early 1950s. Like Hutchins and Adler, he had gained some notice for public entanglements with John Dewey in the 1940s. The Advisory Board's reputation was such that Harold Rugg, an education theorist and disciple of Dewey, wrote collectively, and negatively, of them in his 1947 book, *Foundations of Education*. Rugg variously called them the "Adler-Hutchins group," "Adler-Hutchins-St. John's" group, and the "Great Book Boys." Rugg saw Adler as the group's "brilliant theorist" and leader, making him and "his confreres in the pseudo-Thomist counter-revolution" key figures in his narrative.⁴⁹ Rugg certainly did not see them as advocates of a democratic culture, in any form.

The Board met about ten times, from December 1943 to the summer of 1945, to propose and decide on books for the set. Hutchins asked the Board to choose a list of 75–100 authors based on a series of "musts"—more rules for Britannica's set. Each book should: (1) "Be important in itself and without reference to any other;...it must be seminal and radical in its treatment of basic ideas or problems"; (2) "Belong to the tradition in that it is intelligible by other great books"; (3) "Have an immediate [if superficial] intelligibility for the ordinary reader"; (4) "Have many levels of intelligibility for diverse grades of readers"; (5) and "Be indefinitely rereadable... [A] book that can ever be finally mastered or finished by any reader." The Board received no further instructions from Britannica on page or volume limitations.⁵⁰ These criteria enabled the Board to decide fairly quickly, in its first meetings, on the core of the *Great Books* list. Decisions were made on both "definite eliminations" and "basic musts." The latter included 30-some selections that should "appear on any listing of great books" (appendix). Where disagreements existed, Buchanan suggested that the set be seen "as the basic instrument of liberal education—a set of books which contained all the materials indispensable to getting a liberal education." Buchanan then came to Chicago, in February 1944, to work with Adler to finalize this "liberal education" principle. Out of this came a "tentative list" of "100 rubrics representing the great objects, ideas, arts,

sciences, and questions presented, expounded, and discussed" as a test for inclusion.⁵¹

This was a key moment. These "rubrics," the first articulation of the "great ideas," represented the first sign of a switch from bottom-up (*a posteriori*, inductive) to top-down (*a priori*, deductive) arguments for choosing books. To obtain more conclusive votes on the rest of the nonunanimous selections, Hutchins and Adler had to impose more order on the selection process. As spring turned to summer in 1944, some Board members (Erskine, Faust, and Schwab) initially objected to the "rubrics," fearing the criticism from outside that would result. The Adler-Barr-Buchanan-Van Doren subgroup, however, sought deeper unanimity through a coherent philosophy of education. After some further discussion, and a rewriting of the report by Barr and Buchanan, the report was presented in an October 1944 meeting. The Board, with little debate or stress, then reached consensus on 65 books and authors (appendix). In the spring of 1945, Hutchins sought the Board's opinions, for the last time, on a final book list. After some post-Board "last-minute pruning" by Hutchins and Adler the *Great Books* came into shape with 74 authors and 443 works in 54 volumes (appendix).⁵²

The physical construction of the *Syntopicon* constituted the second, longer term labor stream in the production of Britannica's *Great Books*. The labor consisted of two staffs of five indexers each. Working at two locations, Annapolis and Chicago, they began their research early in November 1943. In Chicago, Milton Mayer headed an initial crew including Saul Bellow, Janet Pollak, Maurice Posada, and Shirley Shapiro. In Annapolis, William Gorman led a mostly anonymous part-time and hourly staff of "four or five good senior students or young graduates."⁵³ As time progressed, the overall staff increased to "40 indexers and 75 clerks," and consolidated in an "Index House" in Chicago.⁵⁴ Aside from indexing the books themselves, staff also reviewed Adler's introductory essays for each "great idea" and wrote short biographies of the set's authors. Hutchins, Mayer, Herman Bernick, Otto Bird, Peter Wolff, Father René Belleperche, and Virginia Colton (Adler's personal secretary) assisted in these efforts.⁵⁵

The concept of a set of great ideas grew out of a "pilot project" on Greek thought. From those books, the indexers, from 1943 until 1945, catalogued Greek classics with a list of 1,003 terms. They reduced this to a "manageable" list of "100 odd" fundamental ideas (see appendix 2 for the final list).⁵⁶ This caused a crisis. Gorman, Mayer, and Adler met in January 1945 to discuss two major issues. The first dealt with differences in terms used by various authors, and the second with a hierarchical structure of ideas under major headings (i.e., great vs. lesser ideas). In a letter to Henry Grunwald, who was writing a *Time*

magazine cover story on the index project, Adler relayed that Gorman called for “an outline of the topics [for] each idea” and “a logical, *a priori* analysis of the ideas.”⁵⁷ What was a bottom-up process became a top-down imposition. This occurred one year after Buchanan and Adler’s Chicago meeting to discuss a similar switch.

As the Grunwald story suggests, the indexing project became a minor popular culture phenomena. By 1948, the rumors of the project were such that reporters from *Life* and *Look* magazines ran picture stories on the undertaking. The extensive *Life* story, which contained a picture of all the staff, focused on the “monumental” task of having spent “five years and nearly a million dollars [in] making an index of every important idea of Western civilization.” Benton later remarked to Adler that the stories were “wonderful.” Apart from the index, *Time* made Hutchins and Adler cover stories in November 1949 and March 1952, respectively. Hutchins’ story centered on his educational activities, with only one line dedicated to Britannica’s *Great Books* project; Adler’s story prominently mentioned his work on Britannica’s set.⁵⁸

After all of this, Adler held his first “printed and bound” volumes of the *Syntopicon* in late December 1951, a few months before the lavish Waldorf dinner. He wrote William Benton, rhapsodizing that it was “a beautiful thing to look at and . . . a hell of an impressive thing to examine.” Adler was particularly pleased with his Introductions, which he called “a labor of love.” He compared their composition to “writing 102 books.”⁵⁹ The introductions were much praised by the set’s reviewers—even when they squabbled over other aspects of the collection.

It was Adler’s confidence in that philosophy of history that manifested itself in those essays and the set’s final appearance. The *Great Books*’ physical appearance conveyed both authority and certainty: the uniformity of appearance, the numbering and cataloguing, gold gilding across the spine, and the University of Chicago logo.⁶⁰ Considering the diversity of authors and opinions in the books, however, as well as the contingencies involved in the set’s production, the feelings generated by the set’s appearance were most certainly illusory. Contrary to some of their own statements, Adler and his community of discourse at times fostered the illusion of surety, causing negative reactions. Hutchins, for instance, asserted in the *Great Books*’ introductory volume, *The Great Conversation*, that the set “almost self-selected.” While this was likely rhetorical flourish, since he at once admitted his own “prejudices” helped inform the final list, this kind of rhetoric caused negative reactions, then and later.⁶¹ The sometimes present myth of certainty both comforted and bothered.

Adler understood the contingency inherent in the production of the *Great Books* and *Syntopicon*. In 1952, he declared that “in neither

case do the purpose and rationale of the choice preclude the possibility of disagreement, even when due consideration is given to these [same] criteria." He added later that "there was nothing magical or sacrosanct about the number 102" given to the great ideas.⁶² Editorial choices, however, do not necessarily constitute the formation of an insidious ideology. What they do demonstrate is a distinct, and potentially fallible, human element. This subjective element included error, opinion, or merely roads not taken; in a word, contingency. The story of the creation of both the *Great Books* and *Syntopicon* reveals a number of moments when subjectivity entered the process.⁶³

This is important to acknowledge because Adler, like Hutchins, would also participate, in a contradictory fashion, in the myth of certainty. This occurred in his memoirs and other writings. In those sources, Adler discussed how "the great conversation" and an "inner logic" of ideas determined the great books. Often in these instances it is difficult to determine whether he was referring to the great books idea in general or to Britannica's set. He clung to the rhetoric, however, because it *separated* his notion of the great books from literal histories of Western civilization, the scholarly study of particular great books, and the *Harvard Classics*. The first two of these applications grounded the great books too firmly in context. One critic and chronicler of the set, Joan Shelley Rubin, specifically referred to the myth of certainty when she noted that "with so much consensus, one might conclude that [the set] virtually assembled itself."⁶⁴

The reviews

After publication cultural critics—reviewers—mediated the set's reception with the masses. Indeed, it would not take long for the good feelings generated by the Waldorf gala to be tempered by reviewers. Although the official publication date was set for September 11 of the same year, Britannica released copies for early review. Most waited until after September 11 to publish, but one eager reviewer, W. E. Garrison of *The Christian Century*, released his in late June. He published another in October in the same periodical.⁶⁵ Garrison's reviews are instructive because they anticipate later, higher profile critiques of Britannica's *Great Books*.

Surveying the landscape in terms of the set's educational value and superiority to others like it, Garrison found the *Great Books* a high point. To him the *Great Books* provided "a means of carrying out a carefully planned and efficiently organized educational project on a vast scale." Garrison noted that the set was a natural outgrowth of "'great books courses' which, during the past few years, have spread over the country like a benign contagion." Like reviewers to follow,

he praised the *Syntopicon*, calling it an “enormously useful piece of apparatus.” On the negative side, as would be the case in subsequent reviews, Garrison critiqued Britannica’s selections.⁶⁶

As may be guessed by his review publication’s title, *The Christian Century*, Garrison’s strongest critique was on Christian writers left out—particularly Protestants. He took exception to the space given to Aquinas, and laid the blame squarely on Hutchins and Adler. Garrison reflected that a “propagandist purpose” lay behind skipping “Luther and Calvin and every other Protestant theologian.” Garrison pointed out that “with reference to religion and related topics, the slant toward regarding Thomism as the norm is too obvious to be easily overlooked.” Although it is tempting to characterize Garrison’s critique as thinly veiled anti-Catholicism, he makes no mention of removing or lessening the Catholic presence—only suggesting that additional authors be included.⁶⁷ Also, Garrison’s final analysis was clearly positive. He wrote, “Obviously this criticism applies to only a small fraction, though an important one, of the total work,” and concluded that the *Great Books* are “the most original and most valuable contribution to the liberal education of adults that [his] time has seen.”⁶⁸

With one important exception, nearly all the arguments reviewers made about selection corresponded with Garrison’s. Namely, they all made cases for *additions* to, not removals from, the set. That one exceptions lay in science and mathematics, and an important discordant note came from I. Bernard Cohen. His piece was part of a symposium in the *Saturday Review*, one of ten by various academic specialists.⁶⁹ A scholar of the history of science at Harvard University, Cohen began with praise, applauding the first published English translations of Ptolemy, Copernicus, and Kepler. This was the set’s “one genuine service to scholars,” if not general readers. Indeed, Cohen argued that the scientific great books in the set had more “archaeological” than practical value. Even “persons of better-than-average education” in the sciences will probably find them “unreadable.” Cohen then nuanced his assertion:

To understand Newton requires not only a knowledge of the physics since Newton’s day, but also the mathematical methods then current. In the decades following the publication of Newton’s “Principia,” the non-scientists—and even many scientists—found this book too difficult to read and learned their Newtonian science from the excellent books of first-rate vulgarizers like Pemberton or Voltaire; yet the twentieth-century reader is apparently expected to perform an heroic task that proved impossible to his predecessors... Even a hundred-page commentary would not serve to

make the "Principia" and other older technical, scientific works "readable."⁷⁰

The great books of science and math may demonstrate superior aspects of Western heritage, but they would not easily reward even careful reading, or forward the project of democratizing culture.

Reviewers from the *New York Times Book Review* and the *Atlantic* also frowned on the inclusion of great books of science. Writing in the *Times*, Gilbert Highet, a Columbia University Latin professor and classicist, sided with Cohen, remarking that "obsolete" and "long scientific works... have seldom or never been read except by experts."⁷¹ Jacques Barzun's review in the *Atlantic* asked: "Of the score of scientists and mathematicians in the collection, how many are in any sense readable? I do not mean easy to read, I mean instructional." He scolded the editors for having "forgotten a fundamental ambiguity in the meaning of "great books" and [for having]... lost sight at once of their aim and of their public."⁷² The experts concurred: including great books of science and mathematics was more of an indulgence than a would-be educational experience.

Highet's assessment, with regard to its prominence and lukewarm reception, warrants further examination. Given his then recent study, *The Classical Tradition* (1949), subtitled "the Greek and Roman influences on Western Literature," it is not surprising that he praised the set as "a noble monument to the power of the human mind." Highet believed, furthermore, that the past was "never dead," continuously existent in our minds. Echoing the words of conservative Cold War traditionalists, he argued that the set reasserted "permanent values in a world of violent and sometimes deliberately catastrophic change."⁷³

As for criticism beyond the scientific and mathematic works, Highet focused on omissions and translations. On the former he noted that "for 1,500 years the world read Cicero (omitted) rather than Aristotle and Plato; for 2,000 years, it read Horace and Sallust (omitted) rather than Ptolemy and Archimedes. The education of the West has long cultivated Racine and Moliere and Ariosto and Tasso; they are omitted. It has seldom included Fourier and Faraday; they are printed at length." Highet then offered a chastising thought experiment: "It would be a valuable project to make a list of the books which have been considered essential, in large areas of the West, over long periods of the past 3,000 years; to reconstruct the bookshelves of men like Cicero, Petrarch, Erasmus, Goethe, Croce. Such a list would fairly accurately represent the *Great Books of the Western World*, but it would be very far from coinciding with this interesting but arbitrary collection." Finally, in agreement with Garrison, Highet added that his theoretical bookshelf of greats "would include Protestant thinkers like Luther, Calvin,

Hooker, to balance St. Thomas."⁷⁴ In the end, Highet recognized that a particular philosophy of history, and a liberal education philosophy, trumped other inclusion criteria. Britannica's set was merely an iteration of the great books idea, not "The Great Books."

Other reviewers commented on absences, as well as translation issues. Apart from the omissions cited by Highet, others wondered why Molière, Nietzsche, and Edmund Burke were excluded. Indeed, most selection criticisms revolved around omissions (excepting science), and this pointed back to one of the Advisory Board's biggest problems. Adler himself, for instance, wanted Cicero, Calvin, and Molière in the set. At bottom, then, it was the economics of publishing that most bothered both the set's editors and its critics. Perhaps closed sets of the so-called great books were impossible? Or maybe the *Syntopicon* criteria were too limiting? Apart from omissions, it is noteworthy that not a single reviewer—not even in the midst of the Cold War and McCarthyism—questioned the inclusion of Marx's *Capital* or Marx and Engels' *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. On the subject of translation quality, Highet criticized the set editors by noting how a poor translation discourages even the "keenest students." Highet's Columbia colleague, literature professor Moses Hadas, concurred. For example, both he and Highet disapproved of Samuel Butler's translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as "proletarian" and "flat," respectively.⁷⁵

Most reviewers did not criticize the *Syntopicon* directly, but Highet offered a critique that partially corresponded with Barzun's review. He believed the *Syntopicon's* introductory essays to be "a little naïve in their acceptance of 'authority' [and] . . . mechanical in their careful counterbalancing arguments." Highet also objected to the *Syntopicon* on symbolic grounds. Its existence implied "that great books are concerned only with ideas which can be logically analyzed—whereas many masterpieces of literature live in realms partially or wholly outside the realm of logic." Another implication that could be drawn was "the conception that the chief purpose of reading a book is to crack its shell and reach its kernel—the form itself being unimportant decoration." Highet added that "reading involves study; but it is not study alone."⁷⁶ The issue of form, of the appreciation of a great work's aesthetic value, returns over and over in subsequent criticism of Adler and his community's intellectualized view of the great books idea. It is a perennial knock against the Great Ideas Approach.

Barzun seemed to agree. He called this disposition a "bias in favor of systems." Because Barzun had also reviewed *How to Read a Book*, and because he would later become part of Adler's community of discourse, his critique carries a special weight in relation to the longer history of the great books idea. Barzun believed it "fair to conclude" that the set,

“gathered with so much love and care and public spirit,” nonetheless revealed “a high-minded axe-grinding in the direction of intellectualism.” It was all about “analytic” thinking. Despite the importance of systems “to our lives as practical and reflective men,” the absence of “other kind[s] of thought” gave the set a “tyrannical” feel. To Barzun “literature and the arts” held forth approaches that better “work[ed] on the imagination.” Ever the scholar himself, Barzun observed that Pascal saw this “as the difference between the spirit of geometry and the *esprit de finesse*.”⁷⁷ Both Highet and Barzun asked, in essence, whether all great books must be read (i.e., analytically) as Adler suggested in *How to Read a Book* and implemented for Britannica’s set through the *Syntopicon*. Their answer was a resounding no.

Even so, reviewers generally saw the *Syntopicon*’s usefulness. It clearly separated Britannica’s effort from Eliot’s *Harvard Classics* and Everyman’s Library. Garrison’s June 1952 review, as well as another by *Commonweal*’s James Hagerty noted the failings of those older ventures. The *Harvard Classics* had concerned Britannica editorial staff such that Adler had composed a long April 1950 memo on their differences. Aside from noting variances in appearance, as well as the quantity of works and authors selected, he focused on the *Syntopicon*’s “utility.” Eliot’s set contained an index, but Adler described it as “chaotic” and “hopelessly inadequate” because it dealt only with place names, proper names, and titles. The *Syntopicon*, however, allowed one to study particular ideas in the set, to “read in” and not just through great books according to one’s “needs and interests.” *Harvard Classics* only proposed the “much advertised scheme of 15 minutes a day of reading.” Despite Eliot’s genuine concern for cultivating “a liberal frame of mind,” the *Syntopicon* enabled an easier-but-deeper pursuit of excellence through great books.⁷⁸ The *Syntopicon*, in Adler’s view, enabled readers to test their “stock notions” against the greatest thinkers in Western history. The *Harvard Classics* supplied furniture for the mind, but Britannica’s set enabled true education for citizenship.

Conclusion

Returning to Adler’s philosophy of history, perhaps his *Syntopicon* argument for the minimization of context was, at base, motivated merely by the practical need to minimize text for the set? If this was the case, one could argue that Adler and his community of discourse “sold out”—that they sacrificed what they knew to be intellectually necessary, or honest, to make money in the so-called middlebrow culture market. This is unlikely, however, or merely a correlation, since Adler had long held the position—inherited from John Erskine—that

great books were proper fodder for obtaining a liberal education.⁷⁹ The fact that Erskine's reading program devalued "environmentalism" happily coincided with Lovejoy's belief in really existing, independent "unit ideas" that transcended environment. Both trains of thought came together in Adler, thereby legitimizing his inadequate philosophy of history and self-satisfied dismissal of the concerns of some professional historians. It was almost natural for Adler to be against history in its most contextual form—the kind that concerns experts. This makes it easier to understand why, in the 1980s and 1990s, historians such as Lawrence Levine fell in with the opposition when Britannica's *Great Books* were criticized.⁸⁰

Adler's own shifting thought on the philosophy of history brings an essential problem into view. The substance of the argument between great books enthusiasts and critics lies in the problem of the *degree of context* needed to understand a great book or a great idea. Britannica's *Great Books* do supply *some* context. First through mini-biographies situated before each author's work/s in a volume. Then, as one progresses, through the overlapping time frames of some works. Finally through each of the *Syntopicon's* idea-integrative and chronologically constructed essays. But when does the lack of year-by-year, or decade-by-decade, context subtract substantially from the meaning of a historical text? On the other hand, how much context is too much, such that antiquarianism enters and detracts from a composition's relevance, or even keeps the work itself out of view? And how much context is actually available? These are problems with which historians must always deal, but which Adler avoided. The most important thing for him was to democratize the great books idea—meaning maximizing accessibility for readers of varied intellectual backgrounds. In introducing the masses to the notion of philosophical thinking (not historical thinking, necessarily), the most expedient solution for Adler and his community of discourse was to lessen context. This, in turn, minimized the authority of professional historians in mediating the great books idea.

This issue dogged the great books movement for decades. In his 1964 work tracing the history of the Great Books Foundation, Hugh Moorhead noted that Adler's community of discourse—meaning Buchanan, Van Doren, Barr, and even Erskine—all subscribed to the notion that "background," or "historical times, biographical data, and influences surrounding [a] particular writing," could basically be ignored when examining a great book. Moorhead added that "no other 'rule of the game' . . . caused so much concern to both participants and critics" of the Foundation and Adler's group.⁸¹ No matter what book is being considered, whether well established or newly minted as a "great book," the issue of context remains.

With regard to Adler, then, the *Syntopicon* acted as a locus for the philosophical problems swirling around the great books idea. Depending on one's own philosophy of history and beliefs about human nature, the *Syntopicon* either negatively manifested Adler's paradox (i.e., respect for Western history but shortchanged historical study) and the fallacy of presentism (i.e., not enough respect for context), or positively stood tall as a marker against the fallacy of historicism. Ultimately, the maxim of the eighteenth-century author Henry St. John, the Lord Viscount Bolingbroke, best approximates Adler's professional commitment: "History is philosophy teaching by examples."⁸² That maxim summarized the Great Ideas Approach to the great books idea. Adler's cohort followed him in making his philosophy of history a reality in the *Syntopicon* and the *Great Books of the Western World*. And the *Syntopicon*, moreover, still stands as a monument to Adler's philosophy of history because he never substantially clarified that philosophy further in his later writings.

Epilogue

Returning to 1952, Adler's and Benton's speeches concluded the Waldorf dinner (Figure 2.2). Adler's ran the longest, and it covered his planned future endeavors, as well as some of the philosophical tensions now built into Britannica's set. Adler arose to applause, and expressed his gratitude to Hutchins, Benton, and the Founders. Adler began by acknowledging that a community of workers (only a handful at the dinner) "labored almost day and night," for years, to produce the *Great Books* and *Syntopicon*. The *Syntopicon*, especially, required years of hard work "in the sphere of ideas."⁸³ He elaborated with a direct reference to the Cold War and an indirect one of Lovejoy: "We are accustomed to... collaboration in the laboratory or in... experimental research. But we tend to think of philosophical inquiry or humanistic study as an individual creative effort. Atom bombs can be made [by teams], but not books, certainly not books that deal with ideas." Yet, even if books cannot be efficiently written that way, it would still seem that the "tremendous advantages" of scientific collaboration could be secured for "philosophical and humanistic studies?"⁸⁴ This very deliberate reference to the cooperative work of thinkers underscored Adler's upcoming work, beginning that same year, leading his Institute for Philosophical Research. He had worked diligently that very spring, prior to the dinner, gathering financial support for the Institute.

The Institute would fully consume the next dozen or so years of Adler's life, and then continue to absorb his part-time labor through



Figure 2.2 April 1952 Waldorf Astoria Dinner (NYC), William Benton at the lectern.

Source: University of Chicago, Special Collections Research Center, William Benton Papers.

the 1990s. It helped fulfill his vision of Lovejoy's aforementioned 1916 call for philosophical cooperation. Having tasted the fruits of historical-dialectical inquiry with the *Syntopicon*, Adler foresaw the Institute reaping an expanded harvest. At the Waldorf dinner, he reported that some *Syntopicon* workers would use it, with him, as a template for "a more difficult and exacting collaborative effort—a dialectical summation of Western thought, a synthesis for the twentieth century."⁸⁵ The Institute would explore Western history, in the great books and beyond, to make present the answered and unanswered questions of philosophy. The Institute would fulfill Lovejoy's vision of philosophical progress and utilize his methodological approach to the history of ideas.

After outlining this material plan, Adler turned his Waldorf address toward his philosophy of history and the *Syntopicon's* historical nature. He argued that the *Syntopicon* "demonstrates concretely and

vidently the reality of the great conversation” in Western intellectual history. Adler professed that he could not say whether Hutchins or Buchanan came up with the “great conversation” trope, but Adler noted that “we all have been using [it] to signify the dramatic character of the intellectual tradition of the West.” Here Adler explicitly confessed to a “physiognomic,” or a scheme (i.e., dialectic), inherent in his community’s version of the history of Western ideas. Next he pointed out the veracity and existence of historical facts present in the *Syntopicon*. It demonstrated the historical “reality of the great conversation” as true because it “simply and plainly . . . record[ed] the great conversation in all its concrete details.” Furthermore, in all “of the 3,000 topics, the references to the great books” were arranged “in their chronological order.”⁸⁶ While the term “history” was relatively absent in Adler’s address, the *Syntopicon* clearly met his own criteria for that kind of work. Adler had talked about history without having to formally engage the history profession.

Without having to acknowledge the storytelling aspect of Great Ideas work, Adler was not compelled to confess that the *Syntopicon* and the *Great Books* set included some degree of human subjectivity, namely, his own. In fact, at the gala he ironically claimed the opposite: “The *Syntopicon* may help to liberate its users from partial or partisan views of the Western tradition. Most of us tend to be, in one way or another, particularistic rather than universal in our allegiance to and understanding of our intellectual tradition. We have sectarian or parochial or epochal limitations of vision or interest . . . The *Syntopicon* may help cure such intellectual blindness.”⁸⁷ The strengths and weaknesses of works of history (i.e., subjectivity, choice, style) were left unspoken. No matter the years of hard work and degrees of truth present in the *Syntopicon*’s dialectical vision of ideas, this failure to concede historical choices and assumptions would mar the *Great Books*’ future. It would be the Achilles’ heel of the Great Ideas Approach, exposed later during the late-twentieth-century Culture Wars.

At this time, however, mid-century great books promoters proceeded without qualification, without having to acknowledge that the *Great Books* contained subjective factors of selection and emphasis. Perhaps they feared the public would not accept their set as authoritative if these factors were publicized? Indeed, a salesman would not bother explaining this during a transaction. But the intellectuals behind the books need not shirk from addressing complexity and complications. Since most of these intellectual promoters were not historians, it is doubtful that they realized the subjectivity inherent in most historical endeavors (whether research or writing). Nevertheless, their confidence resulted in a charade of authority that, once discovered, would

diminish the stature of the great books idea. It would take years, however, for this little error in the beginning to become apparent. In the meantime, however, Britannica's brand of the history of ideas would sell. And the democratic intentions and dreams of the producers masked the set's intellectual blemishes. Indeed, this is the great irony in this period of the great books idea's history—the mixing of a falsely objective authoritativeness with democratic intentions in the Britannica set.

Some years after the Waldorf gala, in 1958, Adler's philosophy of the history of ideas would gain praise from those who inspired him the most. When the Institute for Philosophical Research produced volume one of the *Idea of Freedom* that year, advance copies were sent to those to whom the work was dedicated, Arthur O. Lovejoy and Paul Mellon, and others. Letters of praise returned from colleagues such as the neo-Thomists Jacques Maritain and Yves R. Simon.⁸⁸ But one letter likely proved especially satisfying. A 95-year-old, still lucid Lovejoy wrote:

The long-awaited *opus magnum*...came into my hands almost a fortnight ago, and I must not longer delay to congratulate you and your associates of the Institute...on the completion of so protracted and arduous an inquiry, and to express to yourself my high appreciation...Thanks to your initiative and energy...the dream—[and] it was scarcely more than that—of organized, methodical, comprehensive and (so far as is humanly possible) open-minded investigation of a philosophical problem in light of its history—this dream has now been tried out in actual practice—and on a grander scale than I had even dreamed of...I could wish it to be made required reading for all philosophers, whatever their special subjects.⁸⁹

So even if Adler's work did not precisely mimic Lovejoy's history of ideas project, Adler approximated a Lovejovian vision of history that had satisfied the project's founder. As such, there can be little doubt that Lovejoy's approval mattered a great deal. It confirmed that Adler had succeeded in using a Lovejovian philosophy of history to fulfill both his dreams for philosophy and his dreams as a great books promoter. Indeed, to Adler both dreams were one.

3

Making “Seventy-Four Corpses . . . Pay Off”: The Context and Commerce of the *Great Books*, 1952–1968

In 1965, *Forbes* magazine explained how American encyclopedia companies, including Britannica, navigated the old antagonisms between culture and commerce. Front and center on the article's first page was a picture—captioned “The Midas Touch”—of culture mogul and *Great Books* publisher William “Bill” Benton. *Forbes* claimed that he was “one of the wealthiest men” in the United States. The story outlined how Britannica shared 90 percent of a \$350 million market with only three other companies: (1) Field Enterprises Educational, publisher of *World Book Encyclopedia*; (2) Grolier, publisher of *Encyclopedia Americana*; and (3) Crowell-Collier Publishing, owner of *Collier's Encyclopedia*. Britannica's estimated market share, which included the *Great Books of the Western World*, was \$125 million—almost 40 of that 90 percent. Britannica was the big kid on the block. As of 1962, the company reported annual *Great Books* sales of 51,083 sets. Holding that constant and figuring an average 1965 price of \$398 per 54-volume set, Britannica grossed approximately \$20 million on the *Great Books* alone in 1965. Given an estimated production cost of \$1 per volume, Britannica netted over \$18 million on the *Great Books*. Even with these healthy numbers—in the midst of the so-called “paperback revolution” of the early post-World War II era—one executive speculated that “only 20% of the market” had been tapped. Given an 18 percent annual “renewal rate” due to the Baby Boom, the future profit potential of Britannica and the *Great Books* appeared enormous.¹ Culture industry indeed.

Forbes attributed this success to excellent sales and marketing. Britannica's time-tested methods for locating prospects included obtaining in-person interviews (by hook or crook), and delivering presentations (promised as short, but usually long). On top of this,

Cold War fears enabled a new opportunistic sales pitch based on anxiety: “The appeal is straight to the solar plexus: . . . parents’ aspirations for their children. Parents are warned that, in this highly competitive world, it’s almost impossible for a youngster to get grades good enough to make him eligible for college without a set. . . . Any parent who doesn’t buy . . . is depriving [the child] of the opportunity of getting good grades.” The article then cited a “typical Britannica ad” displaying “a picture of teenagers looking off into space.” The ad muses: “How will they measure up against the kids next door?”² Although the *Great Books* were not specifically mentioned, there can be little doubt that fear, or status anxiety, helped sell those sets. The message was clear: buying from Britannica—on a \$10 down and \$10 per month installment plan—will secure your child’s place in America’s middle class, and insulate you from parenting criticism. The nuclear family will have fulfilled its duty.³

This strategy succeeded in spite of prominent naysayers. *Forbes* noted that “scholars have made innumerable criticisms of the encyclopedias . . . including the Britannica.” Indeed, the company’s tactics made it easy for intellectuals like Dwight Macdonald to disparage the “middlebrow,” utilitarian nature of publications like the *Great Books*. This was blatant “cultural commodification,” as Frankfurt School-inspired critics put it, with only basic connections, Macdonald thought, to higher liberal arts ideals.⁴ If encyclopedias and the *Great Books* represented democratic culture, then to him, it was not culture worth pursuing, let alone celebrating. But the *Forbes* writer, at least, thought otherwise: “The fact remains they do help a child in his studies. For that reason, every middle-class parent is a prime prospect.”⁵ The baser motivations attributed by Macdonald to Britannica, Benton, and other encyclopedia publishers could not dissuade the writer from a value-added thesis in relation to schooling. The affluence and cultural climate of the age, particularly the fears about the degradation quality of school-level education, pushed aside potential concerns about cultural profiteering and status exploitation. Indeed, it seems clear that consumers themselves believed, or were convinced, that encyclopedia publishers were helping democratize culture.

This consumer response means that it is remiss to focus only on producers as sinister manipulators, acting alone to degrade notions of *verum, bonum, pulchrum*. Consumer demand in an affluent society will dictate some kinds of production. Consumer diversity, furthermore, makes that sector difficult to measure. But there are mechanisms—institutions, people, and publications—for thinking about consumer desire in relation to Britannica’s *Great Books*. For instance, the set was discussed in the pages of *Playboy*.

Although not a family publication, *Playboy* served as a means for men to imagine a new kind of consumerism focused on high living, independence, and the good life. It offered education and information in a one-of-a-kind context. While debates exist about whether *Playboy* helped produce, or was produced by, post-World War II consumerism, it was nonetheless emblematic of abundant leisure and consumption. The magazine fed consumer desires through advertisements and prescriptions for urbane living. It should not be surprising, then, to know that the great books idea and Britannica's set appeared in its pages. Articles on literary topics lent an air of legitimacy to *Playboy's* more questionable endeavors.⁶ By entertaining the great books idea in its pages, *Playboy*, in turn, gave the great books a less buttoned-down aura.

The self-confessed "Great Bookie" himself, Mortimer J. Adler, contributed to Hugh Hefner's publication with a 1963 piece titled "How to Read a Book Superficially." In an issue that also contained an interview with Dr. Albert Schweitzer, a centerfold with Donna Michelle, and early photos of Woody Allen, Adler gave pointers on the fine art of a first reading of great books. After discussing how "not to read them"—meaning as lovers enraptured with every phrase and literary allusion—Adler reprised a theme from *How to Read a Book* by encouraging a quicker reading that absorbs the "essential theme and action." Avoid getting bogged down by "pedantic fussiness." Adler's method of skimming and skipping encouraged accessibility. He made his argument compelling by providing examples of pitfalls in first readings of Shakespeare's plays, Homer's *Odyssey*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and even François Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (Rabelais was noted as "*Playboy's* patron monk"). On *War and Peace*, for instance, Adler confessed that Pierre Bezukhov's Masonic activities were "boring." Adler summarized his article with a succinct moral: "It is . . . far better . . . to have read a great book superficially than never . . . at all."⁷ He would later confess to Benton that he deliberately chose books from Britannica's set for the *Playboy* article to boost publicity.⁸

Whether the focus is consumption or production, business considerations dominate the history of the great books idea from the publication of Britannica's set in 1952 until the end of the 1960s. As such, the integration of culture and commerce is a prominent theme of this era—both here and in past historical studies.⁹ The culture-commerce integration, or teleology, has revealed itself as a seemingly unstoppable force in twentieth-century American culture. The great books idea proves no exception to the rule. As such, and because of Britannica's dominance, in this era the idea's history involves a necessary dose of phrases and terms like "market share," "pilot study,"

growth, “sales strategy,” and “awareness survey.” The culture-and-commerce tension overshadows, for a time, the dreams of great books promoters to fight anti-intellectualism through liberal education, and to foster a democratic culture through a thoughtful liberalism. Indeed, Britannica had capitalized on promoters’ dreams and commodified their thoughts. But the democratization of culture operates on many levels: creators making their art (e.g., books and otherwise) available and accessible, promoters aiding material access (via curating exhibits or reproduction), educators facilitating intellectual access, and citizens taking active roles appreciating and making use of cultural creations. Business and “markets” may, at times, function on the lowest of these levels (visibly and invisibly), but function they do. And the culture-commerce aspect of this era’s story, along with the subjective historical decisions outlined in the last chapter, goes some way toward explaining how promoters’ dreams dissolved into the battle of ideas—of cultural paradigms—known today as the Culture Wars.

In this and the following chapter, William Benton and Britannica staff, as well as Great Books Foundation personnel, decenter Adler and his intellectual community as the *dramatis personae* in presenting the great books to the American public. While Adler never wholly separated himself from promotion, his intellectual focus for most of the 1950s became *using* great books in his aforementioned Institute for Philosophical Research. But, for now, courtesy of Britannica and the Foundation, the great books idea’s trajectory was ascending, requiring only Adler’s low-level attention. In this period, the idea reached its twentieth-century apex in terms of positive public awareness and material access.

Sales numbers show that the *Great Books of the Western World* flowed into America’s educational institutions and homes during the 1950s and 1960s. While business considerations alone explain something of the boom, no commercial enterprise succeeds without a receptive cultural climate. Vectors outside the business axis affecting potential *Great Books* readers included changes in political culture, religion, education, economics, and family life. Historical considerations in each area aided a rise in public consciousness of, and receptivity to, the great books idea. Britannica’s set grew in a field planted by many sowers.

Context: Early Cold War political culture and politics

The public activities of Adler and his community of discourse reveal them to be mostly conventional, or slightly left-of-center, consensus-oriented liberal intellectuals. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., aptly summarized some of their politics in his 1949 book, *The Vital Center*—a work that helped define what has since become known (rightly or wrongly)

as the “consensus” period.¹⁰ Most historians and casual observers, for instance, know William Benton for his half-term as Connecticut’s Democratic US Senator (1949–1953) rather than as president and chairman of the board for Britannica. As a senator, Benton famously put forth a resolution to condemn Joseph McCarthy and earned the ire of right-wingers and certain sectors of conservatives.¹¹ One of Robert Hutchins’ claims to fame in terms of politics and the intellectual life included his energetic fight on behalf of academic freedom. This came to a head in 1949 while defending University of Chicago faculty from Illinois politicians. Even Hutchins’ later work on the Ford Foundation’s Fund for the Republic was negatively motivated by Senator Joseph McCarthy and assaults on freedom by the House Un-American Activities Committee.¹²

The liberal politics of Britannica’s editorial staff mattered less, after publication, than the set’s larger political context and reception in the minds of reader-consumers. To understand why Cold War intellectuals and the thoughtful readers were attracted to the great books idea and Britannica’s product, one must look closely at conservatism during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The dominant themes in conservatives’ broader critique of mid-century liberalism included democracy, moral relativism, the decline of the Western tradition of philosophy, and the importance of the history of ideas. Although promoters like Adler, Hutchins, Benton, and Fadiman did not explicitly intend it, a convergence of politics and conservative agitation, particularly by “new conservatives,” point toward a *Great Books Conservatism* as the dominant strain of the idea’s history during the Cold War. This ideology overshadowed the prior *General Honors* and concurrent *Great Ideas Approaches* inasmuch as both promoted nonideological critical thinking and a general deep understanding apart from politics of Britannica’s editors.

Readers seemed to believe that the great books idea promoted a form of culture that was safe for American-style democracy, or “democratic capitalism,” during the Cold War. The great books idea offended neither emerging traditionalist conservatives nor established liberal “celebrants of their native land.” On the former, great books could be perceived to support a trans-Atlantic conservative cosmopolitanism that promoted liberty in the face of Communism.¹³

Among 1950s conservative intellectuals, especially traditionalists such as John Hollowell, great books could be marshaled in support of a kind of natural law democracy that provided a “moral foundation” and promoted “self restraint and...the common good.” Indeed, Walter Lippmann’s “public philosophy” was seen by conservatives as a “philosophy of civility” that rested on natural law. The great books idea might foster a critical mass of citizens who were not

mere “common men” or the “mass men” critiqued by traditionalist conservatives’ favorite Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset, in *The Revolt of the Masses*. Those citizens would neither devolve into a “crowd culture” nor need a “total state” to provide what would be an “ersatz community”—a nominal democracy. To promote a better democratic man, they would need tools, such as great books, that prevented alienation and enlightened “culture, universities, and family relations.”¹⁴ This enlightenment from the darkness of a tyrannical, conformist democracy extended to ethics and morals. Because the Chicago great books promoters had spoken out against moral and ethical relativism in the 1930s and 1940s, the great books project could be perceived, by conservatives at least, as unfriendly to a licentious, nihilistic cultural radicalism that could undermine America’s democratic culture.¹⁵

But the great books idea did more than stand against relativism. To “new conservative” and traditionalist intellectuals of the 1950s, great books were an affirmation of the “Great Tradition” of Western philosophy. Great books held forth “unbending absolutes,” “universalistic natural laws,” and standards.¹⁶ Those foundations, or first things, provided strength and order in an age where the Western heritage was under assault from a Communism that was a “secular and messianic quasi-religion.” Some conservatives, particularly “Straussians” (the disciples of Leo Strauss), took this further by limiting this affirmation to the “classical tradition” and pitting classics against all of modernity. To them “the goal of political life was virtue, not freedom.” Great books helped counter pernicious modern ideas, outlined by Russell Kirk, such as “the perfectibility of man, contempt for tradition, [and] political and economic leveling.” This antimodern, or *Straussian Strain* of the great books idea, would later be developed further in the future by Allan Bloom. But, whether antimodern or inclusive of moderns, this “Great Tradition” espoused by 1950s conservatives generally stood against the “blandly rationalistic liberal mind” that could not grasp this danger. The great books idea, properly conceived, would help Western civilization not merely contain Communism or maintain “neutrality,” but help defeat it, give it the tools for victory. In the process, the internal, almost suicidal decline of Western civilization would be arrested.¹⁷

Indeed, a Cold War victory over the Communist “materialist faith” might be achieved, traditionalist conservatives believed, if Americans held a proper view of intellectual history. To that end, Adler and Hutchins’ “Great Ideas” would help reinforce the notion that ideas were, in fact, “the principal engines of history.” The *Britannica* set might also buttress Richard Weaver’s argument that “ideas have consequences”—that intellectual history exposed both “first principles” and subsequent errors, both of which mattered to America’s cultural and political

well-being. The postwar Right's "belief in the potency of ideas" definitely would not have hurt sales of Britannica's set.¹⁸

These conservative perceptions captured some of the thought of Adler's community of discourse, but missed many others. Traditionalist conservatives overlooked the fact that the comprehensiveness of the *Syntopicon*, or Great Ideas Approach to great books, was more descriptive than prescriptive. And conservatives only selectively acknowledged the promotion of critical thinking (via rationality) evident in works like Adler's *How to Read a Book*, Everett Dean Martin's *The Meaning of a Liberal Education*, and Hutchins' *The Higher Learning in America*. That thinking held everything up for inspection, including orthodoxy, standards, natural law, capitalism, individualism, et cetera. Traditionalists also overlooked, it seems, the very public liberalism of Adler, Hutchins, and many others when it came to matters like the United Nations, academic freedom, and the anti-McCarthyism of great books proponents.

Despite the complexities of Britannica's *Great Books* and Adler's great books reading groups—the two dominant iterations of the great books idea in the 1950s (representing the Great Ideas and General Honors Approaches, respectively)—each were seen as unopposed to, if not friendly and consistent with, Great Books Conservatism. While the last is a retroactive designation, it does reflect the age and some (but not by any means all) of the intentions of great books promoters. As Richard Pells has noted, liberal minds often accommodated to what they perceived as a nonradical, essentially conservative age.¹⁹

Despite their good intentions, great books participants did not escape the scrutiny, or anti-intellectualism, of the early 1950s anti-Communist wing of the Right. Cold War hawks monitored great books groups for the same reason Charles Walgreen, in the 1930s, ordered an investigation of the University of Chicago: namely, the inclusion of the *Communist Manifesto* on great books reading lists.²⁰ In 1959, for instance, the American Legion attempted to block a "Seminar on Essential Ideas" in Briarcliff Manor, New York. The Legion opposed the seminar apparently because funding from the Ford Foundation meant that one's patriotism was necessarily and automatically corrupted. Adler's bad reputation among American "patriots" stemmed from his advocating world federal government in the 1940s. That advocacy had begun with Adler's *How to Think About War and Peace*. Beginning with a 1945 Congressional Record entry submitted by Mississippi Representative John E. Rankin, Adler remained on watch lists into the 1960s. And "one-worlders," as Lawrence Wittner relayed, were fodder for "professional patriots" and right-wing zealots like Senator McCarthy and Robert Welch, founder of the John Birch

Society. As late as April 1963, a Spokane, Washington, branch of the “Birchers” called Adler a “high priest of the liberal left.”²¹

The depth—if not breadth—of Cold War anti-liberal-intellectual animosity reveals itself in surprising ways. No amount of study on democracy, freedom, and the meaning of citizenship, through the great books or otherwise, could immunize one from ideological suspicion. It should not be surprising, therefore, to learn that Adler earned an “FBI file.” On June 28, 1946, J. Edgar Hoover, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, requested information on Adler’s background and activities in relation to Adler’s advocacy for world federal government. The investigation was inexplicably rescinded a few days later, on July 1, but another request was made in 1952 by Maryland congressman, James P. S. Devereux, of the US House of Representatives. Other investigation requests followed in 1955 and 1956. The 1956 inquiry came from Carroll Colby, a resident of Briarcliff Manor, New York, and author of a book, *The FBI*, which favorably analyzed the same institution. The last inquiries made about Adler and his world federal government activities occurred in 1964. Nothing serious resulted from any of these requests.²² Nevertheless, their existence reveals something of the era’s Cold War anxieties and anti-intellectualism, as well as Adler’s middle-left position on the ideological continuum.

Context: Education

The broader fight against anti-intellectualism would not gather steam until the end of the 1950s, post-Sputnik. This occurred first in educational contexts, but gained momentum culturally through the election of John F. Kennedy. His vital center, hyper-masculine liberalism moved the discussion away from liberal elite “eggheads” and toward using the “best and the brightest” (David Halberstam’s ironic term) America had to offer within his administration.²³ That this process took until 1960 did not stop 1950s educators from promoting, discussing, and critiquing the great books idea independent of the desires of Britannica. Adler and his community’s ongoing education writings were of course voluminous, but other educators and institutions promoted the great books idea.²⁴

Citing the Great Books Foundation might appear contradictory in relation to this discussion of the idea’s larger social context, but the Foundation deserves mention for both its membership growth and relative independence from Britannica. The Foundation’s independence derives from the fact that it continued adding reading groups and gaining members *before* Britannica’s *Great Books* sales took off in the late 1950s. The Foundation’s beginnings, however, were rocky after its ballyhooed 1947–1948 start up. Leadership turnover and money

problems hampered the organization during its first five years. From Lynn Williams, Jr., in 1947 to Gordon Dupee in 1953, there were four presidents in six years of existence. On top of that, the University of Chicago ceased funding the Foundation in 1949. After Hutchins left the board of directors in 1950, Adler became its strongest intellectual link to the Foundation's beginnings. On top of these occurrences, a negative book, titled *Great Books: Panacea or What?*, appeared in 1952. Written by Mount Mary College president Edward Fitzpatrick, it emphasized, or at least thoroughly discussed, the failings of reading groups.²⁵ These setbacks slowed the Foundation and probably hampered early sales of Britannica's set.

Shortly thereafter, however, the Foundation began to recover. Grants from Ford Foundation's Fund for Adult Education—\$114,000 in 1956 alone—helped tremendously. But most importantly, increased membership in discussion groups helped cement the future. Although the Foundation was based in Chicago (as it is today), reading groups existed all over the country and beyond. The Foundation's 1956 annual report indicated that participant growth around the world totaled 47 percent in the three years prior. During the 1955–1956 fiscal year, under Dupee's presidency, the Foundation conducted 141 training programs, providing discussion group "leadership experience" for "more than 2,000 persons." By April 1956, there existed 1,735 reading groups in 889 foreign, and US communities. Five years later, in December 1961, the "world total" was 3,135 groups with an estimated average of 15 members each. Actual participants numbered around 26,000 in 1957. This was a kind of steady state between an enthusiastic start-up high of 50,000 during the 1947–1948 winter, and a 1952 low of 17,000. Estimates for late 1961 came to 47,025. In 1956, the largest numbers of groups were in New York and Colorado (165 each), Illinois (129), and Ohio (115); the smallest were in Idaho (2), North Dakota (3), and Montana (3).²⁶ The Foundation's efforts clearly aided a great books proliferation in America and beyond. All of this occurred a few years before Britannica's *Great Books* sales took off in the 1957–1959 period.

Basic financial factors—namely, a booming, consumption-oriented economy—also enabled the growth of the Foundation and the great books idea. Stifled since 1929, demand for home items, including books, exploded in the post-World War II years. And higher incomes enabled greater intellectual and educational expectations. As historian Elaine Tyler May summarized, "Consumerism was not an end in itself; it was the means for achieving individuality, leisure, and upward mobility." Those last achievements would increasingly occur, moreover, in that idealized, self-contained Cold War environment: the suburban home.²⁷ Convergence with the Foundation came by

way of individual and family book ownership. One contemporary scholar cited “the rise of the paperbacks, including the ‘classics’” as “the most significant of all factors affecting reading” in postwar America.²⁸ Although paperbacks had existed before World War II, the Foundation itself published inexpensive great books reprints from its beginning—before the “paperback revolution.” Even so, the rise of the New American Library’s Signet and Mentor series, as well as Doubleday’s Anchor “quality paperbacks” series, fed the explosion. This revolution overcame the “cheapness” stigma in relation to more sturdy hardcover books. Indeed, it was a paradoxical desacralization of books through the market that helped enable the wide availability, or democratization, of the great books idea.²⁹ And all of this occurred, amazingly, despite the rise of television.³⁰

As an adult education institution, the Great Books Foundation benefited indirectly from a larger postwar movement for general education. Although Adler and his cohort were recognized as inspirational to strains of the general education ideal, it was the 1945 Harvard Report, or “The Redbook,” that catalyzed advocates for general education. Officially titled *General Education in a Free Society*, former Harvard President, James Bryant Conant, commissioned the study. The Harvard Report, along with subsequent debates within the President’s Commission on Higher Education (1946–1948), fueled a “General Education Controversy” in the late 1940s and into the early 1950s. At their core, these debates were about the goals of higher education in relation to fostering democracy, or a democratic culture. An important subtopic included how to prescribe the subjects and ideas students ought to know to function properly in a democracy. The Harvard Report worked within the liberal arts tradition, while *Higher Education for American Democracy* (the Commission’s final report) utilized a more “instrumental” view of knowledge in the tradition of John Dewey. In sum, the Harvard Report was friendlier to the great books idea—to the point of mentioning it by name—but with a firm eye on citizenship.³¹

These public discussions inspired other institutions. For instance, Yale University’s “Directed Studies” program (or “DS”), founded in 1946, is one example of a great books-based move toward general education, more intellectual rigor, and development of moral character in students. The program is still in existence.³² This same spirit inspired Notre Dame University President John J. Cavanaugh, C. S. C., to start a great books program. His experiment began in 1947 and came to full fruition in 1950 as the “General Program of Liberal Studies,” directed by Adler colleague and former *Syntopicon* indexer Otto Bird. Cavanaugh presided from 1946–1952, and his successor, Father Theodore Hesburgh, strongly supported Bird’s program into

the 1970s.³³ The program was not strictly for adults, but its creation speaks to a high-profile connectedness between Catholic thinking and the great books idea.

The question, however, of what constitutes a general education, as well as how to deliver it, vexed American educators both before and after the appearance of both reports. The critics of progressive education, such as Adler and Hutchins, perceived the main issues as an overemphasis of scientism, vocationalism, and specialization at all education levels. Hutchins and Adler saw the great books as a solution to these problems, even at the high school level through their great books experiment in the University's well-known Laboratory Schools. This foreshadowed their views of the postwar general education controversy. The two reports quickened and nationalized their concerns—expanding the conversation broadly beyond higher education into the upper tiers of secondary schools. The best expression of the liberal arts vein of the general education discussion for high schools is in the 1952 work, *General Education in the School and College*. Like the Harvard Report, the newer book makes explicit reference to great books programs as an acceptable, even desired, part of the liberal education environment.³⁴

But school and college curriculum reform faced many obstacles. Even Father Cavanaugh and Bird faced early, albeit unsuccessful, resistance at Notre Dame through the writings of a prominent young neo-Thomist, Anton Pegis. Although Adler and Jacques Barzun shared a great deal in common later in life, from the 1970s going forward, Barzun exhibited no substantial belief in democratized general, or liberal, education in the 1950s—through the great books or otherwise. Barzun's 1959 book, *House of Intellect*, is an extended diatribe against the pseudointellectualism fostered by a shallow liberal arts education.³⁵ This kind of opposition pushed great books promoters to advocate through both the marketplace and, in the tradition of Alexis de Tocqueville, voluntary associations such as the Foundation's local reading groups.

Context: Social norms

Before embarking on Britannica's odyssey to publish a great books set, Hutchins warned of a specific negative domestic consequence. Adler remembered Hutchins explicitly declaring he did not want to provide "colorful furniture" for "American homes."³⁶ That type of middlebrow pretension had been vigorously mocked by Virginia Woolf and Clement Greenberg before World War II, and would be again by Dwight Macdonald in the 1950s—beginning with his 1952 review of Britannica's set and culminating with his 1960 *Partisan*

Review essay, "Masscult and Midcult."³⁷ But the middle classes nevertheless proved to be an attractive audience for the great books idea as the 1950s progressed. First, criticisms made by those intellectuals apparently did not filter down. Through Britannica's set and the Great Books Foundation's reading groups, families could materially display their affluence, culture, and intelligence. But other pressures, historical and immaterial, affected the well-being of 1950s and 1960s families: conformity, alienation, and escapism. Elaine Tyler May compellingly characterized these as part and parcel of an unofficial policy of domestic containment that existed during the Cold War.³⁸

Conformity could take a number of forms, negative and positive. Workers and professionals expected to conform intellectually and socially to confined subjects and tasks could seek relief, escape, or even a new consciousness through the great books. Promoters predicted that the public's experience in higher education, focusing on specialization and vocationalism, would leave them unsatisfied.³⁹ Steady employment and material affluence could not effect true intellectual liberation. The great books idea, then, could be either a means of decompressing or filling in educational gaps. If the idea worked this way in education, perhaps some family members experiencing repression, by way of conformity to gender and age expectations, might also see great books as a safety valve for familial containment.⁴⁰

Increased religiosity and the anti-Communist vigilance also may have affected great books enthusiasm. One historian observed that "in the twentieth century, formal church affiliation had never been as high as it was in the 1950s."⁴¹ While the Britannica's *Great Books* included citations of the Bible in its *Syntopicon* essays, no Bible versions came with the set. And promoters like Adler—a lapsed Jew—and Hutchins—a lapsed Presbyterian—never emphasized connections to Christianity.⁴² Nevertheless, the Bible's partial inclusion likely made the set somewhat safe for Christians seeking to bolster the faith's connections to America's larger culture. On the other hand, volume 50 of the *Great Books* also included Karl Marx's *Capital*, and Marx and Friedrich Engels' *Communist Manifesto*. Those works' presence in the collection may have inspired agnostics and atheists to purchase the *Great Books* to make a minor, subversive statement about excessive Cold War anti-Communism. No known evidence exists of American Communists' pride in owning the *Great Books*, but Hugh Moorhead documented that anti-Communist groups monitored readings of Marx by Foundation reading groups.⁴³

Arguments about psychological and social conformity in the 1950s have recently received a boost from historical evidence pointing toward a broad, voluntary movement aimed at understanding

America's "collective self"—that is, itself as a mass culture. Sarah Igo argues that a "little noticed transformation" had taken place by mid-century, "one whereby statistical majorities, bell curves, and impersonal data points came to structure Americans' social imaginations." Media enabled the movement by both using and relaying the data found. Through years of surveying, social scientists offered "new ways of seeing, perceiving, and imagining" the public and individuals who attended to the new data. Surveyors and statisticians helped create the idea of "the masses," or a "mass public," thus enabling the notion of a degraded "mass culture" so despised by Macdonald and Frankfurt School critics. Igo also relayed a concern of mid-century critics about survey data fostering bandwagon effects.⁴⁴ The key, then, for creators of mass culture was to find a way to get a bandwagon rolling. More than a few salesmen—and one publisher—hoped that any new aggregate majority, constructed or otherwise, would envision Britannica's *Great Books* as part of America's average postwar household. And original great books promoter-intellectuals like Adler and Hutchins dreamed of an enlightened "collective self."

Britannica's sales efforts: 1952–1956

Little information exists on *Great Books* sales for the first four years after publication, but one thing is clear: sales were awful and finger-pointing was rampant. Benton's biographer skips those four years, picking up the *Great Book* story again in 1956. A 1962 *Time* article claimed that Britannica sold only 1,863 *Great Books* sets in 1952. Adler had played a key role up to that point, and Hutchins would engineer a deal in 1952 to sell 1600 sets to the Old Dominion Foundation that would be donated to libraries around the United States. But a massive, unanticipated sales drop-off occurred the next year: only 138 sets were sold in 1953. No direct explanation for the problem exists.⁴⁵ The biggest concern for all parties, it seems, then became the assignation of blame. Benton wrote Adler in June 1952 to defend Britannica President Robert Preble's efforts to control expenses:

Mortimer, enormous sums of money have been wasted in the editorial work and publishing expense on the Great Books. Bob Preble knows this. You and I and Bob Hutchins have unconsciously and ignorantly shared great responsibility in this waste. I do not blame Bob Preble for moving in, as he took responsibility for the company, to curb the waste...I want you to know that I thank God that we have [Preble]...because he has brought to me exactly what I needed as an operating executive.⁴⁶

In addition, Benton reminded Adler that Britannica “stood behind you as no other corporation...in all modern history would have.” Benton concluded, “The Great Books have been handled on a basis that is so unbusinesslike that I hope it will never be reported...to any of my friends who like to claim that I have some business ability.”⁴⁷ These concerns resurfaced periodically over the next ten years. As late as 1967, even after the *Great Books* had become a multimillion dollar revenue stream, Adler wrote an eight-page letter to Benton complaining about snide “jocular” remarks made by Benton and detailing, in fact, how Benton actually may have underspent in relation to the labor received.⁴⁸

In spite of the quibbling a few sales ideas did surface in this period. Benton explored the possibility of selling the *Great Books* through department stores in February 1953. His “old friend,” Fred Lazarus of Federated Department Stores, suggested the idea, and believed the price had be around \$130 to tap into existing \$10/month payment options. Benton wrote Hutchins about the possibility, but nothing apparently came of it.⁴⁹ Harry Houghton, a member of Britannica’s Board of Directors since 1945, created a sales brochure in 1953 that excited commentary from Benton—comments that reveal something of Benton’s temperament and feel for the business. Benton made it clear that he liked the creation, but criticized it for “ignor[ing] the tremendous ‘snob appeal’ of the set.” He believed this to be the set’s “most alluring and important quality.”⁵⁰ Benton’s elaboration exhibited the instincts of a first-rate advertiser:

Good promotion and good selling interpret [the set’s intellectual] promises in terms of the individual’s basic desires. How does he become more attractive to the opposite sex? How does he impress people at a party? How does he learn what he needs to know in order to get promoted? How does he acquire the sheen and the glamor [sic] of people such as Hutchins, Adler, the Fat Man’s Class in Chicago and the five hundred Founders? How does he impress the boss?⁵¹

He understood, better than anyone else associated with the great books idea, how to inflame the modern person’s baser desires.⁵²

Benton asked Adler and Hutchins in 1954 to join Britannica in making a *Great Books* promotional movie. The importance of this film was not so much in its actual distribution or number of viewings but in its approximation of the perfect pitch for Britannica’s sales representatives. Benton hoped it would be ready for a July showing in Long Beach, California, where the sales force intended on using the “party method” to sell the set. This method meant using the set’s buyers to

invite their friends to a get-together focusing on the set. Benton gave Adler (and Hutchins) unsolicited, frank advice on making the film a first-rate sales pitch. Benton directed them to “imagine that the movie is to be shown in a home to small group of people . . . make it as intimate and friendly and relaxed as possible.” He then reminded him: “You are not lecturing; you are teaching.” They heeded his input. Adler and Hutchins focused on the “Great Conversation,” and the film succeeded in mixing sales, sociability, and intellectual seriousness.⁵³ Culture and commerce found some harmony in the medium. Even so, sales remained stagnant.

Britannica’s sales efforts: 1956 and beyond

In the years after the film, during late 1955 and early 1956, Britannica’s *Great Books* were nearly “written off” as a failed enterprise. More than three years of poor sales—even in a favorable social, cultural, and intellectual environment—caused Benton to pessimistically speculate, in December 1955, that the *Great Books* may never become “a sound business enterprise.” He blamed Adler and Hutchins for mismanaging the set’s production cost. The “extra million dollars put into the *Syntopicon*,” Benton reflected, “created [an] acute commercial problem” for the set.⁵⁴ In other words, Benton was upset that he had not yet recouped his investment. He wanted more than a “self-supporting” enterprise. But his sales team was not helping matters. At this point Robert Conger headed the *Great Books*’ sales effort. He promoted a sales technique called “creaming” that focused exclusively on intellectuals. Why this strategy failed became abundantly clear after an “awareness study” in the early 1960s. But in the meantime the aim was to capture the top 2 percent of society for the *Great Books*—the “eggheads,” as *Time* magazine later called them. Conger’s immediate goal in January 1956 was to sell his backlog of 3000 sets to persuade Britannica’s Directors, against “considerable opposition,” to approve printing of 6,000 more sets in June. Whether Conger achieved his goals is unknown; at this point most historical accounts of Britannica either superficially cover Conger or skip to the hiring of Kenneth M. Harden as national sales manager later in 1956.⁵⁵

Although a forgotten figure in the one authoritative biography of Benton, Harden saved the *Great Books* as a business venture. *Time* described Harden as a “stocky, bespectacled . . . veteran of 37 years of encyclopedia selling.” Harden believed that the great books belonged in the market for mass culture; he wanted to reach “the butcher, the baker, [and] the candlestick maker.”⁵⁶ In this sense, he was one with all great books promoters who had gone before him.

Harden differed from those promoters, however, and most resembled Benton in his willingness to engage in the “hard sell.” Specific tactics credited to him included ramping up door-to-door sales, creating a course for new salesmen to learn about the *Syntopicon*, selling the set for “\$10 down and \$10 a month,” packaging sales with bookcases (and Bibles and dictionaries), helping the Great Books Foundation sign up members, dreaming up great books reading lists for children, and, lastly, changing the set’s aesthetics (e.g., using brighter binding colors such as “Blue Levantex” and “Red Royal”). During this period sales staff also obtained some sense of the Britannica set’s best customers. That group included anxious parents, military personnel, clergy, college educators, and college students. Britannica also began prominently advertising in the *New York Times*. Each advertisement included: a picture of the entire *Great Books* set, neatly arranged; the phrases “Great Books of the Western World” and “Syntopicon” in large print; reproductions of Britannica’s and the University of Chicago’s logos; and finally a coupon for a free Britannica brochure on the set.⁵⁷

Whether considered individually or wholly, these tactics generally achieved their goal. Sales increased from 5,256 in 1956 to 26,607 in 1959—and more than 40,000 in 1960. Variable pricing, based on the quality of binding, meant that the set’s list costs ranged, in 1962, from \$298 to \$1,175. Moorhead reported that the set’s original, 1952, sale price was \$249.50. By 1962, Harden had increased sales to 51,083 sets with gross revenues of around \$20 million. A few of the *Great Books* regional sales managers brought home \$100,000 per year in 1962. And Harden predicted that sales revenues would grow to \$40 million by 1967.⁵⁸ Of course all these reflected positively on Harden, as a salesman at least. He had succeeded even in a market described as exceedingly strong for paperback sales, such as those of the New American Library’s Signet Classics series.⁵⁹ Harden had successfully commodified the great books idea. If Benton exemplified an uneasy integration of culture-and-commerce in the 1950s and 1960s, Harden symbolically stood at Benton’s right hand, as his first lieutenant in charge of commercial interests. Adler stood on Benton’s left, as his lesser second lieutenant and advisor on cultural matters. Adler symbolized both the co-opting of culture and the attempt by intellectuals to forge a great books-based public philosophy that would buttress a democratic culture. While Adler genuinely believed that the *Syntopicon* moved Britannica’s set apart from the piecemeal purchase of individual volumes on his list, he also did not yet realize how the set would ossify the great books idea—both to himself and others.

Conclusion

Harden's marketing magic proved powerful and controversial. It colored perceptions for the great books idea from the 1960s going forward. Sales of Britannica's publications were estimated at \$125 million in 1965. The 1965 *Forbes* article indicated that the University of Chicago had received \$25 million gross in the 22 years since entering into its agreement with Benton in 1943. Moreover, business experts called the encyclopedia business, and the great books by extension, "price insensitive"—meaning "customers don't argue about price." In fact, "a higher price may even be a selling advantage when people want 'the best' for their children"—or themselves per Marplan's Study (detailed in chapter 4).⁶⁰ *Forbes* reminded readers that "once inside the house... seldom does the salesman leave without having sold" something else. Britannica salespeople, for example,

could conceivably sell an encyclopedia (\$398); a Britannica Junior [encyclopedia] (\$149); a Britannica World Language Dictionary (\$35); the Britannica Library of Great American Writing (\$15); a Britannica World Atlas (\$29.50); the Great Books of the Western World (\$398); and the Great Ideas Today (\$10), for a total cost of \$1,034.50. Such all-inclusive sales are undoubtedly rare, but...⁶¹

The sky was the limit.

By 1965, however, Britannica's sales tactics drew early complaints from cultural critics, some consumers, and even the federal government. At this stage, these complaints did not qualify as a full-blown backlash, but they foreshadowed larger problems that culminated in the early 1970s. After receiving an over-the-top Britannica sales letter in early March 1959, Sydney Harris—a long-time *Chicago Daily News* writer who also had led great books discussion groups—blasted it in his regular "Strictly Personal" column. The letter promised the *Great Books* purchaser "greater success" in life and, in Harris' view, was full of "delusive promises and downright lies." The "vulgar" sales pitch insulted the movement. Harris challenged, "What say you this, Mortimer?" Adler answered and Harris published the reply: "I agree, without reservation, [with] everything you said."⁶² The "misrepresentations" evident in the letter Harris received were confirmed just a few years later. In 1961, the Federal Trade Commission, acting on a 1958 complaint, ordered Britannica to desist with "deceptive pricing, savings, and limited-time-only claims." That Britannica was not alone in earning consumer complaints (e.g., *Americana* was also cited) does not absolve the company of guilt. But it does point toward systemic issues rather than problems with Britannica alone.⁶³

Should the American market become overly marred, or saturated, *Forbes* pointed out other “glowing vistas.” Despite occasional “anti-American outbursts” by foreign activists, things American have “prestige” overseas. Britannica sensed this too. The company forwarded plans in the 1960s (never fully actualized) to create a set of “Eastern Classics” (1965), to study the “relation of Eastern and Western ideas” (1967), and to translate the *Great Books* set into German, Italian, French, and even Russian (1963).⁶⁴ In any event, Britannica and other encyclopedia publishers would continue to help US homes acquire “adequate libraries” going forward. *Forbes* reminded its audience that publishers like Benton “have a way of thinking of themselves as educators,” and they do “perform an important educational function.”⁶⁵ Despite the questionable veneer of the Benton-as-educator proposition and the company’s profit-motive, the writer nevertheless felt that Britannica contributed something to the democratization of American culture.

Apart from the Benton-Harden-Adler triumvirate, other mid-century great books promoters occasionally entered the fray to support sales of Britannica’s set. Much like he did in the 1952 Waldorf dinner, Clifton “Kip” Fadiman lightened the mood for a February 1965 gathering of sales personnel in Phoenix, Arizona. At the end of a speech wherein he had recounted his relationship with Adler before, during, and after the *Great Books*’ production, Fadiman encouraged the gathering:

I take my hat off to you. I take it off to Senator Benton who pushed this idea through, often feeling I’m sure, that he was throwing money down a mink-lined rat hole. I take it off to Dr. Hutchins and Dr. Adler who took seventy-four corpses and made them pay off. The moral is plain: find the right package and the right division managers, and you’re in business. It’s often said that the life of the mind doesn’t pay. But you know different... If a man has \$400 to spend or \$750 (de luxe English leather) or \$1175 (full morocco), there’s no better way to spend it than by helping you become millionaires.⁶⁶

Fadiman could certainly work a room full of aspiring playboys. Of course, it is less the case that the life of the mind had created a successful product. Rather, Britannica’s forceful sales plan had taken advantage of America’s Cold War anxieties, its education policy gaps, its postwar affluence, and its shared political and cultural dreams.

4

“Mixing Vice and Virtue”: Adler, Britannica’s Cottage Industry, and Mid-Century Anxiety

Mortimer Adler helped Britannica’s sales crew and potential male buyers of their wares with another spicy *Playboy* article in 1965. Titled “The Not-So-Classic Classics,” his piece shared *Playboy*’s pages with Shel Silverstein, Woody Allen (again), Ray Bradbury, and centerfold Sally Duberson. Adler sought to promote the great books idea with an ironic confession: namely, that some classics “bored” him. He called those less-than-scintillating works “a rogues’ gallery of famous books” and mere “so-called classics.” Adler kept great books promoters’ and salesmen’s interests in mind, however, by avoiding any references to Britannica’s *Great Books*.¹ He would attempt to sell Britannica by explaining what it was not. The piece underscored the cultural strength of great books idea by risking a look at it in negative terms. But the article also continued the implicit theme of the great books’ accessibility from his 1963 *Playboy* piece.

The spiciness of the article derived from its unsparing criticism—of books not in Britannica’s set. Adler called Cicero a “tedious windbag” and “spouter of flatulent nothings.” Charles M. Doughty’s *Travels in Arabia Deserta* received Adler’s scorn. Doughty’s style was “abominable,” and Adler faulted the book for being “exhaustively complete.” Although Elizabeth Mann Borgese, the youngest daughter of Thomas Mann, was Adler’s friend, her father was not spared Adler’s poison pen. *Magic Mountain* was said to be a “deadly combination of the exhaustive with the exhausting.” Adler opined that the book did “not have much of a story”; its “thick web” of “tedious allegory” made it “dull and unreadable.” John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* also received the “tedious allegory” label. Adler continued by heaping scorn on Thomas More’s *Utopia*, Thorstein Veblen (H. L. Mencken called him “singularly laborious and muggy”), Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (“even sex can be boring,” said Adler), and James G. Cozzens’ *By Love Possessed*.

Adler surprisingly praised Dwight Macdonald for his “masterly job of exposing the lugubriousness, clumsiness, and tediousness” of Cozzens’ “convoluted, pretentious style”—especially in relation to his “clinical” and “boring accounts of sexual action.”² With regard to Adler, if you are going to promote the history of Western ideas under the cover of Britannica’s set, it certainly could not hurt to dress down the competition your colleagues excluded from the same.

Some proof of the article’s effectiveness came from a humorous echo in a prominent place. *New York Times* columnist Russell Baker suggested, after having noted Adler’s state of *ennui* and status as “The Great Books Man,” some tongue-in-cheek rewrites by more entertaining authors. Baker offered that *Anna Karenina* might be better served by Henry Miller. *Huckleberry Finn* could be revised by James Baldwin as an “indictment” of the “typical well-meaning but shallow white liberal” (Huck). William S. Burroughs could make the “most pungent statement ever composed against law enforcement” by making a cocaine-addicted Sherlock Holmes hallucinate his way through London, “always one step ahead of Scotland Yard.” Baker also proposed rewrites of *Wuthering Heights* by Tennessee Williams and *A Tale of Two Cities* by Joseph Heller. Aside from being an entertaining digression from the “great conversation,” Baker’s piece demonstrates that Adler and the great books idea could be presented together in a fashion that required little explanation—as assumed background for another story.³ Adler and the *Great Books* had arrived as cultural capital.

Covering the same time frame as the prior chapter, this portion of the story begins by covering Adler’s concurrent activities. These endeavors show that he concentrated first on *using* the great books in this period rather than promoting or helping sell them. This meant building up his Institute of Philosophical Research, strengthening his vision of a public philosophy, and writing his own books. These projects proved, to him, the power of the great books idea; it formed the basis for conversation about important philosophical topics. Adler also experienced personal troubles that kept his name in the news. In the short term, this seems to have had no effect on his power as a cultural figure. In any case, by the end of the 1960s his endeavors made Adler into a kind of adjunct for what C. Wright Mills called the “power elite”—what critics young and old would call “the system” or “The Establishment” (liberal or Eastern).⁴ Going into the 1970s, this had ominous implications for the great books as both a capitalist enterprise and as a reference point for cultural capital.

In the meantime, Britannica explored new ways to profit from the set. This at first meant constructing a cottage industry of supporting publications for the *Great Books*. Many of these projects involved Adler

working in a part-time, remote editorial role. Later Britannica sought to understand more about current and potential *Great Books* owners through an extensive "Awareness Study." Conducted by Marplan-Chicago, that survey revealed a wealth of information about *Great Books* usage, attitudes toward the set, female owners, home storage, and other issues. The survey's goal was to obtain a precise portrait of potential consumers, but it also closes the mid-century story that began with high intellectual ideals, low sales, Benton's lamentations, and Kenneth Harden's magic in making the great books idea a viable commodity.

Adler in the 1950s

Despite Adler's commitment to the *Great Books* project and his early direct involvement in sales, between 1952 and 1963 his Britannica work seems to have been limited. Two endeavors, in fact, absorbed most of Adler's time in the next decade: his Institute for Philosophical Research and the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. On the surface, both represent retreats from his colleagues in great books promotion, as well as his prior efforts to disseminate the great books idea. But Adler's writings contradict that notion—even if the new projects were less pointed. In Aspen, Colorado, he led great books seminars for business executives, civil servants, politicians, and nonprofit employees. The Aspen Institute began as a commendable attempt to bridge the commerce and culture divide, except through a trickle-down, leader-to-employee method. Adler's dedication to the Institute's seminars is evident in the fact that he participated into the 1990s. The Institute for Philosophical Research (IPR) grew out of Adler's work both on the great books and in philosophy. It involved not only a mental separation from Britannica and the University of Chicago but also a physical one: in 1952, Adler and his family moved to San Francisco for the Institute's founding. Its mission corresponded with a project Adler, inspired by Arthur Lovejoy, envisioned more than 20 years earlier: the compilation of what he called the *Summa Dialectica*—after Aquinas' famous *Summa Theologica*.⁵ Both IPR and Aspen exhibited something of Adler's ongoing commitment to fighting anti-intellectualism, developing a public philosophy, and promoting Enlightenment-era inspired mid-century political liberalism. They were cultural-intellectual endeavors even though they did not radically increase the accessibility of the great books idea.

Aspen provided Adler opportunities to mix virtue and vice. The virtues surfaced over the long term. He used his Aspen time positively to conduct seminars and give lectures. The seminars required little preparation since he had already led Socratic-style great books

groups for years. He merely had to tailor the questions asked. The lectures, however, presented Adler with a chance to reflect and organize his thinking on various topics for books and essays published later. This had two consequences. First, the yearly Aspen ritual enabled Adler's prolific output from roughly the mid-1960s going forward. Beginning with *The Conditions of Philosophy* published in 1965, Adler produced nearly a book annually until 1995. Second, the time spent preparing and organizing for Aspen eventually resulted in a permanent change to Adler's writing style. Before the mid-1950s, he wrote primarily for philosophers, neo-Thomist and otherwise. Communicating with a mixed crowd in Aspen, however, caused him to gradually shift to a more accessible prose style.⁶ The style used for *How to Read a Book* and *How to Think About War and Peace* would no longer be exceptional.

This momentous change had two consequences—one negative and the other positive. First, it alienated some of Adler's future audience in professional philosophy. Although he exhibited an open love for logic that, in another life, might have resulted in a productive career as an analytic philosopher, he did not possess what Ralph McInerney called the "pedantic bone."⁷ Adler avoided exploring every last detail, or nuance, that might otherwise engage some philosophers. As in his *Syntopicon* work, he continued to avoid too many historical facts and context. As is the case for many philosophers, the past had to be useable for Adler in relation to whatever present-day problem engaged him. But what he lost with professional philosophers he gained, in terms of audience, by creating his own form of a public philosophy. His accessible prose helped bring philosophy to those who might have otherwise never read in the subject. This is seen in *How to Read a Book*, but resurfaces strongly in the late 1970s.

With regard to vice, Aspen provided Adler, depending on your point of view, with either relief from tensions at home or the space to be something of a playboy. By the late 1940s, his marriage with Helen was falling apart. She reported "being celibate for 15 years" in a letter to Adler written in the early 1950s, as well as "living under an armed truce" for several of those years. She later called it a "strange marriage."⁸ The truce probably dated from a mid-1940s affair Adler hints at in his memoirs. By 1950, he was again open to paramours. The most prominent was a week-long fling in Aspen during the summer of 1950 with the "bright and beautiful" Clare Boothe Luce, then the wife of *Time* magazine publisher Henry R. Luce. In 1950, she was between prior service as one of Connecticut's delegates to the US House of Representatives and a forthcoming Italian ambassadorship under President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Like Adler, she was also in the midst of spousal troubles.⁹ Adler recalled the situation to Hutchins in

a letter that underscores both their close friendship and the seriousness of the fling:

What a week I had with [Clare] after Harry left, and after Helen left. This has been no vacation, boss. I'll tell you now—and amplify it when I have a chance to talk to you alone—that Clare got to the point of proposing marriage, with my entry into the [Roman Catholic] church as a pre-condition. . . . And the last word that her friend, Buffy Cobb, said to me, as she left, was "Clare will not be happy until she meets you at the altar rail." For God's sake, don't announce the nuptials or even the thought of them; but remind me to tell you the story. It still seems incredible to me.¹⁰

Clare had converted to Catholicism in 1946 under the direction of Fulton J. Sheen. The pressure she exerted was intense enough to cause Adler to temporarily swear off mixing business with pleasure.¹¹

Adler's use of Aspen for another playboy-like affair ultimately precipitated his divorce from Helen, but also resulted in a second marriage and a move back to Chicago. The next liaison was with Sue McKay, Adler's secretary during the late 1950s. By that time his family had been living in San Francisco since 1952; Aspen provided the necessary geographical cover. The start date for the affair is unknown, but by October 1959 it was such that McKay had accepted a conditional marriage proposal from Adler during the prior summer. By November all of Adler's closest male friends knew about McKay: Hutchins, Fadiman, Arthur Rubin, and Adler's IPR associate, Robert Hazo. Beginning that month and culminating in January 1960, Adler worked with his friend and lawyer, Louis O. Kelso, to plan for divorce. News of Mortimer and Helen's separation became public in March 1960. After negotiation and Helen's delayed acquiescence, the divorce became final in November 1960—ending their "strange" 33-year marriage.¹²

Now rid of Helen, Adler found that McKay proved a false consolation. He speaks of betrayal in his memoirs. They never married. Joseph Epstein, in his mocking obituary for Adler, relayed that McKay and her other boyfriend had planned an insurance collection scheme with the potential for murder. Adler's friends learned of the plot through a detective. By the summer of 1962, Adler was in the depths of depression. He contemplated suicide. Ultimately, another great books-related side project would save him. Caroline Pring, a 26-year-old editorial assistant, had already worked with him for more than a year on a Britannica project, *Gateway to the Great Books*. Their meeting and work began in platonic fashion. But by the end of 1962 their relationship had deepened such that he proposed

marriage. She accepted, and they were married in February 1963. They moved to Chicago the next month and would be married until her passing in the 1980s.¹³ In relation to the editorial project they shared, one might conclude that the first greatest love of Adler's life, the great books, led him to his second.

The cottage industry: Great Books subgenres

The means by which Adler and Pring met signaled the emergence of a new Britannica endeavor in the 1960s. Increased *Great Books* sales, along with some creative thinking by William Benton, resulted in a minor cottage industry of *Great Books*-related publications. With these works, Britannica and Benton responded to demands for more reading aids. These new aids buttressed both the relevance of the great books idea and, eventually, the perception that it was a tainted capitalist venture. Four projects are especially relevant: *The Great Ideas Program* (1959–1963, ten volumes); *The Great Ideas Today* (1961–1998); *Great Ideas from the Great Books* (1961); and *Gateway to the Great Books* (1963, ten volumes).¹⁴ Adler and his community of discourse contributed to all of these ventures. He coedited *Great Ideas Today* and *Gateway* with Robert Hutchins. *The Great Ideas Program* involved Adler and three different editors. Adler's newspaper column, "Great Ideas from the Great Books," resulted in a short book of the same title. That work indirectly supported this cottage industry. Washington Square Press compiled the columns into a 1961 book, and Benton wrote its introduction—of course mentioning Britannica's set.¹⁵ Clifton Fadiman's *Lifetime Reading Plan* resembles Adler's brief book in that it was an indirect part this group.

This cottage cultural industry helped promote the legacy of the great books idea as a limited popular cultural form. But those endeavors also further conflated Britannica's *Great Books* with the idea, degrading both, as well as promoters, among more serious intellectuals. Benton's extra endeavors made the great books idea seem both virtuous and too easy, a kind of vice for the mind. The presence of too many reading aids overshadowed the intention of promoters, such as Erskine, Adler, Hutchins, and Fadiman, that great books would excite the mind via direct contact and promote critical thinking. Few critics publicly scorned the helper volumes, but the cottage industry, while enabling accessibility, also unintentionally detracted from the dream of a democratized culture full of critically thinking citizens.

The Great Ideas Program led off these publications in 1959. Adler and his cohorts called *The Great Ideas Program* a "reading plan." The tenth and final volume appeared in 1963. Adler's coeditors for the endeavor were Seymour Cain, V. J. McGill, and Peter Wolff. Prefaces

for the same series were written by, among others, Richard McKeon, William Benton, Saul Bellow, and Joseph Wood Krutch. Adler and Wolff, who had first worked together on the *Syntopicon*, coedited volume one, titled *A General Introduction to the Great Books and to a Liberal Education*. It aimed to "provide a way into the *Great Books* for readers who like help." Each of that volume's 15 readings contained a simplified, narrative guide to the work's issues and ten or so study questions. For some questions, the editors provided answers, but the rest were left open-ended (appendix 7). Robert Hutchins' Preface to *A General Introduction* substantially linked *The Great Ideas Program* series to the *Great Books of the Western World*. By covering the topics of liberal education, democracy, citizenship, and personal growth, Hutchins attempted to turn the *Program* and set into a seamless garment.¹⁶

Britannica's most widely distributed *Great Books* sub-publication, *The Great Ideas Today* (GIT), began in 1961 as an annual "supplement" to the set. The first issue listed Hutchins and Adler as editors in chief, with Peter Wolff as the first executive editor. By 1966, Otto Bird had replaced Wolff. The GIT sought to "focus the wisdom of the great books and the light of the great ideas on the problems of the day. [The] aim is to illuminate, not merely report." Each GIT consisted of four parts. The first two analyzed both broad contemporary issues and world affairs in terms of "the larger perspectives provided by the accumulated experience and wisdom of the [human] race." Essays in part three covered that year's developments in the arts and sciences. Part four afforded Britannica the "opportunity to make additions" to the *Great Books of the Western World*. The 1961 GIT added four works: John Dewey's *Experience and Education*; Albert Einstein's *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*; Molière's *The School for Wives*; and Arnold J. Toynbee's *Three Essays*.¹⁷ Every issue offered a unifying theme and attempted to be "stand alone" (i.e., could be read without specific reference to the set). By the mid-1970s circulation for *The Great Ideas Today* was estimated at 80–90,000. Britannica staff claimed it was one of the "largest selling" annuals through the 1960s. GIT was published continually until 1998.¹⁸

Adler's personal contribution to this cottage industry was a newspaper column. Called *Great Ideas from the Great Books*, it began in October 1958 and became a book in 1961. Adler conceived of the column, and it was distributed by Marshall Field, Jr.'s Chicago *Sun-Times* Syndicate (Field had been a member of Hutchins' and Adler's "Fat Man Class"). The column consisted of Adler's answers to philosophical questions submitted by the general public. A 1959 promotional brochure listed it as a 550-word weekly release syndicated in 12 papers. By mid-1960, it would be in 28. If Adler used a submitter's question, she received a set of Britannica's *Great Books*. Adler's book,

which carried the same title, included 94 columns that helped readers relate great books to contemporary issues. The column/book dealt with topics such as divorce, racial and gender equality, the notion of social progress, the population explosion, 1950s conformity, film and literary censorship, family, and collective ownership and Communism. Adler attempted to dialectically balance his answers, as with the *Syntopicon*, by citing all sides of an issue. He included, of course, numerous great books authors (see appendix 8 for a sample question). Because of the columns' informality (colloquial language, no citations, conversational style), they might be the single best promotional pieces ever written on the great books idea.¹⁹

Non-Adler, non-Britannica publications from this period also contributed to the popular expansion of the great books idea. With an eye on developing a bottom-up great books program for youth, the Great Books Foundation hired Edwin Moldof as "academic director" in 1960 to create a program for fifth- through seventh-grade students using reading lists and inexpensive paperbacks. The first pilot group, for grades five–six, met that same year in Louisville. The reading list included Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Aesop's *Fables*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. Moldof thought big, emphasizing that the readings "are not just...for youngsters...but for everyone." The study continued in Detroit in 1961, which expanded the program to include a training for adult discussion leaders, and then to Chicago in 1961–1962. To help out the 400-plus reading groups eventually formed, the Foundation published and distributed 5,000 copies of two inexpensive paperback sets. An "overwhelming number of enthusiastic responses" to both the groups and the sets led the Foundation, in 1963, to formalize its "Junior Great Books" program. The Foundation then expanded it to the ninth grade and created five series of readings—printed again as cheap (ugly) paperbacks. Another expansion in 1967 lowered entry to the third grade.²⁰ True to its philosophical roots in Adler, Hutchins, and their community of discourse, these sets contained no apparatus: no scholarly introductions, no conclusions, and no footnotes.

Around the same time, Adler and his colleagues contemplated a top-down Britannica-based project tentatively titled "Great Books for Young People" (GBYP). Those 1961 discussions even resulted in a lengthy prospectus. The project was conceived as a ten-volume set, with its own *Syntopicon*, written for the 10–18 age range. Unlike *Junior Great Books*, nothing in GBYP would come from the adult *Great Books* set—though GBYP would have an "intimate relation" to the latter. This project eventually materialized as Britannica's *Gateway to the Great Books*.²¹ It is unclear whether Adler, in his role as a Foundation board member, passed along this idea to his Britannica colleagues—in case

the Foundation's effort failed, or as a hopefully profitable addition to its nascent cottage industry.

Another non-Adler, non-Britannica addition to the cottage industry was Clifton Fadiman's *The Lifetime Reading Plan* (1960). Of course the name "Fadiman" does not bring to mind an independent, non-Britannica-based project; indeed, one reviewer made the obvious association in calling Fadiman's book less a "plan" and more "a list of Great Books." But Fadiman's work did in fact originate outside the Benton-Adler orbit, and it exhibits some independence. Fadiman designed the *Plan* to help "beginners" (adults and otherwise) "avoid mental bankruptcy" by reading the "original communications" of Western culture. He wrote brief entries coaching readers on how to fully appreciate works ranging from Homer's *Iliad* to Lincoln K. Barnett's *The Universe and Dr. Einstein* (1948). He dedicated his book to Adler, writing that Adler "first taught me, and has never ceased teaching me, how to listen to the Great Conversation." Fadiman even included Adler's *How to Read a Book* as number 99 of his 100 selections (appendix 9). Fadiman exhibited some independence from Adler, however, by suggesting "secondary material" and reader aides. He noted that "some teachers of the Great Books decry [their] use," but "I do not agree."²²

The audience: High-profile criticism, notoriety, and admiration

The aforementioned cottage industry, along with Britannica's sales persistence and the ongoing work of the Great Books Foundation, resulted in widespread awareness of the great books idea. The sales numbers provided earlier show this quantitatively. But other evidence for the idea's prominence and wide exposure exists, in both positive and negative terms, during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

If there truly is no such thing as bad publicity then the great books idea benefited from its harshest critics. One of the most eloquent and trenchant critics was Dwight Macdonald. Macdonald made a career out of disdaining attempts to bring "high culture" to the masses. His poor view of the great books idea began immediately, with a much-acclaimed 1952 *New Yorker* review of Britannica's set. Famously calling it "a hundred pounds of Great Books," Macdonald disparaged Adler's "dry essays" and "doctrinaire smugness," as well as anyone's basic need for a set. Macdonald's only concession was that he did see Britannica's enterprise as better than Dr. Eliot's *Harvard Classics*. Adler dismissed Macdonald's review as a "hatchet job."²³

Perhaps the most dramatic symbol of the great books' pervasiveness in American culture involved the White House. The connection

began with the best and the brightest of John F. Kennedy's administration participating in a "serious project" nicknamed "Hickory Hills University." Encouraged by the president, Hickory Hills involved administration officials attending weekly seminars on a variety of subjects. During the last week of September 1962, Adler and Notre Dames former president, Rev. John J. Cavanaugh, lectured on "whether the Declaration of Independence makes America a Christian country." When asked for reading recommendations afterwards, Adler suggested great books: "Locke, Aquinas, Aristotle, and Plato." Adler's correspondence from the period indicates that he believed the project to be "secret," but the *New York Times* ran a story on Hickory Hills. The ever-ready Benton encouraged Kenneth Harden to utilize this "marvelous" promotional material.²⁴ And Adler's appearance revealed him as a literal adjunct to the liberal "Power Elite"—even if the Kennedy administration was a well-liked incarnation of that idea.

Proof of the pervasiveness of the great books idea could arise in unlikely places. Former *Time* magazine editor and Adler friend Henry Grunwald encountered the Britannica set during a 1966 trip to Africa. Grunwald had obtained an audience with Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, and Grunwald relayed part of their conversation:

[Grunwald] asked him about the changes he had seen since the beginning of his long reign... [Selassie said]: "I have seen the great become small, the small become great; I have seen good destroy evil and evil destroy good. I have seen how little history changes." Then he rose and gestured toward a bookshelf at his back: "To really answer your question, I would have to read all those volumes." He pointed to a set of the *Great Books*... Suddenly I imagined Mortimer [Adler]'s stocky, ripe form behind the emperor's spear-thin figure, quoting Aristotle.²⁵

The set's presence and the emperor's gesture of awareness affirmed a trans- or international aspect of the great books idea.

Malcolm Little, known to the world as Malcolm X, once created his own great books reading plan. In his famous *Autobiography*, mediated by Alex Haley and published in 1965, the list of books Malcolm X read while incarcerated (1946–1952) in the Norfolk Prison Colony was truly extraordinary. Beginning with the dictionary, Malcolm X read an astonishing array of books—with many titles and authors falling in the "great," "good," and "middlebrow" categories as outlined by Adler and other great books supporters. The list included: W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Will Durant's *Story of Civilization* series, H. G. Wells' *Outline of History* series, Carter Woodson's *Negro History*, Herodotus'

History, Plato's *Dialogues*, Schopenhauer, Kant, Nietzsche, Spinoza, Aesop's *Fables*, Shakespeare and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. At the end of his reading reminiscences, Malcolm X directly references the *Harvard Classics*.²⁶ His autodidactic program was guided by the desire to read the best his library had to offer. As had been the case with Frederick Douglass over a century before, education—particularly a liberal education—helped emancipate Malcolm X. Both embodied something of the "General Honors Approach" outlined in Adler's *How to Read a Book*.

The audience: Middle-class anxiety, conformity, and intellectual life

Britannica's *Great Books* set hit a sales plateau in the middle portion of the 1960s. In 1962, consumers purchased 51,083 sets, and the numbers seems to have been similar through the decade.²⁷ Like most forward-looking corporations, however, Britannica strategized to maintain and grow while things were going well. To wit, the company contracted Marplan-Chicago, a market research and advertising firm, to analyze the US "great books market." Marplan, in turn, produced a "GB Awareness Study" in July 1962 (hereafter Study). Through telephone surveys it determined "attitudes" toward and "buying motivations" for the set. There were 2,314 respondents: 203 owners, 157 sales prospects provided by Britannica, and 1,954 random from ten geographically diverse urban areas, including Atlanta, GA; Houston, TX; New York, NY; Seattle, WA; Washington, DC; St. Louis, MO; Des Moines, IA; Madison, WI; Oakland, CA; and Wichita, KS.²⁸

The Marplan Study is singular—the only one of its kind on the use and cultural perceptions of Britannica's *Great Books*, whether in the 1960s, before, or after. The study focused on three classes of respondents: owners, prospects, and "really awares." The owner demographics and group characteristics tell us something about the success of Britannica's sales strategies from the late 1950s. Thinking broadly about the Study, at its best it helps nuance assessments, nonfiction or fictional, rigorous and otherwise, of the mid-century middle class made critics such as Dwight Macdonald, John Kenneth Galbraith, William H. Whyte, and Sloan Wilson, as well as in books like *The Lonely Crowd* and *The Split-Level Trap*.²⁹ The data of course provides sociological perspective on the *Great Books*, and also another angle on class anxiety, status fears, conformity, and intellectual life.

For starters, owners reported a "high degree of satisfaction" with their sets. Confirming the efforts of Harden and Britannica's sales staff, nearly two-thirds of them learned of the set from magazine advertisements (33%), direct mail (17%), and salesmen (14%). The

primary reasons for desiring the set were enjoyment, learning, and reference (71% combined). Owners found the set “good or better than they had expected” 95 percent of the time—with 89 percent believing their purchase the “correct” choice. Owners appreciated the set’s ready availability (36%), as well as for its learning opportunities and “knowledge contained” (22% total). Hutchins would have been disappointed to learn that 20 percent of owners enjoyed the fact that the set “looks impressive in the home” (a point to be explored in detail later). A startling 74 percent of owners reported “there is nothing” about the set that “they do not like”; only 1 percent replied that they would tell their friends not to buy a set.³⁰ By these metrics, it would seem that Adler, Hutchins, Benton, and Britannica in general had done a fine job in constructing the set.

The most important criterion for success, however, among great books promoters like Adler and Hutchins was reading. How were owners and households using the set? The Study revealed harried owners, like many today, who complained about having “too little time to make good use” of the set. And owners were indeed the “primary readers” (63%): spouses and children combined served as primary readers 18 percent of the time (with only 5% relaying that “no one” uses the set). This revealed a disconnect between Britannica’s anxiety-based sales pitch (i.e., appealing to your children’s future status) and actual reading practice. When asked “what authors they have read,” 18 percent of owners reported a disheartening “nothing.” A larger number (76%), however, had read the entire works of one to seven authors, or parts of single authors. The next largest numbers had read either two (12%) or three (13%) authors. Only 1 percent had read the entire set. In terms of general reading habits, 24 percent of owners listed a novel from outside the set as the “best book” read “in the past year.” Ironically, only 5 percent named an actual *Great Book* selection as best. And another 4 percent of owners reported, strangely, that they “don’t read.”³¹

With regard to owner use of the *Syntopicon*, more than a third (39%) never used it or “used it so rarely that they do not feel qualified” to discuss its “usefulness.” Even so, about 60 percent of owner users reported it “useful.” Of that group, 34 percent indicated they used it “often” (24% less so) and over 50 percent found the *Syntopicon* “easy to use.” The *Syntopicon* apparently accomplished the promoters’ goal of helping some readers find a way into the set. Even so, Marplan concluded that “owners actually use the Great books infrequently”—being content with their mere availability.³² This surely disappointed the idealistic promoters such as Fadiman, Adler, and Hutchins.

Marplan’s Study provided a summary “Portrait of the Great Books Owner.” It was a qualitative composite built on the quantitative data

already presented. Marplan sought to paint a picture with broad strokes: "personality characteristics," "intellectual functioning," and an assessment of owners' "relationship to the outer world." The goal was to help Britannica find prospects by underscoring the "homogeneity" of current owners.³³ The summary began with social and economic characteristics, noting that owners were mostly "upper middle class." Like Whyte's "organization men" the male owners filled occupations "structured and governed by definite rules, such as medicine, engineering, accounting, and middle management jobs." Male and female owners tended toward frustration with "bothersome" individuals and situations. They often withdrew into "a solitary existence." Even so, owners valued the approval and opinions of others. They also felt the need to be "correct and proper" to stay in high regard.³⁴ As Hutchins feared, the buckram-bound Great Ideas Approach seemed to produce more bourgeois, "averaged" conformist Americans than emancipated critical-thinking citizens.

Owners also exhibited some predictable, and sometimes contradictory, psychological and intellectual characteristics. Here the Study reveals the characteristic social and cultural anxiety of middle-class great books owners as identified by Paul Fussell and Dwight Macdonald, and most recently by Alex Beam and the historian Joan Shelley Rubin.³⁵ Owners lacked "self-confidence" and that insecurity pushed them to "appeal to authority" instead of "relying on their personal beliefs or ideas." Owners also sought to be efficient, in control, and respectful to elders and one's country. They tended toward a black-and-white view of morals and sought to uphold "accepted values." Owners expressed "satisfaction in completing tasks, no matter how routine" and liked "accomplishing something... with perceivable results."³⁶

Not all the news was bad in relation to great books promoters' dreams. Despite their uptightness, owners' "high intelligence" enabled them to perceive "their lack of knowledge in the philosophical and liberal arts fields." Marplan offered that the *Great Books* and *Syntopicon* allowed owners to "contemplate ambiguities" without forcing them "to make their own decisions concerning the appropriateness of (to them) vague ideas." Owners admired "abstract thinkers" but tended themselves toward a "factual bent." They worried about being "incorrect or inaccurate." The set, owners believed, offered them a chance to find "the answer to questions"—a goal Adler and Hutchins had not desired. In an interesting twist the Study's authors concluded that these social, personality, and intellectual traits matched a "slightly lower socioeconomic level" including "draftsmen, carpenters, and other technicians." Those groups, Marplan surmised, would also have the money to buy the set.³⁷ Indeed, it was skilled craftsmen that Sir John Lubbock believed, in the 1880s, were the primary audience for great books.

Marplan surprisingly attempted to obtain some specific sense of Britannica's female *Great Books* owners. Of the 203 total owners, 92 were female. About half (52%) of those 92 were college graduates; 42 percent were divided evenly between high school graduates and those with some college. For men these same categories were 51 percent (college), 13 percent (high school), and 29 percent (some college). A key difference between male and female owners lay in extra-*Great Books* reading habits. Of women, 27 percent read six or more books per month—the highest category in the study, whereas only 12 percent of men fell into this super-reader category. Otherwise, male and female *Great Books* owners read remarkably similar types of books.³⁸

In the "Portrait of a Great Books Owner" section mentioned earlier, the authors extended their analysis to "housewives." This cohort revealed its middle-class anxieties in different ways. For instance, housewives sought some "direction and meaning in their existence" through the *Great Books*. They hoped the set would "provide them with the answers and the keys."³⁹ The search for "direction and meaning" seems to corroborate Betty Friedan's "problem that has no name," described in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).⁴⁰ The survey's authors observed that women owners desire to get "dinner and the dishes done on time and the children to bed when they *should* be." The above-mentioned tendency toward solitude revealed itself in that owner "housewives readily admit to annoyance with their children when they get unruly . . . [This] relates to their need for order and equilibrium rather than to rejection of their children." Married female great books owners felt "the treadmill of the housewife more than women who are less demanding of themselves and their actions."⁴¹ On the basis of this "portrait," it seems that Britannica's sales strategy, according to Marplan, should be to prey on those afflicted with Friedan's malady.

Going beyond owners, among the 1,954 people randomly sampled, Marplan identified an important but small group it termed "really awares." Only 90 individuals (4.8%) fit this category. This cohort knew "some detail" about Britannica's *Great Books* and the *Syntopicon*, and could distinguish it from the *Harvard Classics*, but were not "sufficiently intrigued" to buy. "Really awares" shared similar occupational and age tendencies as the owner and prospect groups. Yet "really awares" were "more self-directed, socially oriented, and more broadly read or educated" than the rest surveyed. "Really awares" saw the set's reference potential, and even believed it "worthwhile and useful" to others, but showed "little interest in actually owning a set." Marplan concluded that "really awares" were, in essence, too smart to own the *Great Books*. This led the study's authors to conclude that "awareness advertising" should ignore the nation's intelligentsia. Put

another way, Marplan believed that future buyers would share *personality types* with current owners and prospects, but not simple *demographic tendencies* that might overlap with "really awares."⁴² Carving out the "really awares" as anomalous explains why Marplan created the owners' personality profile.

Indeed, cross-group analysis and questioning yielded important information. For instance, combined data from "really awares," owners, and prospects revealed similarities in affluence, high education levels (more than 75% had attended college), and youth.⁴³ The education findings were of no small significance in relation to the post-World War II trend toward increased college attendance. Substantially supported by the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly called the "G. I. Bill," some have argued that this period represented the democratization, or at least a popularization or nationalization, of higher education.⁴⁴

But democratized credentialism did not mean cultural democratization. Enter the great books idea. It benefited, and might continue to benefit in the future, from education specialization. This fostered a need for general learning, and the advice of great books promoters offered help. Surprisingly, however, after one's education reached a certain point, evident with the "really awares," the set became just a reference. Highly intelligent and cultured people, according to Marplan's Study, confidently created their own reading lists. The more broadly educated people became, the more likely they were to read, and want to read, broadly. In a thoughtful democracy, a thousand reading lists, or great books approaches, might bloom. Thoughtful citizens could argue selections made for any list. In sum, as Americans became better educated, two seemingly contradictory things happened: education specialization resulted in great books sales, including Britannica's *Great Books*, but the liberally educated were more likely to develop their own version of the great books idea. The latter foreshadows the intellectual debates that increasingly occurred in the public square after the 1970s during the Culture Wars.

Returning to the Study, on the age of owners, prospects, and "really awares," all three groups averaged under 40 and one-third were under 30.⁴⁵ This pointed to a bright future for the great books idea, if not bright future sales for Britannica's set. The youth, affluence, and high education of this group, particularly the owners and prospects, boded well for the coming decade. That subset looked "to the Great Books to inform them about philosophy and literature which they...missed in their technical and professional training." They felt their narrow learning hampered their "personal and occupational" success.⁴⁶ In other words, vocational specialization both enabled and prevented this cohort from climbing the social and corporate ladder. Owners and prospects, then,

believed that the great books could help them *more fully* live out the American dream. Both the Britannica set and the aforementioned cottage industry of aids might be sold to either group of the subset.

Marplan then asked about a specific issue that has vexed critics of middlebrow culture: Where are your books kept? For the critics, purposed displays of culture and learning revealed the shallowness of middle-class culture—as well as something about the utopian dreams of promoters for creating citizen readers and thoughtful common culture. Would the *Great Books* be used by owners as badges of rank, class, higher taste, and superior knowledge? This is what Macdonald believed, and what Paul Fussell would argue later, in the early 1980s.⁴⁷ Dreams of a democratic culture were a sham in what was really a thinly disguised class-based capitalist society. Great books were mere cultural capital, not true engagement or critical thinking. To critics, a prominently displayed set only put your intellectual incapacity up for ridicule—it consigned you to a circle of middlebrow hell.

The Study acquired book storage and display data from all 2,314 respondents. Once again this meant both good and bad news for great books supporters and critics. Confirming Hutchins' fear and the scorn of critics, it was indeed true that *Great Books* owners desired others to know they were intelligent and informed. Marplan noted that because more than 70 percent kept "their books [all of them] in the living room, study, or den," owners were "probably...interested in having them visible to guests." This compared to 50 percent for prospects, 51 percent in a random sample (of the general population), and surprisingly high 62 percent for "really awares." If you exclude the "study or den" storage category, however, where book visibility was circumstantial, the "living room" category smoothed the differences: 51 percent for owners, 37 percent for prospects, 43 percent for "really awares," and 47 percent in the random sample.⁴⁸ Britannica owners, then, were barely more likely than the general population to display their books—and only 8 percent more likely than "really awares." Pride of knowledge and book ownership crossed America's cultural classes, at least in terms of living rooms. But even the higher book display percentage for owners might be explained by the fact that, at the point of sale, Britannica specifically offered specially sized bookcases for the set. Owners, then, apparently earned the grief of cultural critics because either their sets were simply more visible than other books, or because they took advantage of the bookcase offer.

While very enlightening, Marplan's Study leaves several questions unanswered. For instance, in the midst of the ongoing Civil Rights Movement, the Study makes no effort to understand race or ethnicity. It seems shocking that a marketing study focused on urban areas—two of which, Atlanta and Houston, involved 485 respondents—and

purporting to understand "buying motivations" would not explicitly assess potential African-American or Hispanic customers. Does Marplan's failing indicate, or symbolize, that the great books idea was merely a fleeting 1950s dream in terms of fostering a democratic civic culture? Perhaps. The high rhetoric of the prior decades, from the likes of Hutchins, Fadiman, Maritain, and Adler, was overshadowed by crass sales concerns. Does that mean that the great books idea was yet another failed project within the arc of Western Enlightenment liberalism? Put another way, did Britannica's success with the *Great Books* force us to conclude that the great books idea would always be reduced to a capitalist commodity? Macdonald and others thought so. But Marplan's Study provides contradictory evidence, as does the history of the great books idea before Britannica's involvement.

Conclusion

Overwhelmed in the 1960s by mass higher education, the Vietnam War, and the Civil Rights Movement, the great books idea could not, by itself, foster a democratic culture. Great Books Foundation reading groups grew in the late 1950s and early 1960s but, in a decade that would increasingly prioritize direct action, reflective activities receded in importance. Functioning merely as a saleable commodity the *Great Books* set, even with the help of Britannica's cottage industry of aids, could not build a democratic culture without reader effort. Even in bare terms of disseminating the set, the changes in society that would occur over the next ten-to-fifteen years destroyed most of the sale "portraits" obtained by Marplan. All sociological studies have expiration dates—lasting only as long as the dominant culture remained stable. In the context of the decade, the year 1968, with its multiple public traumas, symbolically represented the expiration of any lingering liberal (white) cultural consensus.⁴⁹ But even if that cohesiveness fell apart before 1968, other forthcoming changes would prove hazardous for Britannica's *Great Books*, and make things more complicated for the more ambiguous great books idea. A new cultural paradigm, multiculturalism, would supersede the liberal pluralism (and conservatism) that had allowed for almost 20 years of increasing great books exposure.

But these are larger, impersonal reasons for a coming change. Marplan's reading data, despite coming from a relatively small sample of owners (203), points to a more personal flaw, or irony, in the history of the great books idea. Although the earliest lists from Lubbock and others were created as a means to filter the publishing onslaught that began in the nineteenth century (and continues today), even owners of the great books—who valued the help given in prioritizing

book reading—had trouble setting aside the time and energy needed to read the best.⁵⁰ In other words, the complaints from Macdonald, Fussell, and even Hutchins about Britannica's set just sitting in living rooms are less indictments about middle-class taste or the choices of so-called cultural tastemakers. Rather, a generous analysis of the situation points to sets of dust-covered, unused *Great Books* as symbols of professional/class pressures, of competing leisure activities (even in terms of reading—e.g., magazines), and the failure of an education system oriented toward employment and a larger culture continually on the move.⁵¹ While some less thoughtful owners may have been duped by dubious *Great Books* salesmen, even smart owners probably had trouble balancing legitimate competing interests. Sets that devolved into decoration served as signals of an increasingly harried middle class.

Even if dusty and unread, Britannica's ubiquity meant that their form of the great books idea had penetrated deeply into white middle-class consciousness. This is the legacy of the 1960s for the history of the idea. Benton and Britannica "aided" the great books' proliferation both as a mass cultural commodity and as a limited democratic cultural form. This conditional success enabled some conservatives, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, to look back with nostalgia on the great books as part and parcel of a common culture. The history of the idea and the whitewash of mid-century culture had been forgotten, intentionally or not. To conservatives, the *Great Books* may have been a cultural commodity, but the set symbolized respect for Western tradition (i.e., moral absolutes) and an era of unity among middle-class (white) consumers. Britannica's towering sales success and its "Syntopical Approach" crowded out the more flexible General Honors Approach that dominated prior to 1952 (evident in *How to Read a Book* and through the Great Books Foundation). Finally, despite Adler's lower profile in this era, he too became associated with the *Great Books* in this paradoxically narrow but more ubiquitous cultural form. The long shadow of Britannica's success would even cause him to occasionally forget the idea's more plastic past.

But in the middle of the 1960s none of that mattered. The Britannica association meant boom times for Adler—a comfortable lifestyle, a new wife, and secure employment. Indeed, Adler would write a third *Playboy* article involving the *Great Books*. For this January 1966 installment, he and Clifton Fadiman wrote a pair of pieces speculating on twentieth-century additions to Britannica's set. Titled "The Great Books of 2066," Fadiman covered poets, novelists, and dramatists, while Adler dealt with historians, philosophers, and scientists. The publication of their choices coincided with the release, in *Playboy*, of other choices by readers made in a poll—sponsored by

Britannica—that appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times*.⁵²

Adler's selections were noteworthy less for their staying power than his philosophical reflections on the exercise for *Playboy*. Even so, eight of his thirteen suggested authors would end up in Britannica's 1990 *Great Books* revision: Henri Bergson, John Dewey, Alfred North Whitehead, Max Planck, Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, and John Maynard Keynes. Those who made *Playboy* but not the 1990 set included Adler's close friend Jacques Maritain, Jean-Paul Sartre, Nicolai (Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov) Lenin, Arnold J. Toynbee, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.⁵³ The selection of Lenin makes it clear that the Birchers were no longer intimidating to Adler by 1966, if they ever were. The most surprising thing about the article is Adler's awareness of his and Fadiman's potential as cultural authorities—their place in the cultural hierarchy. Adler wondered "what effect lists like this have on the 'creation' of classics." He asked,

Can a reputation be artificially nurtured? Is there . . . a positive feedback between nominations for immortality and immortality itself? Have Mr. Fadiman and I, by naming our candidates and defending our choices, done our part to insure that the authors we have named will be included in that hypothetical set [of] . . . *Great Books of the 20th Century*? My answer . . . is yes and no. Yes, we will have had a small effect; we and others . . . may help to carry the freight of a reputation forward. But in a longer view, the answer is emphatically negative. Posterity will be the absolute judge . . . Neither of us will be around in 2066 to object to the conclusion.⁵⁴

Given that 60 percent of Adler's suggestions were included in Britannica's 1990 set, one must answer affirmatively that his nominations had more than a "small effect" in helping create future "classics."

Adler and Benton exchanged lively letters about the 2066 *Playboy* article. Chiding them as a "pair of professors," Benton tweaked Adler and Fadiman for spending "too much damn time qualifying" themselves. Benton would have cut "at least a third" of the text where Adler had outlined "seven qualities intrinsic to great books" (derived from *How to Read a Book* and Adler's work on Britannica's set). Benton condemned the section and the article as "dull" and "too damn conventional." They had "missed [their] opportunity" to sell more sets and promote the great books idea. Adler retorted, knowing how to hit his old friend where it hurt, that cutting the disliked section would have eliminated free publicity for Britannica's collection. Adler also noted that Art Sikking, then Britannica's Executive Vice-President of

Sales, should reprint the article: "Art's people think it is very useful promotional stuff." Writing in the margins of Adler's reply, Benton cheered up: "Very good! Yes, of course!" Even so, Benton teased Adler: "I am ordering some of the titles mentioned by Kip, but none by you."⁵⁵

Snide aside, Benton knew the relevance of *Playboy*, hence the disappointment. He remarked with grudging admiration that "*Playboy* seems to be mastering the technique of mixing vice and virtue in its own brand of cocktail."⁵⁶ After a decade of problems with paramours, adultery, divorce, anxiety, and high living in the context of great books promotion and philosophizing, there can be little doubt that Adler also knew something about mixing vice and virtue.

5

The Common Sense of Great Books Liberalism, 1965–1970

In July 1968—after Robert Kennedy’s shocking assassination and before the mayhem of the Democratic Convention—Charles Van Doren and Mortimer Adler traded letters about drafts of Adler’s forthcoming book, *The Time of Our Lives* (1970). The issue at hand was the tone of Adler’s drafts. Van Doren, son of Adler’s friend, the poet Mark Van Doren, and best known for his involvement in the famous *Twenty-One* television show scandal, was then a fellow with Adler’s Institute for Philosophical Research. Charles also worked for Encyclopædia Britannica, having begun with them in 1959 after leaving NBC. After moving his family to Chicago in 1965, he developed a close intellectual partnership with Adler. Van Doren’s letter on *Lives* contained praise and criticism, if more of the latter. His concerns centered on “certain terms” and the “adoption of a tone, at certain points, that seems to me unfortunate.” In discussing the technicalities of terms like “pleasure,” “leisure,” “playboy,” and “indulgence” (including a passage Van Doren feared might be interpreted as discussing “self-abuse”), Van Doren chided Adler for taking “a dour, Presbyterian tone” and for forcing the word “play” “back into the old, narrow, ‘Puritan’ mold.” Van Doren feared Adler was being “Quixotic.” The tone might offend the group he thought Adler might help: American youth.¹

For his part, Adler delineated three groups “whose corns and bunions I cannot help stepping on...hard”—and they unfortunately “constitute a large part of any potential audience” for his book. First, “the professional philosophers”—with whom he had clearly split by the mid-1960s. Second, “the professional liberals,” including John Kenneth Galbraith “and all his ilk . . . who think that freedom is everything and that the only freedom is the freedom to do exactly as one pleases.” This group also consisted of “psychologists, sociologists, and cultural anthropologists for whom the relativeity [sic] of mores and

of all 'value-systems' is a first principle." Adler hoped to "mortally offend all such folk...[and] show them up for...inconsistent fools." His third group was America's "dissident, misguided, poorly trained, and self-indulgent young." Reminding Van Doren of Aristotle's injunction about there being "no point in giving lectures on ethics to the young," Adler regretted that 1960s youth were exceptional only in being "so badly schooled...[and] so undisciplined in the liberal arts."² And by "liberal arts" he meant, of course, they were missing the common sense and wisdom of the "Great Conversation."

As Adler revised *The Time of Our Lives* over 1968–1969 his mood worsened. The private, colorful lament to Van Doren (Figure 5.1) devolved into hot rants. Adler lamented the pervasiveness of "materialism," "cult of sensuality," and excessive "frivolity" in America, Europe, and the West generally. These problems, he believed, began at home. Youth were "disaffected with the materialism of their elders," and rightly perceived a generational hypocrisy.³ This extended crescendo of disgust appeared in the final pages of *Lives*:

Many of the critics [of American society], old as well as young, direct their complaints at the wrong objects...The dissident



Figure 5.1 Charles Van Doren, standing, with a painting of himself, undated (1970s).

Source: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

young...together with the leaders of the New Left...do not hesitate to make moral pronouncements about social evils they think must be immediately eliminated. It is perfectly clear that they do not know or understand the moral principles that would give support to their charges...Exactly the same principles that might support criticism of the [Vietnam] war...racism, and poverty should lead them to criticize a society that exaggerates the importance of sensual pleasures...The same principles...would also help them to understand what is wrong with being a beatnik, a hippie, a self-alienated refugee from reason, or an existentialist cop-out—wrong in a way that can ruin a human life—or what is wrong with over-indulgence in sex, what is wrong with psychedelic escapism, with attempts to expand the sensate life but not the life of the mind, or what is wrong with pure emotionalism and the rejection of reason and so on. Whether it results from alcohol, pot, LSD, or stronger narcotics, drunkenness is drunkenness.⁴

Despite the fact that Adler's rant captured something of the dark side of hippie counterculture, his meditation on youth and New Left hypocrisy came from the same person Hutchins called a "sybarite"—the same Adler of many pre-Caroline paramours. Adler's reactionary rhetoric moved between Albert O. Hirschman's "perversity" and "jeopardy" theses. The former argues that the action proposed "only serves to exacerbate the condition one wishes to remedy" (i.e., as Adler saw it, trying to improve social justice through anarchy). The latter asserts these dissidents were endangering "previous, precious accomplishments" (i.e., undermining the authority of the welfare state).⁵

Adler was not alone in issuing denunciations, neither then nor later. Indeed, his eye-catching passages resemble the famous diatribes that peppered Allan Bloom's 1987 bestseller, *The Closing of the American Mind*. Bloom famously lamented Baby Boomers and their college-aged children who embodied the legacy of the 1960s: the counterculture ("philosophically thin," in Alice Echols' words), feminism, rock and roll, the sexual revolution, and the Dionysian longings of youth. Even more sober left-leaning observers of the West, such as Eric Hobsbawm, lamented youthful irrationalism, out-of-control materialism, the decline of faith in progress, overexuberant displays of "personal liberation," youth worship (the "juvenescence of society"), antinomianism, and a general fragmentation of the welfare state's social and political consensus. Some former 1960s youth activists, such as Todd Gitlin, wondered later how "spoiled star-hungry children of the Lonely Crowd [could be] harbingers of a good society?"⁶ Adler's misgivings existed on a diverse continuum of

alienation. But only his feelings could change the trajectory of the great books idea.

Common sense: General considerations

Buried in the rhetoric of Adler's emotional response to 1960s problems were reflections that touched deeper notes of cultural and political discord. That discord—often rooted in a basic mistrust of government—would, at different times, drive both the left and right wings of the American political scene.⁷ Adler's haranguing passages have distracted subsequent readers, however, on the left and the right, from substantial, still-relevant political messages in both *The Time of Our Lives* and, especially, its sister-book, *The Common Sense of Politics*. Indeed, Adler said both were "reciprocally interdependent parts of a single whole."⁸

If this distraction is real then how did Adler differ from liberal and conservative commentators on the period? For starters, he used traditional philosophy to craft his own liberal response to the "decade of tumult and change." This began a few years before with his little-read, little-studied 1965 book, *The Conditions of Philosophy: Its Checkered Past, Its Present Disorder, and Its Future Promise*. That work provided the basis for what Bennie Crockett called Adler's "commonsense realism."⁹ Crockett acknowledged that Adler did not appear to be committed to any one system; so many threads come together in Adler's thought that it is, technically, "philosophical eclecticism."¹⁰ By contrast, most of Adler's professional philosophical contemporaries identified with "analytic" philosophy (e.g., logical positivism, ordinary language), "continental" philosophy (e.g., existentialism, phenomenology, Marxism, structuralism, and eventually poststructuralism), or those Andrew Jewett recently identified as the "Columbia naturalists" (a group of pragmatists anchored in John Dewey's thinking).¹¹

Adler's big addition in this era was "common sense," philosophically conceived and personalized. Technically, his thinking began with "common experience" and moved toward common sense, but both should be considered here together. Adler uses common sense as a lens for examining moral philosophy (personal and social), political philosophy, government, technology, and education (in positive and negative terms). Contextually, he also uses common sense to construct a public philosophy that would reinforce mid-century liberalism—meaning New Deal and Great Society programs economically, and also in terms of the broad political tradition articulated by contemporaries like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in the tradition of John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Adam Smith.¹² Common sense becomes, for

Adler, the essential intellectual means for maintaining and improving a viable democratic culture. Of course common sense also has its detractors. In the end, however, it seems that common sense is one of those paradoxical, maddening, inadequate, and, ultimately, indispensable tropes—part and parcel of democratic culture. If you stir thinking and reflection into any pluralistic pot, one containing nonacademic (if not actively anti-intellectual) types with democratic aspirations, in the end either “common sense” or a similar shorthand will be necessary.¹³

Two things should be considered, as a primer, before directly tackling Adler’s philosophy: What is “common sense” today? What are the historical sources for Adler’s program? Dictionaries offer a constellation of historical keywords and ideas around common sense—all of the following apply: sound and prudent judgment; simple perceptions; native good judgment; discretion; levelheadedness; wisdom; *sensus communis*, or “the common feelings of humanity”; ordinary, normal, or average understanding; plain wisdom; everyone’s inheritance; combined tact and readiness in everyday affairs; general sagacity; untutored perception; and good sound practical sense.¹⁴ What are we to make of these offerings? Here is a statement compiled from these various notions that, I believe, captures the phrase’s meaning: Common sense involves using, with discretion and tact, one’s simple, untutored, general perceptions—available to all—to make sound, prudent judgments about everyday affairs in order to obtain both levelheaded sagacity and a sense of shared feelings with one’s community.

Although this incorporates a great deal of the keywords mentioned earlier, it still leaves the process of “common-sense judgment” unclear (i.e., making good choices about facts). Common sense’s relationships to morals and psychological filters are also left vague. One should note that aids to perception (mechanical or human) seem to be excluded from common sense—perception has to be unaided.

The history of common sense holds forth a number of practical and philosophical considerations. Sophia Rosenfeld recently asserted, in *Common Sense: A Political History*, that “claims about common sense are, in public life, almost always polemical.”¹⁵ She argues that common sense is central “to modern political life and, especially, to democracy.” Rosenfeld acknowledges the deep, ancient Greek roots of the idea and phrase *sensus communis* was “once a technical term of Aristotelian science,” and *endoxic* was a Greek term for “commonplace knowledge.” She also covered Scottish commonsense philosophy, and its most famous practitioner, Thomas Reid. Rosenfeld asserts that common sense became a means of “legitimizing the airing of nonexpert opinion in the public sphere.” This aspect famously

culminated during the American Revolution when Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* appealed to "simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense." Common sense became a "democratizing rhetorical trope," and American politicians have used it ever since.¹⁶

Rosenfeld also warned of potential abuses. There is the "perennial threat" of common sense as a "fundamentally anti-intellectual construct" containing "an assortment of prerational, tacit suppositions." She added, "[A] claim to speak from common sense could work as a way to challenge existing authority." Rosenfeld concludes that "nothing about common senses is, or has been, exactly what it seems at first glance."¹⁷ Even so, she unambiguously argues that we must take seriously the intellectual foundations of common sense. Adler most certainly did beginning in the early 1960s.

Adler's philosophy of common sense: *The Conditions of Philosophy*

A controlling tenet in Adler's little-read *Conditions of Philosophy* (1965) was his 1947 assertion, derived from William James, that "philosophy is everybody's business"—"the vocation of everyone."¹⁸ For Adler this was a serious conviction, returned to again and again. Being within everyone's grasp, Adler believed there must also be some limited number of shared axioms and principles from which everyone, consciously or not, reasons. This assumption of accessibility ran against the modern trend toward specialization, as well as the movement toward philosophical professionalism noted by Bruce Kuklick.¹⁹ In building his own Walter Lippmann-esque notion of philosophy as a public endeavor, Adler wanted a philosophy with public appeal: this became common sense, or commonsense realism. It should come as no surprise that Adler, in an August 1964 letter to Henry Simon of Simon and Schuster (first slated to publish *Conditions* before a switch), gushed "that my heart is in this book." To him the book represented "a lifetime of thought" about what was needed to improve philosophy in the Western world.²⁰

In addition to his assessment of the field, which Yale philosopher Brand Blanshard called "exhilarating" and "convincing," *Conditions of Philosophy* lays down six provisions Adler believed must be met before philosophy will again yield fruit, either internally or publicly. In brief, they were: (1) philosophy must be recognized as a branch of knowledge. The field "aim[s] at and acquire[s] knowledge in the same sense that science and history do," but that knowledge is "characteristically different"; (2) philosophical theories must be judged by criteria of goodness or a standard of truth; (3) philosophy must be conducted as a public enterprise; (4) it must have relative autonomy

from other branches of knowledge; (5) it must deal with “first-order questions,” which are “about that which is and happens in the world or about what men should do and see,” or “the nature of things”; and (6) philosophy must avoid being esoteric. On the last, Adler wrote that it must answer questions “in a way that makes contact with the world of common-sense; in a way that is continuous with common-sense rather than out of communication with it.”²¹ These became the baseline assumptions for Adler’s system of common sense. He religiously abided by them afterward.

After laying down these provisions Adler then outlined his philosophy of commonsense realism. What follows are ten nonexhaustive tenets and topics of that system. They are not strictly listed in order of priority, but brief commentary from *Conditions* is provided.

1. *Realism of the World.* This involves four affirmations: (a) There is “a reality outside our minds”; (b) “The world... has a determinate structure of its own”; (c) “The world... is intelligible”; and (d) “The world... provides us with a basis for determining whether our efforts to know it fail or succeed.”²²
2. *The Constancy and Character of Mankind.* This involves three affirmations: (a) “Man has a determinate specific nature” and is “part of the real world”; (b) The “properties of man’s determinate nature” include “cognitive powers adapted to knowing whatever is knowable about reality,” which includes “man himself”; and (c) “Man’s cognitive faculties are not exhausted by all his sensitive powers,” which means man has “powers of the mind” such as “understanding and reasoning.” Adler argued these points in *The Difference of Man and the Difference it Makes*, and opposes them to existentialism, existentialist thought, and alienation (e.g., Jean-Paul Sartre, Norman Mailer, Herbert Marcuse), as well as Marxist sociology and positivism via behaviorism.²³
3. *Philosophy’s Role in Common Sense.* “In judging common-sense beliefs, philosophy may discriminate between those which are sound and those which are unsound and may correct the latter; but it is also the case that any philosophical theory which rejects all common-sense beliefs as unsound, or reduces the whole world of common-sense to the status of an illusion, has two strikes against it.”²⁴ Adler’s point here is that philosophy is no substitute for common sense. Philosophy must acknowledge the legitimacy of ordinary, commonsense experience or risk irrelevance.
4. *Common versus Special Experience.* “Common experience is available, and common experience can function in its own way, exactly as special experience does in its, to provide a basis for

conceptual development, the materials relevant to which questions can be formulated, and the evidence by which answers can be tested. . . . Acceptance of this conclusion depends on two things principally: (a) on acceptance of the distinction between special and common experience . . . and (b) on acceptance of the proposition that common experience can function for first-order philosophy as special experience functions for science."²⁵ Special experience also applies to history in its social science (as opposed to humanities) incarnation.

5. *The Universality of Simple Perception*. Common experience "consists of all the experiences we have without asking a single question that calls for steps of observation especially contrived for the purpose." And, "it includes experiences which are the same for all men everywhere at all times." The second requires an explanation, and Adler immediately obliges: "I did not say that everything which belongs to the common experience of a particular man is shared by all the rest of his fellow men . . . I am contending, however, that the ordinary day-to-day experiences of these persons do not differ in *all* respects. There are a certain number of things about which they could immediately communicate with one another if they were to meet and engage in conversation."²⁶
6. *Levels of Learning/Assumptions of Past Knowledge*. In relation to those communicating, Adler assumes "communicators to be [ordinary] persons of no special learning—persons whose minds have been untouched by science and philosophy."²⁷ Adler's postdash "clarification" actually confuses things. Is he saying (a) that common experience and sense involve an *inability* to *communicate* well about science or philosophy, (b) that both are difficult to discuss, or (c) that both unnecessarily complicate discussions of common experience? Does he really mean that some people are truly "untouched" (or uncontaminated?) by science or philosophy, and are therefore *better* able to perceive common experience than overeducated scientists and philosophers? Giving the benefit of the doubt, let us generously interpret Adler as saying that science and philosophy complicate the ability to communicate about shared, common experiences.
7. *Pluralism and Translatability*. Adler addresses cultural differences, or pluralism, in light of common sense. He wrote: "Ordinary persons . . . [with] widely different location[s] in time and space, and cultural background, could . . . immediately communicate (with the aid of an interpreter) about the things common to their ordinary experience." These "things" included: seasonal changes, day-to-night shifts, living, dying, eating,

sleeping, losing, finding, getting, giving, standing and moving in space, et cetera. To ground this assertion in established philosophical thought, Adler calls on A. J. Ayer's *Clarity is Not Enough* (1963) and C. I. Lewis' *Mind and the World-Order* (1929), to add the following about cross-cultural exchange (italics are Adler's): "The core of common experience...consists of those things about which communication is *universally possible* and with regard to which it is possible to translate certain of the statements made in any human language into equivalent statements in any other."²⁸

8. *Truth and Opinion*. Assessing degrees of truth in the realm of common sense begins with the *episteme-doxa* distinction. Adler asserted that common sense is clearly *not* indisputable: "The fact that common-sense opinions [*doxa*, but not 'mere/sheer opinion'] have their basis in common experience must not be construed to mean that they are all *ipso facto* true or beyond criticism. Like other opinions, they are corrigible and subject to criticism."²⁹ Likewise, *episteme* consists of "axioms or self-evident propositions...[that] have the status of indemonstrable and incorrigible truths." He added that "they are knowledge in the sense of *episteme*, not in the sense of *doxa*," and "are based on common experience alone."³⁰ What of everything else in the realm of commonsense knowledge beyond a small number of self-evident truths and axioms? Adler nonrigidly concluded, "The rest of common-sense knowledge consists of *doxai*—opinions that are intrinsically corrigible because they do not assert that which it is impossible to deny...Some of the things we know by common-sense in the light of common experience concern matters about which investigation is simply impossible; in other cases, it may be possible but it is quite unnecessary."³¹
9. *Error Correction*. Adler clarified that commonsense was not "a self-critical faculty." Common sense *required* philosophy and other fields for revision and repair: "Criticism and correction of common-sense opinions or beliefs...come from those branches of knowledge or modes of inquiry which are by their very nature self-critical—...which involve procedures for testing and refining the theories and conclusions they themselves develop."³² The question, of course, for practitioners of commonsense was *when* help was required.
10. *Limits of Common Sense*. Adler added a special note for philosophers—a corollary that helps the general reader understand where common sense ends and philosophy begins: "The proper method of philosophy calls for reliance upon

common experience, but not for reliance on common-sense. The philosopher who adopted the empirical method would naturally respect the common-sense beliefs that have arisen from the same experiences to which he himself appeals; but he would not...appeal to the authority of common-sense opinions...to establish or defend his own theories or conclusions."³³

Like all lists this enumeration is arbitrary. These select ten tenets do not exhaust the caveats and clarifications present in *Conditions*. Even so, these relay the fundamentals of Adler's philosophical "school" of common sense. Insofar as arguments from authority affect our views of philosophical systems, it is worth noting that some established philosophers supported (indirectly) Adler's views about common experience and other key parts of Adler's principles. On top of the aforementioned citations of Ayer and Lewis, Adler references George Santayana (in *Skepticism and Animal Faith*, 1923) for referring to "public experiences," Alfred North Whitehead (in *Process and Reality*, 1929) for discussing "immediate experience," and even John Dewey (in *Experience and Nature*, 1925) for using the related phrase "macroscopic experience."³⁴ Common experience, to these philosophers, seemed a necessary construct for philosophy in a scientific age. To Adler, philosophy demonstrated its worth by bridging the gap between common and special experiences. While the philosophers Adler marshaled did not explicitly support a philosophy of common sense, they all agreed that humans have some accessibility to a core of common experience from which they can operate—build arguments—in a public fashion.

Common sense in *Lives* and *Politics*

Adler consistently argued, in both *The Time of Our Lives* and *The Common Sense of Politics*, that his commonsense moral philosophy also imposed social, economic, and political obligations.³⁵ In *Lives*, he relates that the one "universally binding" desire to pursue a good life for one's self sets up, in turn, a system of necessary "moral obligations" between individuals in relation to their "common human nature." Here is how Adler summed up the jump to society: "The teleological and utilitarian ethics of common sense has only one basic normative principle, only one ultimate end, and only one primary moral obligation; and precisely because that one end...is a common good,...common sense is able to pass from the obligations of an individual...to the obligations he has in his conduct toward others...aiming at the same happiness." Adler also asserts that "the

man of common sense knows this without the benefit of philosophical construction; he recognizes...that he has duties to others and expects others to discharge their obligations toward him."³⁶ These obligations immediately become political for Adler when he equated "a good life" and "happiness" (philosophically rather than merely psychologically considered, i.e., "feeling"). Indeed, Adler's "chief reason" for insisting on this equation was its "political significance"—a significance directly related to authors and documents included in Britannica's *Great Books* set, especially Thomas Jefferson and *The Declaration of Independence*. In spite of those finite historical references, Adler universalizes "happiness" as "the primary natural right which...underlies all others, such as the rights to life and liberty."³⁷ Despite the universalization, all subsequent political points he forwarded in *Lives* and *Politics* applied directly to the United States.

Why not think globally? Aside from being his place of residence, Adler's commonsense sociopolitical philosophy would be used to develop a standard, or ethics, to judge American society at the end of the 1960s. He articulated this in *Lives* as follows: "A society or culture is good if [negatively] it does not prevent its members from making a really good life for themselves, and [if positively]...it facilitates the pursuit of happiness for all or for more of its members." In *Politics*, this standard is applied in an unsurprising fashion: "politics presupposes ethics, and ethics is architectonic or primary." In agreement with Aristotle and his friend Robert Hutchins, Adler regards "politics...as the sovereign...discipline in the practical order."³⁸ With this in mind, Adler will both assess current problems and make recommendations for future change in both *Lives* and *Politics*.

But what are the subordinate points of this commonsense social and political philosophy? In other words, what comprises the pursuit of happiness, socially conceived? Adler saw negative and positive applications, things to avoid and things to pursue. His philosophy not only worked against 1960s anarchists and libertarians but also fought for political and economic "classlessness." It also prioritized education reform as crucial to social and political progress. This renewal of direct interest in education, especially through liberal education and the great books idea, integrates Adler's new thinking about philosophy, common sense, ethics, economics, and politics with his prior work from the 1940s. It is no coincidence that his subsequent work on education picks up, reaching a crescendo in the 1980s.

In applying his commonsense philosophy to the 1960s social and political sphere, Adler first identified his opponents in the realm of political philosophy: anarchists, existentialists, and extreme libertarians, primarily. Task number one was to dismantle their sources of thinking. In *Politics*, Adler "explicitly challenges" both the historical

and “the revived anti-political philosophy of anarchism, which underlies or pervades the various revolutionary movements that are united, if by nothing else, at least by their opposition to ‘the Establishment.’” In a long point-by-point review of the book’s manuscript (written first as a 1969 Aspen Institute lecture) Clifton Fadiman agreed. He identified the “running refutation of anarchism” in *Politics* as one of its chief attributes. Adler’s additional aim, aside from “expos[ing] the fallacies and utopian illusions of the anarchist doctrine,” was “to restore faith in politics” and argue, in New Deal liberal fashion, for the necessity of government.³⁹

Among Adler’s opponents were advocates for extreme personal autonomy, which seemed to overlap with existentialism. He directed his ire at prominent historical figures such as William Godwin, Mikhail Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, Pierre Proudhon, Georges Sorel, and Emma Goldman. The most prominent contemporary proponent in Adler’s text is Paul Goodman—although Adler agrees with the latter’s criticisms of American education. Adler could have also criticized David Riesman, C. Wright Mills, some Beat poets, counterculture enthusiasts like Charles Reich and Theodore Rozaak, as well as his old nemesis Dwight Macdonald, for their anarchistic leanings and emphasis on personal autonomy. Though praised in other spots, even John Kenneth Galbraith receives criticism from Adler for taking arguments against the “new industrial state” to the point of subsuming the state’s interests to the pursuit of happiness, psychologically conceived.⁴⁰

Scholars verify that existentialism permeated the collective mental landscape of the 1960s, as well as the 1950s and earlier according to George Cotkin’s superb history of the subject, *Existential America*. Existentialist philosophy, meaning the notions of alienation, anxiety, absurdity, and angst, permeated the writings, according to Adler, of Goodman, Mills, Riesman, and Norman Mailer. This philosophy, or mode of being, formed part of the counterculture mood; “hippie music,” asserts Alice Echols, contained notes “dread and foreboding.” To David Steigerwald, alienation was “a concept uppermost in the minds of the existentialist founders of the New Left,” which included Goodman’s chronicle of youth alienation, *Growing Up Absurd* (1960). Critical Theorist Herbert Marcuse also receives attention from Adler in *Lives*. Adler correctly pegged Marcuse’s Marxist notion of alienation to the “surplus repression” (Marcuse’s phrase) of the capitalist state. Adler faulted Marcuse and Galbraith, whom he strangely discusses in tandem, for calling for revolution rather than reform. Both are falsely identified as “extreme libertarians and individualists.” Galbraith was neither, and Marcuse believed in a seemingly contradictory “libertarian socialism.” Marcuse is also chided, rightly in this case, for pushing

“an expansion of the sensate life” that John Patrick Diggins classified a sensual aesthetic revolution. The existentialists, moreover, rejected what Steigerwald summarized as “liberalism’s boasts about universal improvement and its faith in unfolding reason and disputed any comprehensive claims that humanity served some preordained purpose . . . [like] liberal progress.”⁴¹

In *Lives* and *Politics*, Adler was never able to see past what Cotkin called “reckless existentialism” to see its positives—its embrace of authenticity, dauntlessness, solidarity, and transcendence. That said, Adler’s war with existentialism and cultural Marxism was more philosophical than a total opposition to America’s youth or New Left reformers. He rejected anarchy, nihilism, and revolution, but not substantial claims about America’s real deficiencies (e.g., racism and class inequality). Despite its faults, Adler could not reject a liberalism he felt generally supported the common good. Like his old friend Yves R. Simon, Adler believed that true work for the common good never caused real alienation; the common good, by definition, could “in no way [be] alien or extraneous to the line of development of the person.”⁴²

Adler also addressed ideas that buttress libertarian thought, both as it developed in the 1970s and is familiar to readers today. This involved not just a discussion of rights but also economics. Many passages from the *Common Sense of Politics*, corroborated in *Lives*, work against Ayn Randian-inspired enthusiasts of selfishness, Robert Nozick-inspired proponents of liberty, and hardcore countercultural advocates of personal liberation (“laissez-faire libertarianism”). Adler does, however, concede a few points before undermining libertarianism’s larger philosophical underpinnings. Using the language of “natural rights” as derived from one’s “natural needs,” Adler concedes that an individual’s direct obligations to others are mostly negative. The result was a maxim: “do nothing that inflicts injury on them by depriving them of the things they need.” Adler also asserts an indirect, positive obligation: each person must “act for . . . the good of the community (the *bonum communitatus*) and for . . . all institutional changes that favor the pursuit of happiness by more and more individual members of the community in which he lives.” He then adds that “no disorder results when the state requires the individual to sacrifice or give up individual goods . . . that come into conflict with the good of the community . . . The state is then only requiring the individual to give up . . . goods that are detrimental to his own good.” Adler’s caveat then is that “society is never justified in subordinating to its own good the ultimate good of its human members.”⁴³ Even so, he has allowed for the existence of society as an entity distinct from individuals, assumed the legitimacy of the modern liberal state,

acknowledged limits to an individual's wants, and justified sacrifice for the good of the community and the state.

Commonsense "Socialism"

Adler asserts that his commonsense philosophy supports the general welfare, meaning his mid-century liberalism, through America's founding documents—its own great intellectual works. A few years later, in 1975, he would label these *The American Testament*. Adler opened in *Lives* by arguing that the "good society" is obligated "as a matter of justice, not of benevolence, to promote the general welfare." Adler added that "a just government ought to help its subjects obtain real goods that they cannot obtain wholly [on] their own... As Lincoln observed, a government should do for its people what they, individually, cannot do for themselves." In *American Testament*, written with Institute colleague William Gorman, a number of historical examples, from the *Federalist* papers onward, are cited to support distributive justice. Each document reveals, to them, progressively broader interpretations of the phrase "general welfare": Hamilton's *Report on Manufactures*; New Deal-era Supreme Court cases, including *United States v. Butler* (1936), *Steward Machine Co. v. Davis* (1937), and *Helvering v. Davis* (1937); and President Franklin Roosevelt's January 1944 State of the Union address (sometimes called the "Second" or "Economic" Bill of Rights)—the last getting the longest treatment.⁴⁴ Adler returned to these topics, with no regrets, years later in a 1990 Aspen Institute seminar titled "The End of the Conflict between Capitalism and Communism." It was published in *The Great Ideas Today* (1990) and in Adler's *Haves Without Have-Nots* (1991). The seminar also involved selections from *Politics*.⁴⁵

In *Politics* Adler makes his clearest case for economic equality and welfare. His economic "end to be achieved" is a variant of "socialism." That ideal derived from his tenet that "a just government and a just state are under the reciprocal obligation to promote every man's pursuit of happiness by doing what they can to...ensure the possession of the requisite economic goods by all." All must have "at least the indispensable minimum of economic goods" and all must be "economically equal...in the sense of each having what he needs." But Adler's "socialism" did not abolish capitalism. Rather, in the course of distinguishing terms, Adler identifies "universal capitalism" as his preferred delivery method and the kind of socialism he advocated. In Adler's utopia, the ownership of capital is "diffused or universally distributed...in private hands." In other words, "every citizen" will be "a capitalist." To him universal capitalism was superior to the mid-century mixed-economy welfare

state, which was both not working hard enough to eliminate poverty and susceptible to power imbalances between the public and private sectors (one reviewer argued it as also susceptible to oligarchy). Given that universal capitalism might be an overly democratic pipe dream, Adler believed that the mid-century “mixed economy” was the closest existing system to achieving “economic welfare and equality.”⁴⁶

Adler defends economic equality against the charge of utopianism by saying it is only “absurd” if “conceived as... an arithmetically determined quantitative equality.” Rather, Adler advocates for a “qualitative” equality, one based on “having all the economic goods and conditions” needed.⁴⁷ What are these goods and conditions? Adler provides a nonexhaustive but sufficient list in both *Lives and Politics*: “a decent supply of the means of subsistence; living and working conditions conducive to health; medical care; opportunities for access to the pleasures of sense... play and aesthetic pleasures; opportunities for access to the goods of the mind through educational facilities in youth and in adult life; and enough free time from subsistence-work, both in youth and adult life, to take full advantage of these opportunities.”⁴⁸ To Adler these were the minimums for fostering a democratic culture.

Despite his focus on the United States’ well-being, Adler’s enumeration of minimal goods and conditions was not meant to be “parochial.” Building on a call he perceived in Gunnar Myrdal’s *Beyond the Welfare State* (1960), Adler asserts we must “extend participation in general economic welfare to all the peoples of the world.” This ideal included an elimination of “the inequitable distribution of resources and wealth that has allowed the rich nations to dominate and exploit the poor.”⁴⁹ This call against economic imperialism and for a worldwide welfare state was, in his mind, a direct extension of the cosmopolitan liberalism he had obtained from his education as a philosopher through the great books. This is what commonsense great books liberalism meant for Adler. Adler’s global economic ideals connected to his earlier dream of a world government—a dream shared with Robert Hutchins, Jacques Maritain, and others. Indeed, this is why world government appears again in *Politics* as a chapter-long reconsideration of Adler’s 1944 book, *How to Think About War and Peace*. It is worth noting that Adler’s call in *Politics* predated the United Nations’ 1974 creation of a “New International Economic Order” and the adoption of the “Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States.” Like his contemporary UN cosmopolitans Adler was concerned about economic justice and parochial nationalism in light of the condition of “globality” as the process of globalization progressed.⁵⁰

Later in *Politics*, while covering education, Adler indirectly anticipates forms of criticism made by later conservatives about citizens who either ignore or abuse government welfare programs. Relative to the time frame of Adler's *Politics*, those criticisms arose with President Richard Nixon in 1969 and continued through the 1970s and into the 1980s, in works like conservative Charles A. Murray's 1984 book, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980*. Murray's thesis, which is representative of criticisms appearing both before his book and after, was that 1960s policy makers ignored the wisdom of the past by discounting three premises: "people respond to incentives and disincentives," "people are not inherently hard working or moral," and "people must be held responsible for their actions." These points buttressed the "wisdom of repugnance" that Leon Kass later said, in the context of a discussion about cloning, helped bind together elements of the libertarian (or neoconservative) political thought.⁵¹

Adler believed these problems were correctable. Without yet enumerating all of his "commonsensical" education recommendations (see "Common Sense and Education Reform" section below), he began by conceding that some will, of course, "probably not make a good use" of their "educational opportunities" or "other institutions of a good society." Even so, he maintains that nonuse (or abuse) "does not alter the rightness of the prescription that [services, or welfare] should be provided for all." Put another way, "the fact that everyone would not utilize the beneficent conditions that such institutions afford for leading the good life does not in any way detract from the rightness of the commitment to develop the best society that is possible on earth." With the Civil Rights Movement likely in mind, or at least his recent work on *The Negro in American History*, Adler added the following historical analogy: "To think otherwise would be to question the rightness of emancipating all men from slavery...on the ground that all are not likely to use their freedom well."⁵² Adler's liberalism often returned to education as the means to attain social, political, economic, and cultural ideals. The health of a democracy pivoted on education.

Common sense, race, cultural differences, and justice

Adler dealt with historical racial issues in *The Negro in American History* (published in February of 1969—covered fully in chapter 6), but both *Lives* and *Politics* afforded him some opportunities to reapproach the subject. His great books-based system of common sense addressed race, economics, politics, justice, and cultural difference by, as noted earlier, advocating for a "classless society." Adler wrote that "justice

is concerned with the distribution of economic and social as well as political goods." And justice helps establish "social democracy" by removing "all forms of ethnic and racial discrimination, [as well as]...residual class distinctions."⁵³ This is all he wrote on social justice and discrimination in *Lives*.

Politics is more expansive. It advocates for a just society by using various great books authors to deny essential differences in mankind in favor of commonalities and the power of nurture. Despite his acclaimed Aristotelianism, Adler refutes Aristotle's oligarchical view that "no...equality of nurture can overcome the deficiency of nature" and affirms Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notion that being "born in" slavery was not the same as being "born for" slavery. To Adler, it was merely "the social and economic conditions" of one's birth that made one *appear* to be "unfit for citizenship and self-government." He also enumerated "disabling circumstances" such as the "deprivation of schooling,...of free time, [and]...of economic independence." The problem, he thought, was that conservatives, oligarchs, and "reluctant democrats" too easily grant that it is "inexpedient to make citizens out of [those with] defects of nurture and miserable conditions of life."⁵⁴ To Adler, however, the cure was not "benevolent despotism" by a do-gooder political class, party, or elected executive. Rather, he advocated the following: "Unless they are made citizens before reforms take place that remove disabling circumstances which prevent them from being good citizens, it is unlikely that the necessary reforms will ever occur." Adler cites history as proof: "It was only by extending suffrage to the working classes and thus making them a majority of the electorate that the necessary social and economic reforms were voted in effect."⁵⁵ Although Adler cites only "the working classes" here, the passages on slavery allude to a racial message.

It seems clear that Adler's economic socialism is pointed toward ameliorating arguments about race that are, in fact, disguised arguments about class. He makes this clear in a passage from *Politics* directly following his advocacy for making participation in the welfare state a global phenomenon: "What is true of poverty on a world-wide basis is similarly true of racism... This, like poverty, is not an evil confined within the borders of this or that parochial society." This evil, to Adler, "pervades a world in which nationalism generates ethnic and racial hatreds and hostilities." And he ends by sounding like a stereotypical left-leaning liberal cosmopolitan: "The elimination of racism requires a world community in which all men, of whatever stock or complexion, are fellow-citizens, and no one is a foreigner, a barbarian, an enemy, or a subhuman alien."⁵⁶ A democratic culture without racism can only come about, Adler believed, when economic justice helps correct imbalances in liberty and equality in the political realm.

Because of Adler's vision of economic, social, and political justice, one might be tempted to compare his work with the writings of another philosopher, much better known and widely referenced, from the period: John Rawls. This comparison is instructive because Rawls is a reference point, but it should in no way be interpreted as an attempt by this historian to elevate the status of Adler's *Common Sense of Politics*. Given that, Rawls' famous *A Theory of Justice* appeared in 1971. Kwame Anthony Appiah called it "the most influential work of liberal political philosophy of the twentieth century," and J. David Hoeveler praised it as "magisterial," "stimulating," and "challenging." As might be expected, across-the-board citation comparisons between Rawls' and Adler's works do not compare. Hoeveler relates that *Theory* received "extensive commentary"; indeed, 14 essay collections covered the book by 1975. Although somewhat anachronistic as a comparison point, a study by Richard Posner shows Rawls' enduring appeal. Posner's study covered the 1995–2000 period, and in that time frame Rawls received 3,933 scholarly citations, 15,825 "web hits," and 374 media mentions. Over the same period Adler received only 92 scholarly citations, 3,931 web hits, and 130 media mentions. This occurred even though Adler qualified as a "public intellectual," by Posner's definition, and Rawls did not.⁵⁷

A basic comparison might help explain why Rawls' cosmopolitan vision, which also utilized common sense, endured while Adler's did not. Rawls' study was focused on the virtue of justice (the "justice owed by each to all," as Dan Rodgers put it). Adler, however, was concerned with a larger range of ideas that buttress a democratic society—even while he acknowledged the primacy of justice in maximizing liberty and equality for all. Both Rawls and Adler rejected utilitarianism.⁵⁸ Rawls' work endures in philosophical, scholarly, and even media circles, in part, because of his famous thought tool in relation to justice: the "veil of ignorance." Adler's work contained no memorable aid for imagining his version of a cosmopolitan, just state. Lastly and most importantly, *Theory* has had lasting appeal because it presumes no conception of "the good," except perhaps the vague idea of fairness (predicated on the veil). *Theory* is about the process of justice. Adler, on the hand, proposed a baseline for "the good." Adler's appeal to a minimal, Aristotelian-based conception of "the good" has more in common with Rawls' later work, *Political Liberalism* (1993). Although Rawls discusses Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in *Theory*, the terms and framework are much different than in Adler's *Politics*.⁵⁹ In any case, Adler's work was neither specialized enough for philosophy nor written with a philosophical audience in mind.

Common sense and education reform

In *Lives*, Adler eventually softened his complaints, somewhat, about 1960s radicalism by criticizing their formation more than their actions. "If this estimate of the character of the most vocal and emotional critics of our...society, both old and young, appears to be harsh," he wrote, "I can mitigate its severity only by saying that the fault [lies] in the dismal failure of our educational system."⁶⁰ The real value in this passage, in terms of the history of the great books idea as an educational project, is that it foreshadowed a greater emphasis on literacy as liberation Adler and Charles Van Doren would make in the 1970s with the new edition of *How to Read a Book* (1972). No matter the future, both *Lives* and *Politics* nurture the seeds of a great books educational liberalism Hutchins, Adler, and others had planted in Chicago.

If it was never clear before 1970, in *Lives* Adler definitively puts the "educational system" at the center of his view of a remade and properly democratized American culture. He began by posing a question about how society should "honor" and "cultivate" the things it should to aid individuals "in their pursuit of happiness?" His answer involved cultural transmission (à la Clifford Geertz), or "cultural institutions" more precisely. In Adler's view, the "educational system" formed the "heart" of a long list of institutions that cultivate "human excellence." Those institutions fundamental to a good society—that all societies should "create, maintain, and develop at the public expense"—included "libraries...museums of art and science...theaters...[and] public parks." Returning to educational institutions, Adler asserted they should not be "directly mainly toward technological and economic advances." To him, "every mode of specialized, technical, professional, or vocational training" must be subordinated to "the liberal arts and...humanistic learning." When that is accomplished, "the culture of a society [will be] beneficent."⁶¹

Instead of the political revolution advocated by 1960s critics, in *Lives* Adler advocated for an "educational revolution" to "reverse" the "academic revolution" of the twentieth century. The latter had been described in 1968 by Christopher Jencks and David Riesman (Adler referenced this work), as a trend made possible by "the rise of the academic profession," which "played an important role in expanding demand for higher education." Furthermore, "the professionalization of academic life" allowed colleges to provide the young with "special job skills."⁶²

Given this, Adler's revolution is focused on higher education in *Lives*. He has heard and agreed with the complaints of alienated 1960s students: "The rebellion of the students in our colleges and universities

is thoroughly justified by wrongs they are suffering at the hands of their institutions... [by] the inadequacy and irrelevance of the education they are receiving." Adler's diagnosis begins with the historical fact that American higher education is "devoted mainly to technological advances and industrial development." The universities were merely instrumental, and their faculties, to Adler, were composed of professors and researchers *rather than* teachers devoted to "liberal and humanistic learning." He understood why students "set up their own Free Universities"; they wanted an alternative to "the deficiencies and deformities of an educational system that has mistreated them so badly." It is clear that Adler sympathized with SDS critics of the multiversity like Carl Ogelsby and Mario Savo, as well as with Clark Kerr. But unlike SDS leadership, Adler's higher education "revolution" did not reject liberalism and progress; he believed universities could be reformed with the proper leadership, and that the politics of knowledge should support liberalism. In *Politics*, Adler makes clear that his use of the term "revolution" is rhetorical—that "civil progress" meant peacefully within a "juridical" framework allowing for "all forms of civil dissent and civil disobedience."⁶³

In *Politics*, however, Adler broadens out the egalitarianism in his great books educational liberalism—and foreshadows his optimism of the early 1980s. In the text, he argues this thesis: "The human race—by which I mean *all men without exception*—[can] be educated to the degree required for citizenship in the union of socialist, democratic republics and beyond that for the pursuits of leisure [as broadly defined in *Lives*] are the essential ingredients in the good life that every man is obligated to make for himself." Adler concedes that this argument involves "an act of faith beyond all the evidence that experience affords." The prescription given, a liberal humanistic education, involves making "the young *learners*, not learned." Adler concedes that no society on earth, either historically or in 1970, has attempted this. Even so, Adler persists that "socialist democratic republics" must operate by the "maxim" of "equal educational opportunity for all—equal in quality as well as... quantity." He clarifies that this means being "educated up to [one's] capacity," but that "every human being should be recognized as having a capacity to be educated for citizenship and the pursuits of leisure." Adler does acknowledge potential criticisms of this educational faith that he proposes. Of course there "can be reasonable disagreement" about whether "this burden *can... or will* be discharged." Indeed, there will be situations where humans do not make "good use" of their education opportunities, but that "does not alter the rightness of the prescription." Finally, if the education ideal in *Politics* is "frustrated or rendered futile" then efforts toward international social and political cooperation, as well

as to control technology (which the reader will recall included ecological destruction), will also fail.⁶⁴ It is on education that the creation of an American and a global democratic culture depends.

Adler's renewed attention to education owed something to Robert Hutchins. Although Adler acknowledges in the Preface to *Politics* that Hutchins' career "as an administrator and educator, as conservative and reformer" inspired him, in the text you only see Hutchins mentioned in relation to politics being the "architectonic science." But Adler's notes, particularly those on his education program, reveal greater Hutchins' influence. When Adler spoke of making the young "learners, not learned" in the context of providing an "effective liberal education for every member of the human race," he was inspired by Hutchins' idea of a "learning society." Hutchins outlined this his 1968 book, *The Learning Society*. A passage from the end of that work goes to the heart of Adler's program: "In addition to offering part-time adult education to every man and woman at every stage of grown-up life," the learning society must be a society that has succeeded "in transforming its values in such a way that learning, fulfillment, [and] becoming human, have become its aims and all its institutions are directed to this end."⁶⁵ This is noteworthy for two reasons. First, Adler had inspired Hutchins toward a more explicit philosophy of education in the 1930s and 1940s, but here their roles reversed. Second, it speaks to how long ideas bounce around and develop within a community of discourse.

At least one other mid-century great books promoter from Adler's sphere also singled out education as the source of 1960s problems. In March 1968, Scott Buchanan wrote a missive for *Center Magazine* entitled, "A Message to the Young." Buchanan, whom Hutchins had called "one of the great teachers of our time," analogized youths' efforts at finding a philosophy of life to cultivating "a suburban garden."⁶⁶ Without ranting about "drunkenness" or excess, he urged youth to "reread some of the great books to help choose your style of garden." He warned against the conservative traditionalist impulse to escape into a past that was "now an impossible world," or into utopian future filled with unrealistic dreams. One must live in the now, where the world is often "ambiguous," unsympathetic, and rigid. The world "revolves," he added, and "revolution . . . is its natural property." But these revolutions were "mere symptoms of the deeper and larger work of the world, the rattling and wobbling of the wheels of the great chariot of time."⁶⁷ Buchanan clearly sympathized with those who hoped for positive change. Unlike Adler, or at least the Adler in *Lives*, Buchanan harbored no curmudgeonly feelings about 1960s youth's desires to remodel the world—so long as it was in the name of maintaining one's ability to exercise the liberal arts. Unfortunately,

Buchanan would not be able to expand on his alternative, great books-based message; he died on March 25, 1968, shortly after the article's appearance.⁶⁸

The reception of *Lives* and *Politics*

Adler began shaping the public reception of *Lives* and *Politics* with a March 1970 appearance on William F. Buckley, Jr.'s *Firing Line*. Titled "The Idea of the Great Ideas," the episode is less about Great Ideas and more about education: philosophies, institutions, and the late 1960s scene. Buckley's interview led off with quotes about education from *Lives*. For his part, Adler affirmed his sympathies with the ongoing student rebellion but pointed an accusatory finger at graduate schools and specialized learning. He advocated for the development of a PhD in the general liberal arts that would create educators "dedicated to continued general learning." This echoed Clark Kerr's 1963 call for a "more unified intellectual world" that "close[s] the gap between C. P. Snow's 'Luddites' and scientists." Adler's liberal arts PhD suggestion also dovetailed with reforms proposed by Paul D. Woodring in 1968. He advocated for a three-year liberal arts curriculum, with zero specialized courses, to combat the growing multiversity and foster a common culture in education. Adler also clarifies, in response to a Buckley provocation about John Dewey (a favorite target of conservatives for several decades), that Adler's opposition to Dewey's influence in education was less about Dewey than his followers. To deepen the point, Adler affirmed Dewey's emphasis on personal growth, saying, "I couldn't agree more." Adler also sympathetically noted Dewey's long-running opposition to "vocationalism" in education (i.e., skills training "for the money reward"), a point Dewey made explicit in *Democracy and Education* (1918).⁶⁹ This sympathetic nod to Dewey's educational thinking foreshadowed a move that became more explicit for Adler in the 1980s.

Great books came up in the interview. Buckley set up the topic by noting the "accent in education" in the 1960s was whatever "we can find out at this particular moment that permits us to adapt to the historical situation." The great books, however, represented "perennial usefulness." Adler linked *Lives* to the great books idea with the following response (emphases his): "The unfortunate thing is that the students today are totally unaware, *totally unaware*, of the riches of the great books. And riches in terms, if I may use their word, the riches in terms of *relevance*." He adds that *Lives*, for instance, is an attempt to update Aristotle's *Ethics* for today: "I think it is the great unread book."

After an interlude Adler then previews points that will be made in the 1972 rewrite of *How to Read a Book* (with Van Doren). Adler

expounds on the virtues of rereading great books and the knowledge “accretions” that come with maturity, experience, and stability. As happens in *How to Read a Book*, he points listeners back to the great books by arguing that everyone should read texts that “make him struggle.” Everyone should wrestle “with texts that are very difficult and over his head.” Adler follows with colorful analogies that sometimes recur in his works. First, the content of the great books serves as a sharpening stone for your mind. Second, reading the great books is like a dog gnawing on a bone: “the great books function . . . the way a large bone functions given to a small puppy who wrestles with it, gnaws at it, agitates it. Even if he gets no meat off it is sharpening his teeth in the process.” Lastly, Adler analogized people, children in particular, with liquid containers—that is, learning with great books, a liquid kind of knowledge, allows for filling “pint, quart, and gallon-sized children” up to their individual capacities. Teachers, in this analogy, are funnels, shaping the knowledge to the contours of the children at hand.⁷⁰ Adler was clearly not going to let an opportunity pass to promote the great books.

Near the end of the interview Buckley finally reached the part of Adler’s *Lives* that touched on elements of paleoconservatism in the former’s conservative ecumenism—as well as the latter’s own great books liberalism. Here we return to points Adler made with Charles Van Doren in their July 1968 correspondence about the present times: namely, that it was a good time to be alive, though Western values, paradoxically, were presently preventing people from reaching a good life. Adler’s red meat for Buckley included the assessment that all of the “West shares in America’s material folly and vice.” Adler and Buckley’s common ground consisted of a disdain for moral relativism (what Adler called “unprincipled relativism”), of an affinity for educational traditionalism (especially a strong respect for the printed word), and of disgust with the antinomian elements of the New Left. During the question-and-answer portion of *Firing Line*, after the Buckley–Adler interview, one thing led to another and Adler made an argument, in the tradition of Plato, that “compulsory public service” ought to be required of all youth. Buckley interjects: “You’re a little bit paternalistic, aren’t you?” And Adler responds: “I’m completely paternalistic!” Although laughter followed, the anecdote underscores the differences between the liberal political philosophy of Adler and the conservative fusion around Buckley and his intellectual community at the *National Review*.⁷¹ The laughter also highlighted a somewhat subversive irony: Adler had just used *Firing Line* to promote his Great Books Liberalism!

Apart from Buckley’s enthusiasm, the reactions to both *Lives* and *Politics* were tepid. Positive but unenergetic reviews of *Lives* appeared

in *America*, *Annals of the American Academy*, *Christian Century*, *Library Journal*, and *Saturday Review*. *Politics* received a bit more attention. It was reviewed by the old leftist Alfred Bingham in *Saturday Review*, the political philosopher George Kateb in the *American Political Science Review*, and the up-and-coming former Bill Buckley protégé, Gary Wills, in the *New York Times*. None noted that it was a companion volume to *Lives*, and hence did not assess it accordingly.⁷² Adler's rationalism had missed, or misread, the emotional notes of the New Left and emerging New Right. Readers on both sides perhaps felt Adler's philosophy did not adequately account for liberalism's failings in relation to justice, liberty, and equality. Finally, Adler wrote as a public intellectual ensconced in "the Establishment." His connections to the Establishment allowed him to be the patient advocate of change. For his part, however, in *Politics* Adler wrote objectively about the "dyslogistic" establishment as if it applied only to others.⁷³

A negative reception was, in fact, anticipated by Adler. In the Preface to *Politics* he opined, "If the political theory here set forth is rejected, as I think it will be, by both the old right and the new left, that will confirm my judgment of its soundness. To... [New Left] anarchist... its controlling principles will appear to bespeak reactionary conservatism. To the reactionary conservative... the ideal of the classless establishment... will appear to be revolutionary, and may even evoke such epithets as 'anarchistic' or 'communistic.' That is... as it should be, for the doctrine of this book is both conservative and revolutionary."⁷⁴ Adler's normative and prescriptive common-sense liberalism leads one to maintain and improve mid-century institutions; so it is conservative relative to New Left. But both *Lives* and *Politics* also maintain the progressive ideal of endless governmental refinement. Because it is neither aggressively anti-communistic nor anti-New Deal, his philosophy cannot be accepted by traditional, ecumenical, or new conservatives. Knowing in advance that either audience might reject his work, it was as if he wrote only for himself, or for Charles Van Doren.

Notwithstanding reviews, real or anticipated, of the books above, Adler's peers in philosophy did not ignore his work. Despite his eclectic and occasionally anachronistic influences, as well as his reliance on the great books and eschewal of hyper-specialization, several noteworthy twentieth-century philosophers and intellectuals saw him as both a legitimate force and an intriguing thinker. Examples include Paul Weiss, Charles Hartshorne, Anthony Quinton, Arthur Lovejoy, Vergilius Ferm, and even an oppositional figure, Morris R. Cohen. Adler maintained contacts with Thomistic philosophers at Catholic institutions; they did not reject a philosophy of common

sense with connections to Jacques Maritain, Thomas Aquinas, and Aristotle. In a letter to a young Catholic philosopher, John Deely, composed in 1969, Étienne Gilson called Adler “an extraordinary person,” adding that “Aristotle would have loved him.” Gilson concluded, “We owe [Adler] a great deal.” And all of this in relation to a person barely mentioned in the first edition of Ted Honderich’s authoritative *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (1995).⁷⁵

Of the figures mentioned earlier, the greatest praise for Adler’s work came, surprisingly and unsolicited, from Charles Hartshorne. Hartshorne (1897–2000) is remembered today as “one of the most important philosophers of religion and metaphysicians of the twentieth century.” Although Adler and Hartshorne probably crossed paths at the University of Chicago (Hartshorne taught in the Philosophy Department from 1928 to 1955), Hartshorne is mentioned only once in Adler’s works. Hartshorne, however, wrote admiringly of Adler on the publication of *The Common Sense of Politics*. Confirming their mutual tenure at Chicago, Hartshorne opined that Adler served as the “serious side of Hutchins.” Looking more broadly, however, he called Adler a “distinguished” philosopher—“one of the ablest men alive in our subject, one of those most worth taking seriously.” Some of this admiration probably derived from their shared respect for rationalism and “the history of thought”—the latter as a methodological endeavor to create comprehensive dialectics, or matrices of thought options. But overlapping methodology alone would not earn the acclamation given by Hartshorne.⁷⁶

Hartshorne ventured that *Politics* might be Adler’s “best” book. While Hartshorne also wrote positively of *The Idea of Freedom*, *The Conditions of Philosophy*, *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes*, and *Lives* in the same piece, none of those garnered his highest praise. With *Politics*, however, Hartshorne declares that his attitude toward Adler “becomes one of wholehearted admiration and deep agreement.”⁷⁷ He continued in almost hagiographical fashion:

Here Adler shows where his greatest talent or genius lies: above all, he is a political philosopher. Here I look up to him; he teaches me far more than I could possibly teach him. Any defects in the rest of his thinking seem to become insignificant in this part of it. He knows what the best students have written [i.e. via the great books]; he knows the most relevant aspects of the contemporary situation; he employs most happily his ability to formulate issues sharply, to marshal pertinent arguments bearing upon possible solutions, to avoid undue elaboration of secondary matters while being sufficiently explicit on the main lines of his doctrine, to be

lucid and forceful while avoiding bigotry or mere rhetoric. This book speaks to our basic needs in our perilous situation.⁷⁸

High praise indeed—especially from a person (Hartshorne) Charles Van Doren thought “very vain.” Van Doren suggested it would be “very difficult” for Hartshorne “to write about anyone in the way he has here written about Mortimer.” “Few scholars and thinkers,” Van Doren opined, “have ever received such praise from a colleague.”⁷⁹ Despite the mixed reviews from other thinkers, *Politics* clearly represented a high point in Adler’s philosophical work.

Conclusion

In July 1969, a year after Adler and Charles Van Doren’s exchange about *The Time of Our Lives*, Clifton Fadiman sent Adler a letter of comment and criticism on a draft of Adler’s *The Common Sense of Politics*. The letter contains much that was probably useful to Adler. But Fadiman’s general comments, which included heavy doses of apocalyptic and dystopian medicine, were more interesting than his suggestions for the book. Fadiman’s letter serves as a counterweight to the overall optimism in *Politics* and Hartshorne’s praise.

As the 1960s were close to becoming the 1970s, Fadiman wondered, pessimistically, whether Adler’s defense of the liberal welfare state was nothing more than “summing up a magnificent, but dying tradition.” Was it pointless to create a Great Books Liberalism? Analogizing like a “great bookie,” Fadiman asked whether Adler’s *Politics* was nothing more than a *Paradise Lost* of universalist politics? Were Adler’s sensibilities “outmoded even as he wrote” his treatise? An apocalyptic Fadiman foresaw a future “in which men will never ask whether they have natural rights.” The same concern for natural, universal human rights that led Adler (and Maritain and Hutchins) to advocate for world government caused Fadiman to speculate whether men were becoming actors in a dystopian “prison-stage” of false action where they played “the charades . . . of the democratic citizen . . . [and] the satisfied economic animal.”⁸⁰ Fadiman’s concerns about Adler’s liberal national vision can be justified, retrospectively, when one considers the quickening of globalization and the rise of multinational corporations that occurred around this period. How does one maintain a workable national cultural homogeneity when borders are breaking down?

In his magisterial recounting of the history of the twentieth century, Eric Hobsbawm observed, “The world economy entered a new period of uncertainties in the 1970s.” Niall Ferguson relayed in *Shock of the Global* that “there was . . . a widespread *perception* of crisis in the

1970s”—or the “long 1970s” that lasted from 1968 to 1981 or after. Of course Fadiman could not predict the 1973 oil crisis, but his letter does refer to a related problem—mankind’s seemingly “aimless ‘conquest of the environment.’” Fadiman also accidentally analogized the late 1960s view of the “good life” with the properties of oil when he wrote that people merely desired “a life devoid of friction.” He continued, “A man who lives on, in, [and] with the machine becomes mechanical—that is, he transfers the ‘ethics’ of the machine (which are based on efficiency, or the continuous reduction of the coefficient of friction) to himself.”⁸¹ Then Fadiman’s analogies coalesce into a dystopian vision that would have pleased Philip K. Dick, or perhaps the canonical author H. G. Wells:

I am (at times) convinced that the human being whose life is completely summed up by buying, selling, accumulating, movement, the admiration of machines (especially when the machines are disguised as men), . . . and frictionless sensory stimulation is no longer the political animal Aristotle, Locke and Jefferson were theorizing about . . . At bottom I am suggesting that man’s *political* decisions will no longer be dictated by a vague idea of justice or liberty, for these terms will have lost their power to inspire, even to interest. They will be dictated by what the *machine* dictates, by considerations of efficiency, productivity, wastelessness [sic]—and preeminently—a-rationality, for the machine has no mind . . . *Mind* is sand in the machine—it will *have* to be eliminated, except insofar as it is deployed in the service of the world-machine.⁸²

To Fadiman, Adler’s optimistic commonsense liberalism, situated in a democratic culture and predicated on the development of the mind via the “Great Ideas” and the great books, would be an anathema to the powers of world.

But if Fadiman’s overall pessimism about politics and ideas was appropriate, it derived from wrong reasons and unexpected developments. Because of Britannica’s success in the 1950s and 1960s, the great books idea would come to be seen by some leftist thinkers as a relic at best, or tool at worst, of a falsely consensual view of society. These intellectuals, therefore, reduced the great books idea to Britannica’s set, and then argued “it” was a mere cultural commodity. To them great books were not worthy of classification with the disruptive, emancipating liberal arts. There did indeed exist a new kind of movement toward irrationality and unreason in post-1960s America, but it bubbled up less in countercultural antinomianism than in moral constructions and secular economic certainties. The liberal welfare state, in fact, would not be undermined by Fadiman’s

dystopian zombie automatons, but rather by an active, rational, and popular conservative movement, the New Right, with a libertarian wing that despised state power and its perceived encroachment on freedoms. The latter was certain that “free markets” were the answer to all social economic problems. In a move that would have distressed Fadiman the great books promoter, the New Right’s culture warriors would successfully appropriate many great works of Western civilization, and even common sense, in a late-twentieth-century, friction-filled *Kulturkampf* (or *Kulturkrieg*) where conservatives sought to reinforce traditionalist cultural norms, religious morals, individualism, and, ironically, right-wing anarchy.⁸³ This appropriation was successful enough that it would come to feel as if a left-of-center, commonsense, secular great books liberalism never even existed. And, thanks in part to Britannica’s success, ironically, left-leaning thinkers conceded that appropriation, as well as common sense and the war of ideas, to conservatives.

6

Diminished Dreams: *Great Books* in an Age of Crisis, Fracture, and Transition, 1968–1977

Great books promoters did not know it for sure as the 1970s began, but Britannica's long-running *Great Books* sales boom was over. Their dreams of a democratized culture via great books were dying. The affluence that had enabled the intense consumerism of the 1950s and 1960s was crumbling. While unemployment remained low, inflation and interest rates began to rise in 1968. Concerns about the rising costs of living were prominent. Just when Mortimer Adler had developed a comprehensive commonsense philosophy that might broaden and deepen the great books idea's connections to politics, culture, and society, the best days for Britannica sales and the larger prestige of great books had ironically come to an end. Even so, as of 1969 the momentum of the recent past caused only a hazy, preemptive concern for the business future of the set—for its prospects as a viable enterprise within the culture industry. That concern resulted in Britannica hiring Arthur Rubin, an old Adler friend and intellectual provocateur from their days at Columbia University, to study past promotional campaigns and help formulate a plan for future business.¹

Rubin presented numerous ideas and strategies. He began, however, with the matter-of-fact observation that Britannica was about to place a new sales manager (name unknown as of the report), and that this person would arrive at a time of relatively low sales (15,000 annual sales of the set). Rubin felt that if Britannica helped the new person "hold the line... and build sales back to 25–30,000 sets," they would "be doing the company and ourselves a good turn."² Then he sounded a larger, more ominous note: "In a very fundamental sense our effort... may be viewed as a last stand in selling sound Education to the country... Confidence in education at all levels is rapidly eroding, and damn well it might in view of the exaggerated and vainglorious claims made for it during the first half of this century."³ Rubin no doubt spoke

of the decade's intense criticism of higher education by the likes of Clark Kerr, Paul Goodman, Mario Savo, and Students for a Democratic Society. Rubín also likely shared, or had absorbed, the wider criticisms of education by great books promoters like Adler of presentism and "life adjustment" in America's schools, as well as rampant focus on training (i.e., for jobs) throughout the education establishment.⁴

Given the situation, Rubín strategically focused on a particular corrective topic: great books in adult education. He considered potential institutional tie-ins that might dovetail with Adler's education ideals in *The Time of Our Lives* and *The Common Sense of Politics*. The Great Books Foundation, sadly, would be of no help. Other than its work with schoolchildren, its conspicuous absence in relation to adult endeavors caused Rubín to sarcastically query whether it was "still in existence?" He underscored other organizations and groups for potential cooperation: Council for Basic Education, PTA groups, the American Association of University Women, Catholic schools/colleges, and "well-heeled Alumni" associations such as Radcliffe and Vassar. Rubín then offered two advertising strategies. One made the set a "Guide for the Perplexed," and involved marketing great books as a "road map" for guiding "the reader from darkness and confusion to light and order." This correlated with Adler's work in *Lives* and *Politics*. A crass second strategy was a "Status and Décor Appeal." This class-based/furniture tactic correlated well with the 1962 Marplan Study findings. The books would be what Paul Fussell would later term "cultural emblems."⁵ Rubín's second strategy found full expression in the late 1970s when Britannica partnered with the Franklin Library for a beautiful gilded iteration of the *Great Books*.

Rubín also suggested two concrete sales campaigns for the 1970s. The first made the *Great Books* an antidote for predicted "campus innovations" in relation to several cryptically notated nodes of issues: "Cash vs culture" (i.e., what students perhaps expect from their education), "Student or subject oriented" (i.e., great books could perhaps be integral no matter which books a college's curriculum emphasized), and "interdisciplinary or fragmentized" (i.e., great books could integrate and unify).⁶ Great books would cure each of these education diseases.

The second sales campaign suggestion connected Britannica's set to US Education Commissioner James E. Allen's proclamation that the 1970s would be "The Decade of Reading." This campaign involved two subprojects. The first involved restoking fears and anxieties. Rubín proposed sending *Great Books* owners yearly self-tests to "expose to themselves how illiterate they are," as well as two Evelyn Wood-type follow-up tests that would surely "exhibit some degree of improvement." Secondly, he suggested that Britannica help start fan clubs as supplements to, or substitutes for, the Great

Books Foundation. This scheme would also involve surveys, polls, and a newsletter. Rubin speculated that the poll results might even be sold to readers like those “catchy Harris-Time-Life polls.” This club and its polls would help owners link their sets to “hot topics” such as “sex education...race, [and] religion.” These surveys, and their attendant statistics and averages, would help form common “statistical communities” among *Great Books* readers, as with Sarah Igo’s “averaged Americans.” Rubin’s proposed polling data would speak to *Great Books* owners as modern, other-directed members of the middle class. Despite the brainstorming, Britannica seems to have ignored Rubin’s suggestions. Given the education focus of his overall comments, it should not be surprising to learn that Rubin offered suggestions toward a rewrite of Adler’s *How to Read a Book*. But that would be his last endeavor as a member of Adler’s community of discourse. Rubin passed away shortly thereafter, in 1973.⁷

What of Britannica’s chief executive and lead advertising guru, Senator William Benton, and his thoughts on keeping the *Great Books* viable? Over the next few years after Rubin’s report, Benton directed Britannica staff and great books intellectuals (e.g., Adler, Clifton Fadiman, Robert Hutchins, and Charles Van Doren) to focus on capturing “reader’s interest” by avoiding “boring” and “dull” material for inclusion in the *Great Ideas Today* (GIT) volumes. Benton had been invigorated by GIT selections, which had caused him to think anew about selections made for the 1952 set and its potential future editions. Returning to Benton’s exhortations, in a 1970 missive he questioned the merits of Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly* (in the 1970 GIT) and suggested instead something by Lord Byron, or Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The next year he praised the inclusion of H. G. Wells’ *Time Machine* in GIT as a story “worth reprinting and rereading.” But Benton “abandoned” uninspiring readings of Jonathan Swift’s “Battle of the Books” and Matthew Arnold’s “On Translating Homer.” He had also given up on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. The GIT volumes should contain “stories...that are interesting as good relaxing reading.”⁸ So much for Adler’s and Hutchins’ agreed-upon criterion of selecting an author according to participation in the “Great Conversation” about the “Great Ideas.” Benton saw Adler and Robert Hutchins as too didactic and rigorous.

Indeed, education was never Benton’s primary concern. Reader energy, for him, meant robust earnings. This came out in the same 1971 memo to Adler, which again copied Hutchins and other Britannica staff such as Charles Swanson (Figure 6.1):

Who is the ultimate arbiter on [the GIT] selections? Aren’t you?
How much correspondence do we get about them? I guarantee



Figure 6.1 Charles Swanson, William Benton, and Robert Hutchins, 1974, on publication of the Fifteenth Edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

Source: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

that we get very little. I am not complaining about the sales of GIT because I always think they are extraordinary. On the other hand, they could be doing better ... if GIT contained more material which the reader really is eager to read. The current [1971] volume is a great disappointment. If I were the average subscriber, I would not buy another. This is pretty damning ... We should reexamine our editorial approach.⁹

This memo nicely encapsulated Benton's view of Britannica's role in the culture industry: appeal to the modern person's restlessness by balancing reader energy with a bit of transcendence via Britannica's overall education mission, all the while weighing the probability of

present and future purchase. Cynicism aside, when Benton died in March 1973 (the same year as Rubin) the great books idea lost a significant advocate. Even if he cared little for details of Hutchins and Adler's larger program of cultural democratization, Benton's affection for this particular Britannica venture contributed a great deal to the public's awareness of their program.¹⁰

Backing away from Benton's business subjectivity, Rubin's sales strategies, and the ominous notes of decline in Britannica's *Great Books* sales, how disastrous was the set's situation? Britannica correspondence indicates that sales decreased from 15,000 to 2,000 per year between 1969 and 1976—from a high of over 50,000 in 1961. Adler estimated total worldwide *Great Books* sales at “almost a million” from 1952 until 1976.¹¹ It is clear, however, that the set as a cultural commodity experienced both its zenith and a nadir in a 15-year span. Why? Could the decline have been prevented? What of the story of the larger great books idea in the wake of the 1960s?

The tale behind this dramatic decrease in sales of Britannica's set is a subjective one, dependent on a number of somewhat elusive factors. The company's own role seems to go no further than market saturation. The saturation thesis seems indirectly proved by the fact that Britannica fell into regulatory trouble for deceptive and illegal sales tactics. Alex Beam uncovered two Federal Trade Commission violations: Dockets 7137 (1961) and 8908 (1976). Docket 7137 refers to non-*Great Books* sales problems, but Docket 8908 covers *Great Books*-related violations dating from the late 1960s (to be covered later herein in more detail). In any case, it seems clear that Britannica's management cannot be accused of resting on their laurels.¹² Benton's death certainly removed a charismatic imperative for sales, but he was not the *only* enthusiast for Britannica's set. What of Hutchins and Adler? Despite minor editorial work with Britannica in this period, Hutchins focused on his Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. Located in Santa Barbara, California, the Center was “a residential facility for the study, discussion, and clarification of democratic ideas and institutions.” Comprised of Hutchins and a small group of fellows, the Center had little to do with Britannica. Hutchins wrote directly about liberal education in *The Learning Society* (1968), but not distinctly about the great books idea.¹³ In other words, Hutchins can be neither praised for the set's 1960s sales zenith nor criticized for its decline in the 1970s.

What of Adler's activities, on behalf of the great books idea and otherwise, in context of the general cultural climate? His role in the decline of Britannica's set is less than direct. For starters, Adler's baseline personal enthusiasm for the great books idea never diminished. He continued to correspond with Benton and Britannica employees

about the set's prospects. In his philosophical works, Adler advocated for liberal education and cites *Great Books* authors and writings. In his nonphilosophical work from the 1970s, Adler discusses the great books idea, especially in a revised edition of *How to Read a Book* (1972), in *Philosopher at Large* (1977), and in smaller articles. On the last, he opined on the greatest books of the twentieth century for potential publication on the twenty-fifth anniversary of set's publication in 1977. Adler's written support for Britannica's set and the great books idea, then, is reasonably direct, evident, and consistent during this larger downturn in great books enthusiasm. But his personality and other factors overshadowed that support.

On Adler's activities in relation to his socio-cultural-intellectual context, important factors include perceptions of his person (beyond the esteem of some philosophers), the reception of his written work, and the effectiveness of his crusade both *against* anti-intellectualism and *for* liberal education. Significant historical factors affected the trajectory of the great books idea: racial strife, the Civil Rights Movement, the rise of pluralism, identity struggles, changes in higher and public education, the advent of postindustrialism, and the general assault on mid-century liberalism by forces on the left and right. And that list ignores the growing list of competing popular culture diversions: blockbuster films, new music (e.g., rock and disco), paperback novels, television, and the sexual revolution. These factors destabilized the social sphere and the self in the 1970s. There can be little doubt that the fracturing of America's really existing and merely perceived common culture, as well as a climate of narcissism in relation to individuals, are directly related to diminished dreams of a democratic culture—via a great books liberalism—for the rest of the twentieth century.

“Negro history” and great books liberalism

Racial strife was one of the issues that eventually contributed to the decline of Great Ideas and General Honors Approaches to the great books idea. Even so, before the 1960s concluded Adler had tackled that generally neglected topic great books-like work for Britannica. Of all the editorial works Adler constructed for Britannica with his intellectual community, the three-volume documents set, *Negro in American History* (NAH), reveals as much, or more, about Adler's thoughts on the racial turmoil of the 1960s than appear in *Lives and Politics*.

Published in February 1969, it is not hard to read NAH, superficially at least, as a cynical attempt by the culture industry to capitalize on the Civil Rights Movement and the decade's racial upheaval.

The period's most relevant event in terms of race, education, and race education was the oft-noted San Francisco State College strike in November 1968. The strikers demanded black and ethnic studies programs through an independent college within the university.¹⁴ Although the rise of, and demand for, minority studies and history were acknowledged in Britannica editorial discussions, the planning involved in a set like Britannica's likely meant the collection was not a reaction to any singular event. Indeed, Britannica was not alone in terms of thinking about the African-American community of readers. A review essay by Herbert Aptheker, in the spring 1969 issue of *American Quarterly*, covered an astounding eleven new edited collections about race. Indeed, a *New York Times* article covering the imminent release of Britannica's set noted that "books by and about Negroes . . . have poured from publishing houses . . . in recent months." *Crisis*, the magazine founded by W. E. B. Du Bois and the official publication of the NAACP, also noticed that "materials for studying the Negro experience" had been "rolling off the press at an every accelerating rate."¹⁵ While this trend cannot completely alleviate cynicism about profiteering, it does allow the historian to consider other motivations.

Britannica's *Negro in American History* set contained 186 selections by 134 different authors (black and white), and purported to cover "the role of the black man in the life of this continent" over 400 years. The editors—Charles Van Doren, George Ducas, and Adler—reported that this set was largely drawn from the 20-volume *Annals of America* (also edited by Adler). *Annals* was another documents set covering the whole of American history.¹⁶ In that the NAH selections were not book length, they resembled what Adler called "opuscula" in 1940s *Great Books* editorial discussions—great but short works. Indeed, it is clear that NAH purposed to stamp certain works as "great" in relation to African-American history.

With that in mind, consistencies exist between Adler's prior language about the great books and the NAH selections. The set's "Editors' Preface" contains commentary on the inadequacies of textbooks that echoes Adler's great books promotional rhetoric from the 1930s to the 1950s, as well as his philosophy of history. Indeed, this language, as well as the tone of several passages, leads one to believe that Adler may have been the primary author of the piece, despite the plural "editors" appellation. In any case, the piece begins with a focus on *history* textbooks. The editors observed then—and were confirmed by later historians—that, in the 1960s, "the teaching of American history . . . is undergoing radical change." Owing to better teacher training and problems with the "impossible demands" put on textbook writers, teachers were now ready to use documents more often.¹⁷ If

you insert “great books” in every spot where “source materials” are mentioned in the “Editors’ Preface,” you can almost hear Adler promoting the former while talking African-American history:

Collections of source materials [read: great books]...are inherently controversial, as a textbook can seldom afford to be—but the controversy they contain is the responsibility of the...authors of various selections, not of the supposed impartial [textbook] author or editor. They are better reading, too, because they are anthologies of the best writing available—the strongest statements, the most eloquent expressions of views that, though often conflicting, always reflect the feelings and beliefs of some readers, if not all. Last but not least, they are the stuff of living history, not history seen through the eyes of someone who may be very far removed from it. Thus, whatever source materials may lose in ‘coverage,’ they gain—doubly—in interest and authenticity.¹⁸

As with great books, learning through documents would also be heuristic, meaning suggestive of further research, open-ended, and providing “unexpected results.” Indeed, the editors went as far as to suggest that the history profession itself—not just history teaching in schools—would not survive unless it implemented a heuristic approach.¹⁹

Although the Preface contains other interesting commentary on teaching history, the most relevant passages cover “Negro history” both as a subject and the teaching of it. Given that Adler was not famous for his tact, the preface sends mixed messages in terms of sensitivity. The article relays that textbooks “are likely to be not only inadequate but also dangerous” in properly accounting for the “role of Negroes in American history.” Why? Because Adler will later be faulted (rightfully) for racial insensitivity, the answering passage deserves direct quotation for its genuine positive sensitivity:

Who is to write such a textbook—a white or a black? In either case, there may be bias, perhaps concealed but nevertheless there. Even given an ideally unbiased author, from what point of view is such a book to be written. It is hard to think of any that would be totally satisfactory... Any such narrative account must inevitably seem out of date within a few years. Next year... we may all—white and black alike—have very different opinions or feelings about what this history means, and whither it is tending.²⁰

The surprising thing about this passage, in the context of Adler’s writings before and after, as well as his personality, is its frank acknowledgment of human subjectivity—of point of view as opposed to the more nefarious “bias.” But another passage shortly after suffers from

its lack of tact. In talking about blacks as a problematic area of historical study, the Preface falters:

The blacks are a problem, to themselves and to everyone else. The fact is, *they have always been a problem*. The reason is simple: injustice is wrong and makes men unhappy, whether they are unjust themselves or are subjected to unjust treatment. And few living men would deny the injustice, in both past and present.²¹

Taken out of context, the first few sentences of this passage suggest blacks deserve the blame for their own condition. The self-correction at the end cannot diminish the sting of the wording.

By the end of the Preface, the direction of Enlightenment liberal progress, “the arc of history,” is unmistakably clear: justice must be served. The editors’ mid-century racial liberalism shines—obvious though it may seem to present-day readers. Their words:

In a country that is dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, there must be no bars to equality... Only in recent years have American Negroes discovered that, in right, there are and can be no limits, short of full equality, on their demands. Inhabitants of this land for longer than most of us and the producers, in past and present, of much of its wealth... [t]hey should and they will participate fully in the political process, ... enjoy educational opportunities, [and] ... share the economic advantages that accrue to citizens. Between ‘should’ and ‘will’, however, there is still a great gap; ... this ... is the problem.²²

The editors continued, with some evident passion, by advocating for nonviolent revolution:

Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke of [time being the enemy] in his great and impassioned ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail.’ The time, for us, is *now*, he said; waiting, for us, means never... It means... that the problem of the Negro is a tragic one for all of us... The *dénouement* [however,] may not have to be... Anyone concerned with justice must express his deep gratitude to the blacks of America and of the world. Throughout all of history it has been the movement of the oppressed that has produced progress toward justice. The oppressor has never moved the world forward... This was true in classical times... it is true now. The cry of the downtrodden, of the wronged, is the cry of justice itself... The blacks have spoken out in recent years, and by doing so they have put us in their debt.²³

The most surprising thing about this passage, in the context of Adler and his rationalist liberal intellectual community, is its sermon-like tone.

How will this movement happen? Citing the writings of Lincoln, Adler advocated “peaceful revolution.” This meant a pace of change necessarily faster than forwarded in the 1955 *Brown II* decision:

It is against the law in the United States to advocate a violent revolution. This is as it should be; as Abraham Lincoln said in his First Inaugural Address, ‘no government proper ever had a provision in its organic law for its own termination.’... Violence almost always frustrates the aims it hopes to achieve. A peaceful revolution is another matter. Every man should advocate that, since it means change toward a better world. Without the help of the blacks... we could not even hope, much less expect, to achieve it... Change must occur, rapid change, perhaps breathtaking change. We look forward to it.²⁴

The urgent tone in relation to racial equality is surprising in relation to Adler’s past silences and forthcoming, late 1980s insensitivity. But references to similar passages from Lincoln’s First Inaugural, as well as other Lincoln writings, appear again in *The American Testament*, published in 1975 and coauthored with William Gorman. Consider it a great books approach to more rapid social and cultural reform.

The tone of NAH compares favorably to other Adler writings from the period. In *The Time of Our Lives* (1970), Adler recognizes the “justifiable impatience of all those who are still oppressed by injustices that are not yet rectified and may not even be rectifiable with sufficient speed.” “Their deep unrest,” Adler continued, shows that the time is “ripe for the needed reforms... [among the] the politically, economically, and socially oppressed.”²⁵ And a year later, in *The Common Sense of Politics* (1971), Adler makes a restrained case for revolution as a last resort. To get there he cites Henry David Thoreau, Sidney Hook, Marshall Cohen, and Gandhi in support of the King-inspired “direct action” of the Civil Rights Movement. Adler wrote,

Civil dissent is protest by peaceful means... Like civil dissent and unlike revolutionary action, civil disobedience is non-violent and occurs within the boundaries of consent [to the general framework of existing government]. But civil disobedience should not be confused with civil dissent for... [the former] is always and only refusal by an individual to obey a particular law that he regards as repugnant to his conscience because it commands him to perform an act that he regards as unjust... In societies under *de jure*

government [like the United States], revolutionary action may be justified if juridical means are either not available or not...adequate for the rectification of injustices.²⁶

In the context of the late 1960s in America, the particular applications of this passage are clear. This is not support for the Black Power movement, nor does it come close to matching Malcolm X's colorful, militant rhetoric. But it is clear that Adler felt the Civil Rights Movement was an ongoing process where African Americans, and their white sympathizers, would have to push the envelope to achieve just, equitable treatment. Adler's vision of a great books-based liberalism included the intellectual, social, and political program of pluralism espoused by King.

Despite the left-leaning racial liberalism evident above, the next year Adler gave other signals that his views on the various upheavals of the 1960s might cause some to view him as a neoconservative. The neo-Aristotelian moral philosophy articulated in *Time of Our Lives* (1970) reveals Adler as a stodgy, traditionalist advocate of personal responsibility as opposed to the emerging, and soon to be dominant, ethic of personal liberation (or satisfaction or expression—or just narcissism). In the words of Michael Sandel, the vision of an “unencumbered self” flowered.²⁷ Adler recoiled at this. His great books-based program for emancipation from bad ideas did not include do-what-you-will irresponsibility. But, as shown in the last chapter, evidence of an expansive, nonminimalist communitarian liberal political, economic, and social program exists in both *Lives* and *Politics*. When considered with the *Negro in American History* volumes, wherein Adler resisted trends such as the “New Ethnicity” movement celebrated by Michael Novak, Adler's 1970s works demonstrate that he cannot be classified as a neoconservative, or even as a member of the New Right as it developed from the 1970s going forward.²⁸

The great books idea, therefore, was clearly no New Right project to counter the Civil Rights Movement in education. Indeed, Adler's writings, on education and otherwise, demonstrate an ongoing effort to reconcile the great books idea, in some form, with demotic (paradoxically) pluralist and cosmopolitan social ideals. But would he be able to balance his own emerging sense of an Aristotelian public philosophy with both his vision of a great books-based liberalism and his growing desire, in the late 1970s, to be an education reformer? And would he be able to make progress on any of these fronts given his personality weaknesses? An early opportunity to assess his ability to balance those goals came with the 1972 rewrite of one of Adler's bestsellers.

***How to Read a Book*, revised**

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Adler slowly worked himself up for a major revision of *How to Read a Book*. He had already revised it somewhat with a particular eye toward the great books. That version was published in 1966 with the appropriate subtitle, *A Guide to Reading the Great Books*. But this edition contained only a new preface and a revised list of great books for its appendix. Consequently that version was not widely distributed, and was even left off a bibliography of Adler works in his 1977 autobiography, *Philosopher at Large*. But, in 1971 an instructor and a student from Broward Junior College (Fort Lauderdale) wrote Adler personally to suggest revision. The instructor, Oscar Schmerler of the math department, had used *How to Read a Book* (HTRB) as “required reading” for his Elementary Statistics class in the four previous years. Adler saved both letters as keepsakes that prompted action.²⁹ Because the new HTRB would have a long life, especially in the lower, nontraditional rungs of higher education, it became a means by which a certain variation of the great books idea survived the educational and cultural upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s. It achieved some degree of permanence because of its revised pedagogical message to fit the times. If HTRB-1940 represented the General Honors Approach to great books, HTRB-1972 embodied an offshoot of Great Books Liberalism—a relativistic Great Books Pluralism in education.

In one of his last important acts as a member of Adler’s community of discourse, before his 1973 passing, Arthur Rubin had also provoked Adler to rewrite *How to Read a Book*. Rubin was energetic enough about the endeavor that he took it upon himself to reach out, presumably with Adler’s approval, to Simon & Schuster’s Leon Shimkin about the project late in 1970. Rubin cited President Richard Nixon’s appointment of a National Reading Council to argue that the time was right. The missive worked because Simon & Schuster agreed to publish the revision. Afterwards, through 1971, Rubin worked closely with Adler and Charles Van Doren on revising three of the four different levels of reading (i.e., Elementary, Inspectional, Analytical) outlined in Parts I and II of the book. The fourth and most advanced level, Syntopical (i.e., the Great Ideas Approach), is covered in Part IV of the book. Rubin also helped create the substantial Appendix B, which contained 56 new pages (of the book’s 419 total) on “Exercises and Tests at the Four Levels of Reading.” Rubin’s contributions earned him a literary epitaph in HTRB’s Preface, where the authors expressed their “deepest gratitude for all the constructive criticism, guidance, and help . . . received from our friend Arthur L. H. Rubin, who persuaded us to introduce many of the important

changes" in the revision.³⁰ Given the extensive help of Rubin and Van Doren, the future usefulness of HTRB puts on full display Adler's reliance on his community of discourse. The book demonstrates how the health and maintenance of the great books idea depended on a group of enthusiasts wherein Adler was a well-known celebrity.

By publication in 1972, the revised *How to Read a Book* contained a great deal of new material in addition to Appendix B. The revision held two new sections, one with several chapters on reading specific book genres (i.e., history, science, and imaginative literature) and the other on reading "syntopically"—the term derived, of course, from Britannica's *Great Books*). Even so, use of the phrase "great books" appears, surprisingly, to have been studiously avoided throughout most of HTRB's textual body. The authors opted instead to discuss the "pyramid of books." Appendix A became "A Recommended Reading List," though the term "great books" appears in the list's preface.³¹

The most important, at-large response to the publication of *How to Read a Book* came from *New York Times Book Review* Editor, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt. If one word can sum up his Christmas 1972 review, Lehmann-Haupt probably would have chosen "maddening." After three mocking paragraphs in an eight-paragraph piece, Lehmann-Haupt delivers his verdict: It "is both a far better book and a far worse one than I had been led to expect...I can't make up my mind whether to praise it or damn it." Since only two paragraphs overall are positive, his readers will be forgiven for seeing mostly damnation. Lehmann-Haupt's most serious criticisms echoed those levied by his critical predecessors. As with Dwight Macdonald before him, Lehmann-Haupt is contemptuous of the "overwhelming impression" given in the book that "Dr. Adler and Mr. Van Doren have canned Western culture, put a lid on it, and belted it into the supermarket." He castigates the phrase "syntopical reading" as "perfectly repulsive...replete with overtones of gimmickry and pseudoscience." Given the independent, out-of-the-blue popularity of HTRB-1940, despite its own bit of gimmickry in being linked to Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936), Lehmann-Haupt is probably indirectly faulting Adler for connecting his classic to Britannica's own cottage industry—and to the culture industry in general.³²

In spite of his criticism Lehmann-Haupt did find some positives. Indeed, those few points would, amazingly, motivate the lion's share of subsequent buyers, users, and readers. Lehmann-Haupt confessed that *How to Read a Book* was "full of good advice" on how to surpass the grade-school reading level possessed, sadly, by the "majority of Americans." The book also offered something helpful to "well-educated people...hungry for advice on how to read books

more quickly and efficiently." Lehmann-Haupt confessed that it had taken him "years of intensive practice to learn [even incompletely] the same lessons" taught in HTRB. But he intimated familiarity with the 1940 version when he related, somewhat humorously, that "the revised edition is a great improvement over the original...in large part because [the new edition] gets away from the *inspirational*, cozily *confessional*, and *over-italicized* tone of the original."³³ The italicized irony was indeed intentional.

Another reviewer, Janet Spencer, makes the connection between *How to Read a Book* and the great books much more explicit than Adler and Van Doren. She opens her piece connecting a dream from her childhood about "meeting the great figures of history" to the fact that, today, those figures "beckon daily from our bookshelves." To Spencer, it is "through books [that] we look into other souls and share the problems and thoughts common to man throughout history." Like Lehmann-Haupt she too was vexed about the mediocre reading habits of the general American populace, particularly lamenting the "abysmal" numbers that read books ("about 25 percent" as of 1971). Spencer argues that "active creative reading" is a way to increase "the only occasional glimmerings" of "brilliance and beauty of thought" that we experience in our everyday tasks. And HTRB promoted active reading and gave the tools to read analytically—to engage in a deep reading that just may "electrify" you. It is clear in the piece that Spencer is a pragmatic believer. "It works," she relays matter-of-factly: "When you've finished, you know exactly what real reading is all about."³⁴

Perhaps the most interesting thing about Spencer's article is how she engages Christopher Lehmann-Haupt in a deeper, more substantial conversation with Adler and Van Doren than he did on his own. (Spencer apparently interviewed Lehmann-Haupt about his review.) For instance, Lehmann-Haupt had chided Adler and Van Doren for making a "trivial argument" for one's "serious commitment to reading": namely, that "the only reason for learning to read properly is to 'stretch' the mind and make it 'grow', as if the mind were nothing more than a muscle between one's ears." Contrast that with Lehmann-Haupt's reasoning as recorded by Spencer: "self-discovery is the most important reason to read." In the Spencer article, he added, "Books cause you to reflect on your own perceptions, make distinctions of new areas of reality and become sensitive to them... Through reading you start thinking about the world in new ways." While this reasoning appears more subtle than what appeared in his Christmas review, Lehmann-Haupt ignored the fact that Adler and Van Doren sought a different kind of audience; they kept things basic and provided scaffolding for the reader seeking to raise her/his skills.³⁵

Spencer built on Lehmann-Haupt's exhortations, but went further by encouraging readers to also take on the most challenging works produced in human history. In congruence with Adler and Van Doren, Spencer argued that "books that expand your mind and increase your sensitivity are not the brisk-selling paperbacks full of murder, mystery and intrigue"—mere "entertainment." Spencer makes her point about going historical by citing Rollo May's *Man's Search for Himself* (1953), quoting the latter as follows: "a classic . . . arises from such profound depths in human experience that . . . it speaks to us . . . centuries later in vastly different cultures as the voice of our own experience, helping us to understand ourselves better and enriching us by releasing echoes within ourselves which we may not have known were there." Building on May, Spencer ultimately argues that there are three "basic reasons" people don't read books: "fear, inability, [and] time." Adler and Van Doren can help with all three. Their work strips away fear by improving ability and makes the reader adept at "inspectional reading" (level two, where one identifies the most "serious," or good books).³⁶ It is in the last step where Spencer, with Adler and Van Doren, splits with Lehmann-Haupt in a way that partially foreshadows the fracturing of the canon that would become most prominent in the 1980s and beyond.

The question now becomes "What is a great book?" Lehmann-Haupt does not explicitly deny either Spencer's assertion that books provide pathways to meet "the great figures of history," or May's notion of our ability to connect, across time, with the depths of human experience expressed in classics. And Lehmann-Haupt does concede that there are bad books; some are neither "good enough to read carefully" nor provide lasting nourishment. To him good books "ask questions as they answer others," and are "continually active in [your] imagination." But then Lehmann-Haupt backs away from making further distinctions. He argued that "any writing which challenges you or presents something new in ideas or prose . . . is worth reading well." In this he positively resembles Matthew Arnold, who argued, in the Preface to *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), that "if a man . . . reading nothing but his letters and the newspapers, gets nevertheless a fresh and free play of the best thought upon his stock notions and habits, he has got culture."³⁷

This helps one understand the value of excellent writing but, again, what is a good or great book? Lehmann-Haupt fell back on a language of growth, ironically, that resembles what he abhorred in *How to Read a Book*. He implored people to "find the books that have meaning for you, books that grow as you grow." It is in the practical acts of list making and ranking that Lehmann-Haupt departs from Adler, Van Doren, and Spencer. Lehmann-Haupt "takes issue" with both the

“idea of following reading lists” and the notion, in Spencer’s relay-ing of Adler’s thinking, that there are “about 100 books that merit being read and reread many times over a lifetime.” Lehmann-Haupt then emphatically asserted: “No one can point to a fixed body of literature and say ‘these are great books.’” Spencer, however, hedges by following his assertion with the qualification that “any qualified list can serve as a good reminder and a nudge.” She leaves unanswered the question of how “qualified” lists are built, and by whom. And Lehmann-Haupt leaves us only with relative criteria, declaring that one should “follow your nose and explore”—and that you will just “know the book isn’t good enough to read carefully.” Only Adler and Van Doren hazard providing some guidance in relation to good, better, and best.

In the section of *How to Read a Book* titled “A Pyramid of Books,” Adler and Van Doren lay out a case for winnowing the books of the world—a case that is *much less* heavy-handed and prescriptive than was used by Britannica’s 1940s Advisory Board for its set. Van Doren and Adler open their argument for selection and distinction with the following: “The great majority of the several million books that have been written in the Western tradition alone—more than 99 percent of them—will not make sufficient demands on you for you to improve your skill in reading.” As such, skimming, or inspectional reading, is sufficient. On top of this frightful mass, there exists a second class of books that can teach you “both how to read and how to live.” These constitute the top 1 percent of all books; there are “probably no more than a few thousand such books.” These “good books” deserve close reading, but only once. Why? They relay: “As your mind stretches and your understanding increases, you realize, by a process that is more or less mysterious, that you are not going to be changed any more in the future by this book.” The insertion of “mystery” here is the difference between 1972 and 1952—and the authors get more vague and mystical.³⁸

The distinction between good and great books involves an almost New Age kind of jump in understanding. First the authors continue building their pyramid: “Of the few thousand such [good] books, there is a much smaller number—here the number is probably less than a hundred—that cannot be exhausted by even the very best reading you can manage.” Then they add their mystical, highly subjective layer to the process of discerning the best:

When you have closed the book . . . you have a sneaking suspicion that there is more there than you got. We say “suspicion” because that may be all it is at this stage . . . You cannot put your finger on [what you missed], but you know it is there. You find that you

cannot forget the book, that you keep thinking about it and your reaction to it... You find, on returning... that there was [paradoxically] *less there than you remembered*. The reason... is that you yourself have grown in the meantime... The book has not changed, but you have. Such a return is inevitably disappointing. But if the book belongs to the highest class—the very small number of inexhaustible books—you discover on returning that *the book seems to have grown with you*... What you only now begin to realize is that the book was so far above you to begin with that it has remained above you, and probably will always remain so. Since it is a really good book—a great book, as we might say—it is accessible at different levels.³⁹

With that, Adler and Van Doren have revealed something of the mysteries of great books to the uninitiated. If this is not merely rhetoric—pandering to readers who might buy from their corner of the culture industry—then HTRB-1972 shows a greater awareness of the subjective nature of Britannica's 1940s efforts to define THE great books.

The authors' awareness of human diversity and the subjectivity of "the" great books increased remarkably in the paragraphs that follow. Adler and Van Doren offered the following (*italics mine*): "Human beings differ in many ways other than the power of their minds. They have different tastes; different things appeal more to one person than another... *We do not want to state authoritatively that any particular book or group of books must be great for you.*" And then the finale (*authors' italics*): "Although in our first Appendix we do list those books that experience has shown are capable of having this kind of value for many of our readers. Our point, instead, is that *you should seek out the few books that can have this value for you.*"⁴⁰ Never before in Adler's writings had he conceded this much authority in terms of determining the hierarchy of great books.

What caused this turn of events? Which author was primarily responsible for drafting these passages? Was it an honest concession from both authors (and Arthur Rubin?) based on an awareness of changing, postmodern times—that 1970s readers would not accept pretensions of cultural authority as they had before? Was it a dishonest concession from the "authors" in relation to selling Britannica sets? Was it a convergence of internal changes of opinion and consciousness of context? Neither Adler's reminiscences nor his archived papers offer a clue on who authored these particular passages. But the subjective, generous spirit articulated above is at least partially consistent with Adler's work on the 1980s Paideia Project—even though that spirit of personal satisfaction and growth fades dramatically after the so-called "Stanford Affair."

Gilded, sacralized, and ossified: The Franklin library

A few years later Charles Van Doren would remind his Britannica colleagues that 1977 was “replete” with opportunities to celebrate Adler, his accomplishments, and the *Great Books*. Among several options conceded as “hokey” in an interoffice memo, he nonetheless argued their appropriateness for promoting great books in connection with Adler’s upcoming seventy-fifth birthday. Of special interest is Van Doren’s recommendation of a “Golden Anniversary Edition” of the set dedicated to Adler.⁴¹ Following up on this proposal, which built on Rubin’s 1969 “Status and Décor Appeal” suggestion, Britannica approached the prestigious Franklin Library in 1977 about a commemorative publication. In the beginning there was the potential for something new: a relatively small, 20–24 volume set of the “Great Books of the Twentieth Century” chosen by Adler. But the Britannica-Franklin transaction evolved into a 96-volume twenty-fifth anniversary “special edition” of *Great Books of the Western World* uncoupled from Adler anniversary possibilities. A difference between the 1952 set and Franklin’s edition would be the construction of “study guides” for each of the latter’s volumes.⁴²

With hindsight, it is hard not to judge the 96-volume publication as a profit-based betrayal of the great books idea as a democratic cultural phenomenon. Even though their selections were no different from the 1952 set, and the profit motive drove both sets to a certain degree, the symbolism alone of Franklin as publisher went against all the original intentions of the 1952 Advisory Board. Britannica’s decision to partner with Franklin Library betrayed Hutchins’ requirement that the set not provide mere furniture for homes—a betrayal both directly and indirectly mocked by critics like Macdonald and Paul Fussell. Even so, not all references to the ossified, sacralized remnants of the great books idea in popular culture were mocking.

In her study of “fine editions and cultural distinction” in print culture, Megan Benton reminds us that “we cannot read a text without also, simultaneously and inevitably, reading its form.” Franklin’s aesthetic of distinction involved an inordinate concern for “packaging,” including leather covers, gifts to the subscriber “to sweeten the cup,” illustrations, and decorative bindings—embellished with 22-karat gold in the case of Franklin’s *Great Books* set. The company clearly acknowledged, even embraced, the fact that the *Great Books* would serve as furniture for some purchasers. Editions like these, returning to Megan Benton, are often “deemed beautiful but benign relics of a golden age...self-indulgent gestures of book love.” This correlates with David Lowenthal’s observation that we moderns “tame the past by giving its relics a new function.” Or, as Lowenthal relayed

via Penelope Lively's *Road to Lichfield*: "By displaying what had gone before and making an ornament of it you destroy its potency. Less sophisticated societies propitiate their ancestors; this one makes a display of them and renders them harmless."⁴³ Franklin provided an opportunity for bourgeois Americans to render great books as relics made of leather and gold, no matter their pedigree in relation to pluralist America.

And Adler was complicit in this. He betrayed both Hutchins' maxim and his own ideals, as articulated in HTRB-1972, by advising Franklin's Joseph Sloves to appeal to Franklin's special "readership":

I assume that you and I are equally cynical about the Franklin readership in general. But there certainly may be a certain percentage of your subscribers who... may have some degree of interest in the contents of the books. For them, having the design more rather than less appropriate to the contents is a plus... Having the design more attractive for the less readable books is, in my judgment, also highly advisable for the purchaser who wants to own these books but not read them.⁴⁴

It is clear that Franklin, with Adler's blessing, would appeal to room decorators, collectors, and so-called highbrow culture, not the consumers of a popular, democratized culture that Adler had pursued in HTRB-1972. The Franklin endeavor corresponded with what Lawrence Levine called the "sacralization" of cultural forms. Once sacralized, the great books idea was necessarily neutralized as a democratic cultural endeavor.⁴⁵ With Adler's approval, the Franklin edition symbolized the great books idea at its nadir in twentieth-century American culture.

Of course it was not as if the problem of books-as-furniture, or as cultural distinction, was new in America. There were Eliot's *Harvard Classics*. Megan Benton reminds her readers that Henry Seidel Canby complained about a similar phenomenon in 1930—meaning homes decked with "stale and unprofitable volumes, unread and unreadable" ... "sacred arcs of culture."⁴⁶ And it is not as if a market (or "audience") for Franklin's *Great Books* did not exist. Franklin had secured "something over 12,000 orders" by December 1977 (for eight-year subscriptions!).⁴⁷ The problem is Adler's hypocrisy in relation to his past work and his worst impulses. Here one sees Adler at his worst in relation to what Anthony Quinton, in an otherwise complimentary 1968 piece, called Adler's "philosopher entrepreneur" problem. Adler quibbles with Franklin staff (i.e., Sloves) over things like "the color of the leather, the decorations on the binding, the interior format," and even "the kind of embellishments used."

He apologized for “butting into what, strictly speaking, is not my business,” but cited his “long experience in book publishing” and “commercial expertise” as authoritative. He continues, “My concern here, which must also be yours, is with sustaining the subscriber through the course of eight years. We want to keep the attrition rate to the minimum.”⁴⁸ These missives reveal Adler as a traitorous, superficial busybody in relation to the thing he had cared about the most: the creation of an informed, critical citizenry concerned with America’s common, communitarian values that respected what Saul Bellow’s fictional Moses Herzog called “the wisdom of old books.”⁴⁹

Despite the ossification of the great books idea in Franklin’s set, Franklin and Britannica considered it a sales success. By early December 1977, there were “over 12,000 orders.” Franklin Library Publisher Robert V. O’Brien was “quite happy” with those numbers. Indeed, by that time Franklin had earned an 11–12 percent profit after taxes. Britannica President Peter Norton felt positive enough about the *Great Books* endeavor that he wanted to brainstorm other “joint-venture” projects. Capitalism’s wheels of innovation, or “creative destruction” in Joseph Schumpeter’s Marxist-inspired thinking, kept turning.⁵⁰

Other instances of the sacralization and ossification of Britannica’s set existed prior to, and concurrent with, Franklin’s production of gilded furniture for the middle and upper classes. One sign a cultural product has ossified is when it is mocked or satirized in popular culture. Mocking had already occurred, of course, immediately upon the publication of Britannica’s *Great Books* with Dwight Macdonald’s “Book-of-the-Millennium Club” review. But Paul Fussell, in his 1983 book *CLASS: A Guide Through the American Status System*, updated Macdonald’s mocking during Franklin’s eight-year subscription period—just in time for Reagan-era Yuppies.⁵¹

In so doing Fussell revised an idea first broached by F. Stuart Chapin in his 1935 book, *Contemporary American Institutions*, called “The Living-Room Scale.” Chapin’s scale awarded or subtracted points according to the structure of, and things found in, your house’s most prominent room for guests. Fussell’s own humorous scale did the same, and included an overall score that placed you in various socioeconomic classes ranging from below 50 (“mid- or low prole”) to above 245 (“upper class”). Books figured prominently in the Fussell’s hierarchy: a “book case full of books” earned you 7 positive points, a “partially full” case 5 points, “overflow books stacked on the floor, chairs” garnered 6 points, and books with “any leather bindings more than 75 years old” added 6 points. Indeed, books and magazines alone, properly displayed and selected, could raise your score entirely out of

the “mid or low prole” class. Fussell directly addressed Great Books when he addressed “tastes in reading” among the middle classes. As mentioned in chapter 5, it was the “anxious middle class” that “wants you to believe it reads ‘the best literature’” and condemns the rest as “trash or rubbish.” Middle-class literary perfection, Fussell mocked, rested in Britannica’s set or in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*—preferably leather bound and placed on top of an overflow stack of books rising from a chair next to a full bookcase.⁵² Fussell’s vivid, mocking picture spoke to the diminished dreams of great books promoters. The materialist desire to sell symbolic decorations to denizens had replaced older ideals of a literate citizenry dedicated to the hard work of close reading.

The Britannica-Adler symbiosis: “GB 20,” FTC, and the vicissitudes of promotions

Returning to the late 1976 suggestions from Charles Van Doren about anniversaries for 1977, he wrote that “it would be a good commercial move by this company to play Mortimer’s 75th birthday for all it’s worth—and I think it’s worth a good deal.”⁵³ He reflected further that “what is likely to happen—and what may be *made* to happen—to an intellectual figure when he reaches the age of 75” is that “suddenly [the] person who was... ‘controversial’ earlier becomes a monument.” That person is now “a national resource.” A crafty Van Doren added that “the media fall all over themselves... to do him honor, just for having grown so old.”⁵⁴ He suggested that Britannica “host a public gala in Mortimer’s honor,” “call for a new printing of GBWW,” and “publish a book about Mortimer.”⁵⁵ And these ideas were needed relative to the recent sales decline for the set (from over 50,000 in 1961, to 15,000 in 1969, and only 2,000 per year by 1976). Adler had estimated total worldwide *Great Books* sales at “almost a million” by 1976 (which, if true, would mean an average of 43,478 sets sold annually over 23 years). Even so, subscriptions to *The Great Ideas Today* remained high: 80–90,000 in the mid-1970s.⁵⁶ That last fact pointed toward Van Doren’s optimism that an audience existed for his initiatives.

These “good commercial moves” involving Adler were also needed to counteract bad publicity for Britannica. The trouble began for its \$70-million annual sales business in 1972 with complaints to the Federal Trade Commission alleging numerous violations of the Federal Trade Commission Act. The complaints were leveled against both Encyclopedia Britannica, incorporated in New York, and its “wholly owned subsidiary,” Britannica Home Library Services (BHLS), incorporated in Chicago. Documents confirm the decline of Britannica’s

"Great Books Sales Division," noting it was folded into the regular "Encyclopedia Sales Division" in 1971. Over the course of two years, FTC officials called 84 witnesses: 25 ex-salesman, 47 consumers, and 12 company employees. As the "respondents," Britannica utilized the testimony of 12 company employees. Altogether there were 27 days of formal hearings and over 1,000 exhibits introduced. The hearings took over two years because Britannica twice attempted motions for delay due to pending rulings on new Commission rules *proposed by Britannica* to the Commission. Apparently there were no FTC rules, at the time, prohibiting the initiation of rules by the public. Both Britannica proposals were denied.⁵⁷

What did the company's salesman do? The complaints, leveled in 1972 through customer testimony and overwhelmingly documented in Administrative Law Judge Ernest G. Barnes' December 1974 ruling, involved many underhanded tactics involving *Great Books* sets and the associated cottage industry of products (e.g., Great Books Reading Plans, *Gateway to the Great Books*, custom bookcases, *Annals of America*). Those tactics included: (1) recruiting sales personnel while supposedly selling products, (2) falsely inflating real and potential income in those sales positions, (3) promising free gifts or to conduct "advertising research analysis surveys" when really selling products, (4) promising to only take a few minutes when taking hours in reality, (5) falsely promising "no sales presentations" during preliminary "telephone talks," (6) falsely selling something called the "Library Research Service," (7) presenting misleading bundling plans, (8) conducting bogus contests, and (9) misrepresenting the deliveries and billing in relation to "continuity book programs" (presumably books like *Great Ideas Today*). Barnes judged Britannica in violation of nearly every complaint. These were not, moreover, "a few isolated departures from company policy." The evidence, he concluded, demonstrates "unlawful conduct."⁵⁸ Based on these findings and the Franklin endeavor, it is easy to understand why cultural critics saw the Britannica's set, and the great books idea it had overshadowed, as mere cultural commodities. Britannica's fetishization of the set's exchange value (i.e., monetary worth) had thoroughly displaced the idea's value as an educational tool.

Returning to Barnes' findings, the bad publicity began almost immediately, in January 1975, with a *Chicago Tribune* article confirming the violations. That article relayed the judge's unique "remedy": Britannica salesmen, all 2,000 of them, were ordered to carry a 3×5 inch "disclosure" card stating, in large boldface type, their name, title, affiliation, and purpose of the visit. The slow drip of poor news continued in Chicago over the next year after Britannica appealed Barnes' decision. A final *Tribune* article appeared a few weeks after the

Commission issued its unanimous final order on March 9, 1976. Alex Beam quoted Charles Van Doren as relaying that it was “embarrassing.” The decision stood until 1982 when the FTC allowed sales representatives to use much smaller business cards to convey the same information.⁵⁹ There can be no doubt that the FTC debacle gave the *Great Books* a black eye. It underscored the chasm between the *Great Books* as a business venture *and* dreams of promoters (at their best, anyway) who saw the great books idea as buttressing a democratized cultural form respectful of its humanistic context. In this case, a dishonest business undermined the free associations, and spontaneity, necessary for fostering a democratic culture.

Despite these setbacks, or perhaps because of them, Britannica staff and Van Doren were determined to make something of aforementioned anniversaries of 1977. Around this time Adler again blurred the lines between intellectual advocate and salesman by proposing a number of sales ideas for a twenty-fifth anniversary edition of the *Great Books*. In a confidential memo, he wrote that a ten-volume assemblage of “Great Books of Modern Times” could be offered to subscribers. This suggestion ended up, ultimately, as a path not taken—at the time. But it is useful to examine the effort because many of the books and authors suggested would, in the end, be nominated and selected for the 1990 revision of Britannica’s *Great Books* set.

Adler’s nominations for what became known as “GB 20”—Great Books of the Twentieth Century—garnered the attention of *Time* magazine and were published in its March 7, 1977 issue. His suggestions included well-known standards and some surprising choices totaling 73 authors and 131 works. The imaginative literature list (31 authors, 52 works) included Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Albert Camus’s *The Plague* and *The Stranger*, Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and James Joyce’s *Ulysses* among others.⁶⁰

Adler’s history and social sciences list (18 authors, 28 works) included (again, among others) John Maynard Keynes’ *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* and *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*, and Leon Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution*. His “Philosophy, Theology, and Religion” nominations (16 authors, 36 works) included old nemesis John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*, old friend Jacques Maritain’s *Man and the State* (and two others), Étienne Gilson’s *Unity of Philosophical Experience*, Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, Jose Ortega y Gasset’s *The Revolt of the Masses*, and Reinhold Niebuhr’s *Nature and Destiny of Man*. In the natural sciences Adler proposed 8 authors and 15 works,

including Werner Heisenberg's *Physics and Philosophy*, Albert Einstein's *The Meaning of Relativity*, and Erwin Schrodinger's *What Is Life?*⁶¹

The selections were relatively uncontroversial in hindsight. Given Adler's rejection of existentialist thought in *The Time of Our Lives* and *The Common Sense of Politics*, the attention he gave to existentialism is surprising. Women thinkers received more attention than one might have expected. He offered in-depth reflections on his choices in a May 1977 *Chicago Tribune* article that reproduced the *Time* list. In a surprising move in relation to his prior work on the great books idea, even the new edition of *How to Read a Book*, Adler stated that these selections were not really the "greatest books" produced by Western civilization. Indeed, the "greatest" qualifier denoted a kind of super category of great books in Adler's hierarchy. He opined that there were only "fifteen at the most" of the "greatest books" that met the qualifying standard of being "worth reading over and over again—endlessly." This move cheapened, whether accidentally or otherwise, the 1952 Britannica set which, according to the original 1943 criteria in chapter 2, stipulated that each work be "indefinitely rereadable." Each, in the prior words of Hutchins (and Adler), "should not be the sort of book that can ever be finally mastered or finished by any reader." But now, in 1977, Adler created a brand-new category of "important books of lasting significance" that were great books "even if they are not inexhaustibly rereadable."⁶² Apparently these stood at the tip-top of the pyramid of books outlined in HTRB-1972.

Continuing his philosophical thinking about GB 20, Adler also confessed the "parochialism of confining ourselves to Western culture." He argued that "no one has yet compiled a list of the world's great books, adequately representing its five or six major cultural streams; nor has anyone yet tried to determine the books that would belong to the common cultural heritage of mankind" in terms of a "unified world cultural community."⁶³ Apart from the complications contained in this statement, as well as difficulties in discerning the "greatest" versus "great" books, it is possible that Adler's GB 20 list would have energized existing and potential enthusiasts of excellence in reading. The publication of this commentary and Adler's list, however, only prompted a few reflections from regular *Tribune* columnists. One offered regrets for unfamiliarity with many works on Adler's list and put forward an alternate list of more entertaining books.⁶⁴ Nobody but Adler and his Britannica friends were dreaming big about the great books idea—or rather their version of it.

Even so Adler worked to get the publication process for GB 20 started. It was a Quixotic endeavor that never reached critical mass but, again, served a purpose for the 1990 Britannica set. As he had in the early 1940s, Adler helped set up an advisory group and

conduct its first meeting early May of 1977. The team consisted of familiar and some new names: Jacques Barzun, Harrison Brown, Norman Cousins, Maurice Cranston, Clifton Fadiman, Frank Gibney, Anthony Quinton, and Charles Van Doren. Most of these names would reappear in 1990. The group got as far as deciding on the anthology/edited collection approach for part of the 20-volume collection (which is what happened in 1990), and assigning potential editors. The group decided to exclude non-Western authors due, in part, to the complications outlined above in Adler's *Tribune* article. The group also created a preliminary list of authors "loudly black-balled by some but not all." This excluded list, whose formation criteria was left mysterious, included some from Adler's *Time* list (e.g., Sartre, Levi-Strauss, Bergson) and new submissions (e.g., John Rawls, Rebecca West, and Vilfredo Pareto).⁶⁵

In a report on the advisory group's first meeting Adler added further complexity to his 1970s writings about the great books idea. Adler underscored a point made by Fadiman to the advisory group: that "received opinion" of today's readers and thinkers should be considered in selecting authors and works. Adler then clarified the directive: "Our job as knowledgeable, . . . literate [persons] should be not merely to bring our own personal judgments to bear, . . . certainly not our likes and dislikes or our evaluation of the truth or soundness of the works considered, but to assess *the generally received opinion concerning them as it exists at this time.*" In other words, the group should ask itself about the popularity of each twentieth-century author and selection among 1977 readers. Adler and Fadiman claim that this criterion assisted them with selections for the 1952 Britannica set. Even so, neither the "Great Conversation" nor the "Great Ideas" were mentioned in Adler's summary of the group's first meeting.⁶⁶

The strengths and weaknesses of a group's activities are best measured, however, by its dissenters. In this case the reflections of one dissenter, Norman Cousins (1915–1990), are instructive. At the time he was editor of the *Saturday Review*, but was also a well-known anti-nuclear activist, world government proponent, and consummate mid-century liberal. Since he was a self-proclaimed "old friend" and a peripheral member of Adler's community of discourse, you might also label Cousins a proponent of great books liberalism. As someone who understood what Joan Shelley Rubin would call the middle-brow reader, it is no surprise that he was associated with Britannica's effort.⁶⁷

In a June 1977 letter to Adler, Cousins wrote of an "increasingly uneasy" feeling about GB 20. He inquired, "Is the emphasis to be on the great writers or the great books? What is the *primary* function of our jury?" Finally, going to the shared point of Fadiman's and

Adler's, he asked: "Are we to fix our attention on those titles that have achieved recognition through acceptance by critics and in the marketplace, which is to say, received opinion?" Cousins noted that if the last "perfectly valid concept" were followed, the choices could be better achieved by "two or three trained researchers" than by the "nominal" thoughts of "judges." Cousins felt that the subjective, mysterious round of veto voting—blackballing—illustrated his point. He also objected to his own qualifications as a list maker by confessing that he "had not read perhaps one-third of the books mentioned." Furthermore, since the meeting he had reread about two-dozen books on the list and was surprised at his changed opinions—when his past "high opinions" had "coincided... with the received opinion at the time." With these confessions, problems, and unease in mind, he withdrew "rather than make a nuisance of myself." He also promised that his "uneasiness" with GB 20 would not "find its way into any public discussions of the project." Adler asked that he reconsider, but Cousins' response did not matter because, Britannica and Adler abandoned the project in the near term.⁶⁸

Cousins' honesty sheds light on the tensions inherent in the list making of books and the great books idea in general. Who selects? How? What are the criteria? What of the weaknesses of the selection committee, both individually and as a group? What of the history of that book and its reception? What of philosophy, or the history of ideas? Which ideas? Who is the audience for the set? How does the unity of a set relate to the diversity of its audience? There can be no question that each and every manifestation of the great books idea is an embedded, human endeavor.

Aside from failed GB 20 endeavor, Van Doren also suggested that Britannica publish a book about Mortimer Adler. Van Doren offered this without knowing, apparently, that Adler's autobiography, *Philosopher at Large*, was due to be published in 1977. In fact, what Van Doren suggested as a "Golden Anniversary Edition" of the same—apparently meant to commemorate Adler's fiftieth year leading great books classes.⁶⁹ The memo contained no cautions against making Adler appear an ossified relic to popular audiences—the dangerous flipside of such commemorations. In any case, the publication of Adler's autobiography gave him and others a chance to take stock of his life and, more importantly here, his involvement with the history of the great books idea. The release of *Philosopher at Large* was duly noted in Chicago where Adler was interviewed by two television and three radio stations, including sessions with Studs Terkel and Chicago news celebrity John Callaway. Britannica's Vice President John S. Robling basked in the glow of what he called "excellent publicity" for the company.⁷⁰

Philosopher at Large generated two pieces of insightful commentary on Adler. Authored by Cousins (again) and John Murray Cuddihy, both underscored something of the complex relationship between Adler's conceptions of the great books idea, on the one hand, and his high hopes, on the other, that "it" could create a democratized culture that celebrated a smart citizenry, fight anti-intellectualism by invigorating education (at all levels) with a strong liberal arts sensibility, and at once promote cosmopolitanism, liberalism, and common sense. Both pieces of commentary force reflections on one's own views of "history" in relation to the great books idea and specific books. Both also helped move the conversation about Britannica and its *Great Books* away from vicissitudes of promotion and sales.

Reviewing the range of Adler's work via *Philosopher at Large*, and renewing "the Great Bookie" nickname, Norman Cousins positively asserted that "it is futile to speculate whether Adler has had a greater influence as a teacher, as a philosopher, or as an editor." Cousins added that it is "futile, because all the strands form a single skein. [Adler] is a thinker and teacher who obviously regards systematic thought as a value second only to life itself." Apart from pure praise, Cousins also highlighted Adler's solution in *Philosopher at Large* to an apparent contradiction of Adler's promotion of philosophy. On the one hand, Adler advocated studying multiple philosophical greats (such as Plato, Plotinus, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Kant, and Hegel). But, on the other hand, there was his devotion to Aristotle, Aquinas as the "student of Aristotle," and of Jacques Maritain as "a student of both Aristotle and Aquinas." Adler saw each of the latter as commonsense realists who respected tradition and history in philosophy. Cousins underscored Adler's solution to the charge of contradiction: "It is certainly possible to be an Aristotelian—or the devoted disciple of some other philosopher, without also being a blind slavish adherent of his views, declaring with misplaced piety that he is right in everything he says, never in error, or that he has cornered the market on truth and is in no respect deficient or defective."⁷¹ Such was Adler's defense of looking to the greatest works in the history of philosophy in order to reason with the cultural, social, and economic problems of a modern democratic culture. In conjunction with underlining the positive aspect of Adler's Aristotelianism, the rest of Cousins' September 1977 review in the *Saturday Review* is generally complimentary. But it's hard not to read it as follow-through on his early summer promise to Adler to avoid more negative public controversy in relation to Britannica's *Great Books*.

The flawed but attractive humanity behind the great books idea, in the person of Adler, is put on full display in John Murray Cuddihy's review of *Philosopher at Large* for *New York Times* readers. It may be the

best, one-stop brief description of the tensions and ironies embodied in Adler the great books promoter. It also explains, better than any other piece of writing before or after, why the great books idea found a lasting home in the United States.

For starters, Cuddihy posited the existence of an unholy trinity of Adlers: the “public Adler,” the “semi-public Adler,” and a “human and humorous Adler.” Each affected the trajectory of the great books idea in different ways. The “public Adler” had a “nationwide and formidable reputation” as a “polymathic promoter of ‘the great books’ movement, the circuit-riding evangelist of liberal education based on these books, . . . the cataloguer who recruited a staff . . . to index the ‘great ideas’, [and] . . . the author of the bestselling *How to Read a Book*.” On the other hand, the “semi-public Adler . . . made enemies and alienated people.” This Adler was “imperious . . . dogmatic . . . vain . . . a humorless elitist . . . compulsive talker . . . huckstering *Luftmensch* . . . officious autodidact . . . [and] *idiot savant* witless about the heart and its reasons.” Finally, the third Adler was a “rebellious *schlemiel*, the vulnerable social misfit and loser, preternaturally gauche and clumsy.” This is the mixed-bag Adler evident in the history of the great books idea—“human and humorous” and “often stubborn and courageous.” Cuddihy relates that this Adler is “the democrat convinced that taxi drivers can come home and read Hobbes and Rousseau.” This is the Adler “midwived by Erskine and Aquinas” who, in turn, brought into being “the idea of the ‘great books’ movement.”⁷²

In showing great books relationship to American dreams, Cuddihy also indirectly, and ironically, links Adler’s great books project to Friedrich Nietzsche’s antifoundationalism. While this connection would be an anathema to Adler and conservative traditionalist Culture Wars defenders of great books, the provocative link ought to be considered by all great books proponents and opponents. In Cuddihy’s view Adler’s project is, in fact, an antihistorical vision of newness and reconfiguration—the American dream, in essence. From the review:

The dream that the relation of reader to author can be a direct and transcendental “meeting of minds”—minds without bodies, psyches, histories, classes or subcultures—is a very American and Emersonian dream. America, made anxious by its own belatedness, was to be the place where everything could begin again from scratch, where education could make an end run around “the nightmare of history” and thus end the “anxiety of influence,” a place where any and every seeker avid for learning had merely to rip away the intermediating “scholastic” and “talmudic” armor encasing a great book to break and enter the sanctuary and lay siege to truth.⁷³

The great books project created anachronism because you could, theoretically, skip intervening years to commune directly with past minds to renew the present. In addition, it was antihistorical or even anti-intellectual because it let you skip historians' complex interpretations of legacy of ideas and thinkers. This made the great books idea attractive, empowering, democratic, and intellectually risky. It made Adler's project attractive to both liberals and conservatives, and might inspire others outside those camps. Cuddihy concludes his Harold Bloomian-influenced observations of paradox in the person of Adler with a Nietzschean aphorism about an unquestioned "American piety" that Adler embodied: "everything is a matter of learning and that learning is everything."⁷⁴ This observation certainly sets up well Adler's writing in *The Common Sense of Politics*, as well as the fact that the next decade of Adler's life would be spent bringing the great books idea down the rungs of the education ladder into America's schools.

Epilogue: Hutchins' passing and postmodern pessimism

Hutchins' death in May 1977 added to the real and symbolic significance of the year in the history of the great books idea. He succumbed to postsurgical complications in relation to a kidney ailment and was buried in Santa Barbara—far from Hyde Park and the university that fed off his magnetism. While long separated from the *Great Books* and *Britannica*, his death highlighted the separation of *Britannica's* product, and derivatives like the Franklin Library edition, from the set's roots in relevance and use. Despite Adler's prominence as "the great bookie," Hutchins' passing correlated with a sense of listlessness—of crisis—in the history of the great books idea.

Hutchins had continued to act on his belief in a democratic culture and the fruits of good dialogue through his liberal think tank, the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. To him, "discussion [was] the road to progress," echoing notes he sounded on behalf of the "great conversation" that, to him, was integral to the great books idea. But, at the Center, participants moved beyond the great books alone to analyze democracy, science, technology, and philosophy.⁷⁵ In the meantime Adler reflected in *Philosopher at Large*—completed before Hutchins' death—on recent dark times in the United States in relation to his, and Hutchins', belief in the idea of human progress:

I have suffered serious distress, but not despair, with regard to Vietnam, the continuing injustice to the blacks, the manifest discontent on the part of the young, and the corruption associated

with Watergate . . . Throughout all of this, I have not found it necessary to adopt different principles or to reorder my priorities . . . But on one score . . . a great change has taken place, and that is in my attitude toward the future. The future no longer seems benign to me as it once did.⁷⁶

This was of a piece with the fact that, a few years earlier with the approach of the American Bicentennial, Adler had announced himself a “moderate pessimist.” This stands in contrast with the sentiments relayed in *The Common Sense of Politics* when he laid out a thoroughly optimistic plan for political renewal. The change had apparently occurred over the intervening five years of the 1970s when he realized that now “we are the first [peoples] to have scientific grounds [as opposed to “emotional and religious”] for taking a dim view of the future. Our sense of doom is more concretely factual.” He was also thinking about larger problems: “pollution, ecological and energy problems.” “Is the idea of progress,” he asked, “more and more, or better and better?”⁷⁷ Although Cousins had reflected that Adler had “defined his own context and has lived within it,” it is clear that present circumstances colored his outlook.⁷⁸ Like other postindustrialists and postmoderns, Adler could not hold an unalloyed belief in the Enlightenment idea of progress when surrounded by intense economic stagflation, political malaise, and social fracture.⁷⁹

As a new decade neared, one could only wonder how great books promoters would respond to its recent problems? And how would the great books idea change with the times? The answers to these questions depends on several contingent factors: the advocacy and flexibility of Adler and his community of discourse, the emergence of new supporters, Britannica’s creativity, changes in K-12 and higher education, and, perhaps most importantly, the tug-of-war of cultural politics. From the diminished dreams of 1970s-era supporters a chastened great books idea would emerge. It would be less grandiose and less taken-for-granted as a part of the center of American thought and culture. But the great books idea would persist, and sometimes exhibit surprising strength.

7

“The Poobah of Popularizers”: Paideia, Pluralism, and the Culture Wars, 1978–1988

Adler’s bout of postmodern pessimism did not last for long. He found something of a talking cure for his listlessness by focusing on the only subject apart from philosophy that perennially motivated him: education. Through the creation of a new community of discourse, the Paideia group, he found fresh energy for a new decade of meaningful work. Adler would bring a bit of Hutchins with him into that effort—an effort that became a quest at once Quixotic, populist, and symbolic. Adler would state several times that his goal as an education reformer was to implement a Hutchins slogan, from 1953, that condensed his educational philosophy into a sentence: “The best education for the best is the best education for all.” That statement became one of the prominent introductory parts of Adler’s best-known education reform product, *The Paideia Proposal*.¹ Hutchins, then, became a guiding light for Adler’s new community of educators in their dialogues about the field all through the 1980s.

What of great books? How did the actions of this new group help or hurt the great books idea? For Adler a new work of philosophy catalyzed his great books promotional work. His first popular success in this period of renewal came through a 1978 book promoting his favorite classical philosopher: *Aristotle for Everybody*. Interest in that work allowed Adler to build a media presence where he discussed the great books, education, and philosophical issues during interviews on shows like William F. Buckley’s *Firing Line*. When those appearances were combined with his recently released essay compilation, *Reforming Education*, as well as his later work on the Paideia program, Adler became something of an “Educator for Everybody.” He began to dream anew about democratizing culture through education. He would do this by championing the liberal arts both positively and formally, but also negatively as a means fighting anti-intellectualism.

In addition, it is in this era that one clearly discerns in his writings the Great Books Pluralism that had surfaced with the 1972 revision of *How to Read a Book*. In terms of the formal educational establishment, Adler's next move involved the conception and promotion of the above-mentioned Paideia education reform group for schools. This was connected to the great books idea through a seminar component that eventually morphed into a freestanding slice of the Paideia effort called the "Wednesday Revolution." Altogether, these efforts helped underscore great books as a democratic cultural form. Indeed, by early 1983 one thoughtful commenter could declare that "'liberal education' is in vogue again, and the classics are back in fashion."²

Adler's efforts were sometimes undermined and aided by a bigger phenomenon: the "Culture Wars," or "Cultural Wars" in Daniel Bell's phrasing. This had variable effects on the history of the great books idea. For instance, after a 40-some year flirtation with Christianity Adler finally converted in 1984. His earlier Thomistic period had already gained him a Catholic readership. But his new writings—particularly *How to Think About God* (1980), *The Angels and Us* (1982), and *Truth in Religion* (1990)—also found an audience with Evangelical Christians and the Religious Right.³ This enabled private Christian education institutions, and homeschoolers, to become a niche for the great books idea. Beyond Christian education, the Culture Wars often involved battles over educational methods, curricula, and goals—reform, in a word. Because of this, Adler and his community of discourse, and the great books idea as a consequence, became ensnared in the Culture Wars as the 1980s progressed. This culminated in the Stanford Debates of 1986–1988. In the meantime, the great books idea recovered, for a short time, from its 1970s malaise through both Adler's newfound enthusiasm and a newfound ideological concern for Great Books by conservatives.

The Culture Wars: An overview

What are the Culture Wars? According to Daniel Rodgers, they were about warring ideas, as well as issues of "fluidity and choice" versus "centers and certainties"—even as they were fought over concrete cultural, educational, social, and political issues. Of special importance to Rodgers were two problems: the nature of one's identity in the midst of America's cultural diversity (especially gender to Rodgers, but also race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and class), and "which ideas of society might endure in an age of fracture." Another current included fears of American decline in relation to the larger world, meaning decline as a cultural, social, and military power.⁴

Inspired by Bell and Rodgers, I define the Culture Wars as the sometimes public fights over the symbolism and meanings, attached to historical and present-day events, by varieties of nonintellectuals, politicians, and "institutional" intellectuals—purposely and accidentally separated from each other. Nonintellectuals often use religion as their bridge back into cultural, social, political, and economic terrain. Continuing Rodgers' points about identity and diversity, the Culture Wars often rotated around the notion of "multiculturalism," especially when conceived as a normative social theory and applied in education. Did multiculturalism promote cultural and political Balkanization—"little platoons of society," to quote Edmund Burke via Rodgers? Had multiculturalism replaced an already existing and healthy Horace Kallen-inspired cultural pluralism? Was an obsession over multiculturalism distracting us from real economic and political issues (the "politics of recognition," in Charles Taylor's words, versus the politics of inequality)? Finally, and most importantly in relation to the history of the great books idea, did multiculturalism displace excellence and rigor as curricular ideals in all levels of education? There is, of course, no *one* answer to these questions, which is what vexed liberals and conservatives alike. In any case, just when the Cold War sort of receded as a national paradigm for all-encompassing discourse (when Reagan and his allies would let it), the Culture Wars were ascendant.⁵

During the Culture Wars there were, to radically simplify matters, basically two opponents, or national currents, in conflict. Each would be significant participants in great book-related discussions. The most important current in relation to the late 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s was the strengthening of the New Right, or Conservatism. Underscoring the importance of the "New Christian Right" to this cohort, James Davison Hunter emphasized "worldview" and labeled this cohort "the orthodox." In relation to the intellectual terrain of conflict, Bell uses a Sidney Blumenthal phrase, "counter-intellectuals," to classify conservative thinkers. The literature on this movement has grown rapidly over the last 15 years, but it is useful to review the fundamentals. Although there are legitimate claims that the movement itself has roots in the 1920s and 1930s, there also exists some historiographic consensus that the movement as we know it began after World War II, building steam through the 1970s in particular. The postwar New Right's diverse ranks included older, or "paleo," conservatives and anti-Communists, as well as neoconservatives, libertarians, and all stripes of religious peoples including Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Mormons, Fundamentalists, and Muslims. Although strong elements of "whiteness" and "maleness" existed in the movement, it was nevertheless populated by diverse ethnicities, races, sexual preferences,

and prominent, thoughtful women. Apart from its intellectuals, most proponents of the New Right were geographically situated, generally, in the South, the Sun Belt, suburbs, and small towns.⁶

This diversity within conservatism unified in a “backlash” against changes in American culture (e.g., sexual norms), society (e.g., school integration, the feminist movement), politics (e.g., the Civil Rights Movement), and intellectual life (e.g., especially in higher education) that had occurred, in reality and otherwise, during and since the 1960s. Conservatives successfully helped mobilize resentment, fear, and anxiety about “the decade of tumult and change.” Despite the emotive and anti-intellectual connotation of “backlash” it should be reemphasized that the movement contained a number of intellectuals, particularly among the neoconservatives and within “think tanks.” Even so one could argue, as does Corey Robin, that conservatives successfully fused emotion and rationality into a kind of “reactionary mind” (or “metaphysical pathos”). One example of this, the “wisdom of repugnance” or disgust, was formulated by the conservative, Leo Strauss-inspired intellectual Leon Kass in 1997. Other old and new issues for conservatives included the perceived disintegration of America’s “common culture” and the trend toward cultural relativism (or multiculturalism). Many became great books advocates precisely because they believed, as did some 1950s traditionalist conservatives, those works supported a coherent Western tradition. More practically, some also frowned upon waning anti-Communism and the waxing size of government. They believed both trends were caused by years of “liberalism” (economic and otherwise) that began with New Deal and culminated in the Great Society programs of the 1960s. Religious and cultural conservatives also disapproved, as did Adler, of perceived trends toward self-indulgence, liberal sexuality, and secularism during the 1960s and the “Me Decade” of the 1970s (using Tom Wolfe’s memorable phrase). By the early 1980s these various conservatives had begun to coalesce into a comprehensive, and aggressive backlash that hit full-stride in the Culture Wars during the late 1980s.⁷

“Liberals” comprised the other prominent side of the Culture Wars. In some sense, this group can be defined simply in terms of what conservatives were not.⁸ But that simplification underplays the diverse range of individuals, groups, ideas, and endeavors among liberals. It helps to look at things from the point of view of intellectual history. Daniel Bell discerned the “New Left,” or Radicals, as distinct from both liberalism (i.e., center left). He also noted the renewal of liberal political philosophy in relation to the writings of John Rawls, Michael Walzer, Ronald Dworkin, and Amartya Sen. These writers and others helped develop broader thinking about process, procedures,

and communitarianism within liberalism. These developments correlate well with Adler's advocacy of a "great books liberalism" based on his philosophy of commonsense realism. Despite this intellectual diversity, over time the Culture Wars seemed to develop into a series of jousts between polarities, as between liberals and conservatives. The "Radicals" of the New Left and communitarian intellectuals were collapsed into the category of Liberal. Even Bell himself complicates his groupings by proposing that left-leaning intellectuals were mostly ensconced, as an "adversary culture" (Lionel Trilling's term), in institutions—universities, print media, broadcasting, and Hollywood. Neoconservatives saw this group as a "New Class" of liberal and left-leaning intellectual elites. On the other side were the aforementioned conservative "counterintellectuals" or "counterintelligentsia"—a category that fed the notion that "intellectualism" could, ironically, be equated with liberalism.⁹

Looking at liberals through the lens of economic class reveals more categorical diversity. Upper- and middle-class liberals were characterized as urban, elitist, pro-union, pro-affirmative action, pro-socialist, anti-free market, and irreligious if not atheistic. They were generalized as advocates of secularism (or "secular humanism"), of non-traditional sexuality and gender roles, of multiculturalism, and of a clinical form of social justice enabled by government regulation and New Deal economic programs. These were the liberals who, in the eyes of conservatives, leaned on experts and intellectuals to enact progressive programs.¹⁰

Things get more complicated when one looks at working-class, labor, and blue-collar liberals. First, there is the question of how many working-class liberals in fact existed in the 1980s? They are often characterized as aggrieved peoples—the "Silent Majority" of "good people" as Richard Nixon called them—who resented radical leftist behavior and were susceptible to backlash politics. They could be converted to conservatism on issues such as deregulation, affirmative action (or reverse discrimination), gun control, abortion, and government spending/waste. Potential conversions were enabled by the decline of union power and wages, particularly after 1973. By 1980 many former labor liberals had become "Reagan Democrats" who supported conservative social policies but still favored New Deal-style economic programs.¹¹ The category of "liberal," then, changed over time and across classes. We will see that, in many ways, it was the loss of readers in this category that hurt *Britannica*, pushed Adler to accept more conservative audiences, and allowed for reversion in defining the best strain of the great books idea.

To complicate further my proposed conservative-liberal dichotomy, the divide also breaks down when one closely scrutinizes various

ideological developments over the past four decades. Beginning in the 1970s, American neoliberals began to advocate for melding market mechanisms with traditional government and nongovernment programs. Some liberals, like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., also reacted negatively to a perceived overexuberance for multiculturalism. Conservatives supported large government subsidies for the farming and military industries. Liberals and conservatives spoke, at times, for limits on choice. Indeed, terms like “choice,” “freedom,” “markets,” “rights,” and “identity” crossed the divide between camps. Both sides also spoke of the “common good” as a universal aspiration (shaded differently, of course). As Rodgers noted in *Age of Fracture*, a “contagion of metaphors” traversed the boundaries of intellectual life in the last quarter of the twentieth century.¹² Given Adler’s “great books liberalism” of the early 1970s and the fact that conservatives would appropriate the great books idea by the 1980s, one might add “great books” to the crossover issues above.

The great books idea and Mortimer Adler became direct participants in the Culture Wars when battles over curricula occurred in schools, colleges, and adult education institutions. In the 1970s and 1980s, liberal educators had enlarged their view of humanities and social science curricula, and of the canon or great books idea, to include works of more recent and diverse origin. To liberals this expansion better accounted for America’s history and its current, multicultural society. Excellence, complexity, and rigor were not devalued as ideals. Rather, recognition and representation were prioritized in curricula by liberal educators when all other things were equal. Conservatives, however, both disagreed with this ideal and saw it as compromised in practice. They believed that older incarnations of great books curricula, including those developed by Adler, Hutchins, and their colleagues, were instilled with traditional values and fostered intellectual community—values that famed neoconservative Irving Kristol would remember later, in 1977 before the Culture Wars peaked, through a “golden haze.” The memory of a certain Adler and the great books represented stability, the idea of an objective common good, and the maintenance of a Cold War-era common culture based on Western values. For conservatives, it boiled down to a choice between cultural pluralism or a reverence for tradition. They wanted the Great Books Conservatism they associated with Britannica’s “Great Ideas.” And Adler represented, in fact, the conservative ideal to some degree—no matter his past and present inconsistencies, changed views, and liberalism. In the end, both liberals and conservatives believed that history (i.e., recent for liberals, premodern for conservatives) was on their side when it came to great books. This is why Daniel Bell wrote that “the most rancorous cultural war” was over the canon—over the great books idea.¹³

In this period, especially in the 1980s, the popularity of the great books idea—though not the Britannica set—increased, ironically, alongside a wider awareness of the idea's weaknesses as a democratic cultural form. The great books idea was alive, paradoxically, precisely because, as Rachel Donadio observed in 2007, "the multiculturalists won the canon wars" (a natural consequence of Nathan Glazer's ambivalent 1997 declaration that "we are all multiculturalists now"). Yet because of Culture Wars controversies, those expanded great books reading lists were less a part of the center of America's shared culture. Donadio rightly noted, however, that "the lines aren't drawn between right and left in the traditional political sense, but between those who defend the idea of a distinct body of knowledge and texts that students should master[,] and those who focus more on modes of inquiry and interpretation." Adler, as the great books' longest-tenured promoter, matters on this point. Perceptions of Adler, as an embodiment of the great books idea, depend, at times, on one's perceptions of the "complicated sense of the costs and benefits" of transformations in the canon.¹⁴ His actions and writings serve as a refracting lens in relation to the great books' ups and downs. This is important because Adler defended, not always consistently, both the great books as a distinct body of knowledge *and* great books discussion groups as a distinct mode of inquiry. His personal contradictions were woven into the fabric of the great books idea itself. His trajectory in the 1980s, therefore, embodied the trajectory of the idea.

"Flogging the Great Ideas": The popularizer on TV

After the publication of *Philosopher at Large* in 1977, and aided by the publicity it generated, Adler began a slow process of recovery from several 1970s setbacks. Those included his own pessimism, the deaths of colleagues and friends, negative perceptions of him and his work leveled by intellectuals (i.e., Gary Wills, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, John Cuddihy), and from bad publicity associated with Britannica (i.e., the FTC rulings). In the end, his public profile rebounded in the 1980s—he emerged as a true "philosopher at large"—before a spectacular flameout. As Charles Van Doren had predicted, Adler began to be viewed as a "monument" and a "national resource." This is not to say that Adler engaged in a purposeful campaign of rehabilitation. Rather, he reset and relaunched himself with populist visions for philosophy and, later, the great books idea. On the latter he set about applying his great book liberalism and the flexible form of list generation, for which he (and Van Doren) advocated in *How to Read a Book*, to school reform with the *Paideia Proposal*. Before *Paideia*, however, television helped in the process of recovery.

Adler appeared on television only a handful of times before the late 1970s. He seems to have devalued those infrequent appearances since they are only a small part of his 1977 autobiography. Those brief passages included recollections of time spent on local broadcasts in the San Francisco area, on the great ideas in the early 1950s, and the inclusion of pictures from appearances, in 1967, on *The Today Show* and a local Chicago program, *Kup's Show*. Another picture came from his first time as a guest on William F. Buckley's *Firing Line*. In the late 1970s and early 1980s new television appearances occurred. Bill Moyers and Adler interacted to create some programs that, in many ways, best represent Adler's populist effort to bring books, philosophy, and culture to the masses. But it was the relationship with Buckley that grew and endured, eventually resulting in 21 Adler appearances on *Firing Line*. From 1980 to 1993, the frequency increased to once or twice annually. Given Buckley's political interest those appearances came at a cost. For Adler that could mean that his interests were tainted by the Culture Wars, or that he might be perceived as a conservative intellectual. Those risks were attenuated by the fact that the show was known for its "unhurried and intelligent" conversation, as well as "careful ventilation of ideas" in an age when, as Daniel Rodgers observed, "ideas were made at every pore of society."¹⁵

Despite his negative feelings about the medium in relation to the highest forms of learning, Adler saw television's necessity for intellectual outreach and promotion. On top of his string of *Firing Line* appearances he made at least one more appearance on *Kup's Show* (Irv Kupcinet's long-running program) again in March 1980. Adler also appeared twice on *Chicago Tonight* in 1984 and 1987, both times interviewed by local celebrity John Callaway.¹⁶ In terms of national programs, in 1979 Adler appeared on *The Dick Cavett Show* and on *Bill Moyers Journal* to discuss *Aristotle for Everybody*. After Moyers program, which featured Adler in a seminar and walking Aspen in conversation with him, the host wrote that the show "drew a response of 15,000 letters in three weeks," including 10,000 transcript requests. The appearance also instigated the sale of at least 50,000 copies of *Aristotle for Everybody*.¹⁷

Adler again found success with Bill Moyers in promoting the *Six Great Ideas* (1981). Adler's *Six Great Ideas* carried forward his project of promoting a public philosophy based on Aristotelian thinking while being inclusive of the great books of the Western tradition. The title clearly referred back to the Britannica set and its *Syntopicon*. The book dealt with the ideas of truth, goodness, beauty, liberty, equality, and justice. Adler argued that the first three were ideas people "judge by," and the rest "ideas we act on."¹⁸ The intriguing addition, in light of post-1952 social and cultural changes, was equality.

Adler had worked with William Gorman, an associate at the Institute for Philosophical Research, to develop arguments about "equality" for an earlier, coauthored work, *The American Testament* (1976).¹⁹

In his 1982 review of the *Six Great Ideas* series, *New York Times* critic Walter Goodman called Adler the "Poobah of popularizers." Goodman cited Dwight Macdonald's poor view of Adler's work in the 1950s, and noted that Adler had been "flogging the great ideas" since the 1940s, "tirelessly quantifying, codifying, and categorizing" them. In critiquing the series, however, Goodman unexpectedly softened his tone:

The popularizer serves a valuable function in democracy; conveying big ideas from the academy to the populace is one of the more wholesome missions of the mass media. The highbrow disdain for the popularizer often betrays the envy or insecurity of those whose careers and self-esteem depend on their master of mumbo-jumbo. The question is always how much is lost along the way?²⁰

In positively assessing Adler's work, Goodman sympathized with the caught-in-the-middle plight of the popularizer. Adler possessed "a proprietary love of the classic great ideas and pushes them engagingly, with apt examples and without jargon." "His manner is hard-sell," Goodman added, but "he rarely talks down." Despite the love for Adler, Goodman denigrated the participants in Moyers' 1982 program (appendix 10) for their "fatuity and banality," as well as "obtuseness and tendentiousness." Adler himself later called them "patently exhibitionistic," and Moyers too thought poorly of them. Goodman concluded his review by calling Adler an "eloquent guide" to these six great ideas. Looking back in 1988, Moyers himself called the series a "television success."²¹

Building toward Paideia

While Adler continued to promote an Aristotelian and great books-based public philosophy in the 1980s, on television and in writing, it was his work in education—with a revamped community of discourse—that revived both his reputation and the status, temporarily at least, of the great books idea. This occurred within a larger, late 1970s discussion about education in the United States.

The history of education narrative for the period, in textbooks and otherwise, is that U.S. primary and secondary schools were in *decline* (reality notwithstanding). They were failing amidst the larger feeling of "malaise" articulated by Jimmy Carter in his famous July

1979 address. The critics cited numerous issues: problems with bus-ing and integration, a general decline in SAT scores (first reported in 1975), the failure of antiauthoritarian reforms instituted in the early 1970s, increased instances of cheating, and the relative incompetence in international comparisons of math and science scores. Because of these problems, historians of American education often chronicle the period from the 1970s to the present under the rubric of “reform.”²² Diane Ravitch, in her 1983 book *The Troubled Crusade*, added another problematic node with a pessimistic conclusion: “There was no turning back to the days when local school boards were near-autonomous and when higher education was as remote from the government as were churches . . . The new relationship between education and government was a problem, and . . . a challenge to critical intelligence.”²³ This set the stage for education intellectuals to apply their “critical intelligence.” That same year a prominent report entered the scene: *A Nation at Risk* (ANAR). This landmark study primarily criticized high schools by pointing out—in “flamboyant” and somewhat “alarmist” language—several risk factors endangering their future. It cited the decline in SAT scores, the rise of remedial courses in higher education, problems with illiteracy among youth and minorities, and deficient “higher order intellectual skills.” As Ravitch later reflected, the release of ANAR is the point where “states and the nation” began “to craft genuine curriculum standards in many subjects.”²⁴

A Nation at Risk confirmed the critics’ fears and deepened the sense of instability felt by conservatives with regard to the new dominant paradigm in education, namely, multiculturalism. To conservatives, educational excellence via high expectations and rigorous content had been sacrificed—presuming those ideals had ever been adequate—for the sake of access by a pluralistic society. The report emboldened conservatives (such as Allan Bloom) to recommend what they believed to be the best of traditional curriculums (i.e., “the great books”). It is worth noting that ANAR itself did not recommend the great books or any particular canon, but rather a “coherent” curriculum with a core focused on the “Five New Basics.”²⁵

Adler’s pre-Paideia response to these growing concerns occurred over a five-year period from 1977 to 1982. His first education-related publication for post-1960s audiences came in 1977 with a book of essays, *Reforming Education*. Edited by Geraldine Van Doren, *Reforming Education* collected older Adler pieces on the topic covering general principles in relation to adult and higher education. Proof that most of the essays were backward looking came in 1992 when Adler reflected that from 1952 to 1978, he “gave not a moment’s thought to the deplorable state of the nation’s K-12 schools.”²⁶ That drought ended

definitively with a 1979 *American Educator* article titled "Education in a Democracy."

The article contained several of the philosophical elements behind Paideia. Strong similarities between the article and *The Paideia Proposal* (1982) show that Adler's ideas decisively influenced the latter. The essay was also consistent, however, with a number of earlier themes in Adler's long-developed philosophy of education, especially as articulated in *The Common Sense of Politics*. Adler reminded his audience that the goal of a liberal education was to prepare students "for the continuation of learning after schooling has been completed." He cited John Dewey's admonition in *Democracy and Education* (1916) that "the only end to be served by any phase of education should be *more* education." The citation signaled an end to the 1940s-era feuds with Dewey on curriculum and content.²⁷ Using Dewey again as inspiration, Adler expanded on his radical proposition from *Politics* by arguing that all young people, except the "pathologically disabled," should be viewed as educable. That "all," he argued, was "based on an act of faith—a faith that underlies our commitment to constitutional democracy, the central principle of which is human equality and, with it, political and economic equality and educational opportunity for all." If we cannot affirm this "all," he continued, "we should...give democracy up because it is based on a fundamental mistake about human nature." In that case universal suffrage would be a dangerous delusion. Tracking turned out to be a prime enemy for Adler because it creates two populations within the school system, one for vocational and another for liberal arts education. He argued for liberal or basic education for all through the age of 16, followed by a four-year window for work training for those who desire that path.²⁸ These principles, clearly centered on equality in the polis, were the foundation of Adler's reform program. That program continued his dream of a democratized culture.

The great books entered as part of Adler's curricular vision. In light of his own conceptions of the great books idea, however, Adler made a concession in terms of delivery: the great books would have to be *related* to the "less gifted." This meant that, while retaining the principle that one should have to "reach up" for a book that is over one's current educational status, the degree of reaching up would have to be "proportioned to the capacity of the less well endowed." Adler still maintained that "discussing the great ideas as [they] are discussed in the great books is the ideal method of imparting acquaintance" with the liberal arts, but acknowledged that it would be "folly" to use "this material and this method...for the whole school population."²⁹

With his program, Adler was riding fault lines in his thought about the great books idea that had never been fully articulated, or

acknowledged, in his writings. These cracks created conflicts and confusion, in Adler and others, about the history, strengths, and weaknesses of the great books idea. What were these lines separating? As of the late 1970s and early 1980s there existed at least four discernible great books ideas in Adler's thought: the General Honors Approach, the Great Ideas/Syntopical Approach, Great Books Liberalism, and something near Great Books Pluralism. Each produced different lists and authors relevant to their contexts, but points of cultural, education, and political overlap exist. And other strains existed beyond Adler, such as Great Books Conservatism, the Straussian Approach, and Great Books Multiculturalism. But the four above competed and overlapped within Adler's own work.

At this point, it is important to review each approach. Proceeding chronologically, the General Honors Approach dated from John Erskine at Columbia in the 1920s and Adler's experiences with Hutchins at Chicago in the 1930s. This oldest strain, discussed in chapter 1, promoted deep, close reading and excellence in higher education (i.e., liberal education). The book lists produced were culturally Western, but drew from the ancient classics and modern works. The nondogmatic selection criteria for this strain seemed to include the greatness and reputation of the author via his (primarily) complexity of thought and writings. Elements of a larger adult education program appear, in Adler's lifetime, when Erskine's program is applied to the work of the People's Institute. No highly *rigorous* historical, political, or cultural philosophy seems to undergird the text selections. That said, a kind of American and Western cosmopolitanism seems to have driven Erskine, Adler, and Hutchins in that Americans needed to be rescued from their intellectual parochialism (or sense of exceptionalism) and anti-intellectualism in order to coexist peacefully with their Atlantic brethren. Adler's *How to Read a Book* promoted this approach for public consumption. That 1940 work, as well as its 1972 successor, was about the public educational process of reading individually, discussing books communally, and fostering good citizenship. Adler's book helped promote the movement and the Great Books Foundation.

The *Great Ideas/Syntopical Approach* dates from the late 1940s, and was discussed in chapters 2 and 3. This strain was materially constituted in what Adler produced for Britannica. That great books list was controlled by his thoughtful-but-subjective list of 102 Great Ideas, as well as the notion of a "great conversation." That product grew out of the dreams, of Adler, Hutchins, and others, of democratizing culture through adult education. This would occur both formally and communally via the Great Books Foundation, and informally and individually through Britannica's set. The latter was the introverted

autodidact's dream product—the kind that inspired visions of uninterrupted reading in isolation, either in a Thoreau-esque cabin in the wilderness or Crusoe-esque hut on a deserted island. Its book list covered all sorts of knowledge (science, social science, literature, philosophy, theology, history, etc.). Although prominent Western names and famous books populate the list, their selection was based on Adler's vision of a history of ideas founded on the thinking of Arthur Lovejoy. Despite Hutchins and Adler's work promoting world federal government, and despite the fact that the world had entered a new phase of global politics, the political ideology behind Britannica's set was, again, an American and Western cosmopolitanism. The editors' outside work promoting the United Nations, World Constitutionalism, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights makes this clear.

The third Adler strain, *Great Books Liberalism*, dates from the 1960s. This consisted of forcefully and objectively buttressing a globally aware mid-century liberalism. This approach was introduced in chapter 5. This project is mostly separate from Adler's work with Britannica, but bled into it at certain points, such as with the *Negro in American History* documents set, which supported Adler's growing concern for the idea of equality. The *Great Ideas Today* volumes also contain essays and shorter great books selections that support mid-century liberalism. In relation to Adler's own work, his writings from *The Conditions of Philosophy* (1965) to *The American Testament* (1975), which use great books selected from lists constructed during his General Honors and Great Ideas phases, support principles that can be retroactively attached to liberalism: racial and cultural tolerance, a positive view of the role of government, opposition to political anarchy, fighting anti-intellectualism, support for the welfare state, and an awareness of the world community. In Adler's mind, a liberal education based on great books promoted a responsible, communitarian-focused citizenship that kept adherents focused on progress, especially in relation to education and social ideals. One can find aspects of Great Books Liberalism in all but the earliest phases of Adler's thinking about the great books idea, especially where larger extra-educational structures (i.e., economics and institutions) are considered.

The fourth Adler strain, designated here as *Great Books Pluralism*, is the last and most relativistic in his thinking about the great books idea. This approach is something of an offshoot from Great Books Liberalism. Adler's explicit attention to pluralism dates from the early 1970s and first appears in chapter 6, especially in the growth-and-process language surrounding the "pyramid of books" in Adler and Van Doren's 1972 rewrite of *How to Read a Book*. A degree of relativism also appeared in the mid-1970s in Adler's rationale for the so-called "GB-20" selections—the twentieth-century additions

proposed by him on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1952 *Great Books of the Western World* release. It was then that Adler acknowledged “cultural parochialism” in his selections. As such, this approach exhibits pluralism-as-tolerance but no kind of multicultural celebration of difference. It was at this point in Adler’s own intellectual history that he appeared most in touch, relative to generational differences, with American social and cultural trends. It is noteworthy that he received little or no comment for his flirtation with cultural relativism at that time. Perhaps it seemed like common sense in the 1970s? Indeed, when conservatives later praised, before and after his death, Adler’s association with “the” great books, none noticed, or commented on, the strains of Adler’s thought that ran contrary to their own expectations. That is likely because even though Adler’s Great Books Pluralism continued in the early 1980s with his Paideia-related writings, it suddenly and dramatically ended after the late 1980s Stanford Affair and with the 1990 rerelease of Britannica’s set.

The existence of this final strain raises the question of what kind of pluralism existed in Adler’s thought during the Culture Wars. Evidence of an embryonic philosophy of pluralism dates to the 1950s, but it develops most fully in the late 1970s, as well in the Paideia Project and a slender 1990 book, *Truth in Religion*. The last stands as his most definitive statement on cultural diversity—as well as on globalism and globalization. Given that *Truth in Religion* prominently cites three lectures given in 1973, 1978, and 1989, and that Adler himself states that the book repeats things said in those lectures and in other books “in order to make advances” on earlier material, it is not anachronistic to use the book to retroactively help tease out his philosophy of pluralism.³⁰

Adler seems to have first addressed cultural pluralism in a 1957 panel discussion titled “How Much Unity Must a Pluralistic Society Have?” Despite the age, his notes reveal an advanced awareness of, and commitment to, cultural pluralism and diversity. In his contribution, he affirmed—anticipating John Rawls in the 1970s—that in democracies there should exist “unity in procedure,” or “dialectical unity,” that respects pluralism and diversity in the face of conformity and the enforced loyalty of the 1950s. Given the topic it should be noted that, in this paper, Adler never explicitly affirmed or denied Horace Kallen’s philosophy of cultural pluralism, as given in *Democracy versus the Melting Pot* (1915). That said, Adler’s lecture and his other writings through the 1990s affirmed something in the orbit of Kallen’s work. At the very least Adler approached Randolph Bourne’s iteration of Kallen that, in David Hollinger’s words, stressed the need for “dynamic interaction” between diverse cultural groups.³¹

Returning to the 1957 panel discussion, Adler spoke of both intellectual and cultural communities. He affirmed that individual "diversity" in a "cultural community" should "not only [be] accepted, but understood." In the wake of McCarthyism, Adler stood against the prevalent demand for "doctrinal," or political-ideological, unity as "incompatible with cultural pluralism." His call for liberal tolerance is clear. But Adler also registered opposition to "a certain type of liberalism or skepticism" that "accepts diversity as irreducible," holding "that no agreements at all are possible." Value or absolute moral relativism would not hold with Adler. Later, in 1990, he labeled adherents of relativism "doctrinaire liberals" even while affirming that "pluralism is desirable and tolerable in perpetuity" in relation to taste, personal preference, public policy, legislation, and "poetical truth."³²

Adler's opinions began to grow more nuanced by the early 1970s. This was when multiethnic education gained currency, in John Higham's words, as a kind of "ad hoc," imperfect policy response to racial and ethnic crises. Adler gave evidence, in 1973, of concurring with "structuralism"—the notion that many types of knowledge (e.g., identity) are socially constructed. This was perhaps influenced by his own sublimation of his Jewish identity, as well as his affirmation that skin color and other biological features were "accidents" (i.e., nonessential) in the Aristotelian sense. The nature of truth and error played a major role in Adler's view of cultural pluralism. "Pluralism is intolerable," he wrote, "only with respect to matters that are *wholly* or *purely* matters of truth—for example, mathematics" and the sciences. In 1978, he would write that "the logic of science and mathematics is... global, not Western." Returning to 1973, Adler asserted that the subjective cultural element should not be given "dominance over the objective." They are "supplementary to each other, each enriching human life and culture." He registered another caution in declaring that "cultural diversity should be tolerated (i.e., accepted as unavoidable) only in those areas in which the criteria of truth and falsity and the principle of noncontradiction do not apply—[i.e.,]... matters of taste (with conventions or customs in eating and in dress, with social manners, with styles in the fine arts)." Adler deplored "culturism," which he defined as "the acceptance or, worse, the promotion and defense of cultural diversity without observing the [difference]... between matters of truth and matters of taste."³³ It is abundantly clear that Adler's primary concern of the decade was how pluralism could negatively affect intellectual communities and the pursuit of truth. His issue was the pluralism of opinions and arguments rather than the social and cultural construction of identity.

But when Adler did turn his mind to those constructions, he spent most of his time emphasizing humanity's commonalities. This began

in the late 1970s and continued until the end of his public life. In 1978, he wrote that “the unity of man” preceded “all differences in nurture and . . . culture.” He reaffirmed this in 1989, adding, contrary to the French existentialists, that evidence from the sciences (hard and social) could be used to demonstrate that humankind’s special essence underlay its existence.³⁴ He also argued for unity based, in part, on an observed “transcultural” commitment to truth, again, in mathematics and the sciences. Or at least, he believed, other cultures assented to those truths by their use of technologies based on them. Adler also noted that his commitment to world federal government, to “the existence of world community,” required “a certain degree of cultural unity—unity of civilization.”³⁵

All of this pointed to Adler adhering, by the end of his life, to a philosophy of cultural difference that lay in the middle of a triangle of pluralism, universalism, and cosmopolitanism. His was definitely a “postethnic” ideology that emphasized shared values *over* “enclosures,” the politics of recognition, and differences in endowment and choice. But there were limits. Adler denied the legitimacy of, and need for, affirmative action as a social policy in education institutions. Multicultural or “multiethnic” pedagogy and ethnocentric curricula had no place in Adler’s education vision, whether in “token” form or of a higher order of complexity: he would never espouse a form of *Great Books Multiculturalism*. Adler did not, in Hollinger’s words, advocate an “eager exploration of diversity.” Adler’s leaning toward a practical cosmopolitanism is affirmed, however, through his long commitment to world federal government and human rights, both of which began in the 1940s. That said, Adler displayed no knowledge of advanced or special concepts related to a multicultural cosmopolitanism, such as “situational ethnic identity,” “double consciousness,” or “intersectionality” (i.e., among race, class, gender, and sexuality). In many ways Adler resembled Schlesinger in the latter’s *Disuniting of America* (1991). Like Schlesinger, Adler wanted the focus to be on cohesion, common ideals, and unity. And, like Schlesinger, Adler experienced an intense revulsion to “radical multiculturalists” (Higham’s term again) and multiculturalism as a normative social policy. But Adler’s pluralism was tempered, or aided, by an older cosmopolitanism and universalism more firmly rooted in a discourse on human rights. That was the philosophy of pluralism behind his education work.³⁶

Paideia: The group, the proposal, and the schools

Shortly after publication of the 1979 *American Educator* article Adler formed the Paideia group. Its name was derived from the Greek words “*pais* or *paidos*,” both meaning “the upbringing of a child.”

The term "paideia" had been in use in the English language since at least the 1870s, but Adler claimed to not remember how it was given to the group.³⁷ What kind of discursive community would it be? Who were its members? One founding member was Ruth B. Love, then superintendent of Oakland, California's Unified School District. After participating in an Aspen seminar in the 1970s, she had invited Adler to conduct a seminar at Oakland's Skyline High School—Adler's first experience teaching in a diverse public school. Apart from her professional distinctions, she is one of the first African Americans to appear in Adler's intellectual circles. A few years later she became the first African-American woman to be general superintendent of Chicago's Public School system. Skyline High School's principal, Nicholas Caputi, was also a Paideia group member.³⁸ Another participant was Jacques Barzun, a longtime friend with whom Adler first conversed about the idea of forming the group. Adler and Barzun held long-shared opinions "about the sorry state of education and culture in the United States." Several other familiar names from Adler's past work were group members, including Otto Bird, Clifton Fadiman, and Charles, Geraldine, and John Van Doren (see appendix 11 for the complete member list).³⁹ At least seven of the group's 22 total members came into the project with significant shared experiences and philosophies in relation to the great books idea.

Given Adler's personality and history of independence, it is not surprising that he later downplayed the group's contributions in his memory. When Barzun reviewed a draft of Adler's second memoir, *Second Look*, he had to tweak Adler on the group nature of the Paideia project. Barzun conceded that Adler was "'the onlie begetter' organizer and missionary" but reminded him nevertheless that the group "met several times, wrote position papers, and in discussion supplied ancillary ideas and formulas." Adler was reminded that Barzun himself "edited the publications, much of the Manifesto being at first rather too angular and vol[ume] 2 full of disparities of style and inconsistent views." Barzun did "not ask to be cited," but rather encouraged Adler to avoid conveying "the idea that you drew up a plan and got 22 stooges to sign their names in approval."⁴⁰

After nearly three years work the group, with Adler as its main signatory, published *The Paideia Proposal* in 1982. Much in the *Proposal* anticipated the recommendations that appeared in *A Nation at Risk* the next year. The "risks" in both correlated almost exactly: parents' concern for "the decline in quality of public schooling"; teachers' concern for the decline in discipline; school boards' concern for "the flight of middle-class children" from public to private schools; college administrators' concerns about "remedial education"; taxpayers' concerns for efficient spending by elected officials; employers' concerns

about “productivity”; labor leaders’ concerns about workers’ “skills”; minority groups’ concerns about gaps in the quality of education; military leaders’ concerns about “brainpower” for using increasingly “sophisticated weaponry”; and American citizens’ concern about the “prospects of a democracy” where declining numbers vote and few “understand the great issues of our time.”⁴¹ This last concern foreshadowed *Nation at Risk’s* anxiety about the development of “higher order intellectual skills.”

The *Proposal* contained the approximation of a practical program, but most of that came out in subsequent publications, especially *Paideia Problems and Possibilities* (1983) and *The Paideia Program* (1984). As the idea document, the *Proposal* asserted that there were three modes of teaching and learning: *didactic*, or the acquisition of organized knowledge; *coaching*, or the development of intellectual skills; and *Socratic*, the enlarged understanding of ideas and values. Although focused on the liberal arts, the *Proposal* allowed for auxiliary studies such as physical education, health, and one year of job exploration. It also advocated for the continuation of preschool programs such as Head Start. These were proposed in the context of equal quantity (12 years) and quality (leveling of curriculum) of schooling for each student.⁴² The *Problems* book contained 31 questions (appendix 12) divided into four categories as follows: (1) “The recommended curricular framework”; (2) “The applicability of the program to students and their reaction to it”; (3) “Teachers and teaching”; and (4) “Matters of organization, administration, and financing.”⁴³

The *Program* introduced essays by Paideia group members on subjects such as: “the conduct of seminars”; coaching; “didactic instruction”; the various subjects to be taught, such as English, Math, History, Social Studies; and the physical structure and organization of a Paideia school. Not surprisingly, in light of Adler’s history with the great books idea and the Paideia group’s composition, the *Program’s* Appendix contained lists of recommended reading for, respectively, ages from five to nine years (grades K-4), ages from ten to fourteen (grades 5-9), and ages from fifteen to eighteen (grades 10-12). These lists comprise the most challenging books—the great books—still accessible to the respective age groups.⁴⁴ The phrase “great books,” however, was virtually absent from the three Paideia volumes.

Why? One obvious explanation could be 1970s-era negative perceptions of Adler, Britannica, and great books generally. Another reason for downplaying the great books idea was an awareness of the larger ideological shift in education philosophy from pluralism to multiculturalism. The absence of the term “great books” in the *Proposal* indicates a cognizance that the idea may have seemed out-of-step with professional educators by the early 1980s. One of the scripted

questions (#2) in *Problems* contains the closest reference: "Does not *The Paideia Proposal* amount to little more than a call for the restoration of a classical education, its only novelty being that it advocates giving such an education to all the children instead of only to some—the college-bound?"⁴⁵ In answering this, the group directly addressed the difference between "classics" (defined as ancient Greek and Latin works) and "great books" but denied any program of traditionalism. Still, they hedged in favor of Great Books when they wrote: "It is quite misleading to identify the reading of some great books—or, for that matter, any discussable books that are not textbooks (which are obviously undiscussable)—as a return to the classics." The group hoped to demarcate a boundary between its work and backwards looking, antimodern classicism. Adler and his associates did not want to be labeled as "guardians of tradition" or dismissed as another back-to-the-basics reform movement. Then again, they had to appear reformist enough (i.e., "Manifesto") to excite the imagination of educators and unhappy parents.⁴⁶

Public awareness and promotions of *The Paideia Proposal* came quickly. In August 1982, Albert Shanker composed a paid advertisement in favor of Paideia for the *New York Times* in his "Where We Stand" column. Next month *Time* magazine covered the *Proposal* and excerpts were published in *The Rotarian*. Adler appeared on Buckley's *Firing Line* in November to discuss it.⁴⁷ Notoriety came quick enough that, in September, Adler the "philosopher entrepreneur" had already upbraided Albert Litewka, Macmillan's president and publisher:

In the week of the TIME review (which I assured you we would get), Macmillan is out of stock, the bookstores are crying for books, and our phones here [at the Institute for Philosophical Research] are ringing from all over the country... Macmillan clerks [are falsely replying]... that the book doesn't exist. I thought you... understood that [we]... would have... no difficulty in selling 50,000 copies of the paperback—probably 100,000. In the weeks ahead, I am going to be on national TV, radio, and at large press conferences in a half dozen cities, where I will also do local radio and TV. I... do all this PR... and... Macmillan fail[s] to back me up.⁴⁸

Ever conscious of sales and promotion, Adler might have made an excellent publisher were it not for his deeper concern for writing, philosophy, and education.

In the course of promoting Paideia, Adler also revealed, in a rare occurrence, his on-the-ground political inclinations in relation to the 1984 presidential election. With a June 1983 letter to Warren Spannaus, former Minnesota Attorney General and friend of the

Democratic Party's presidential candidate, Walter Mondale, Adler forwarded copies of the *Proposal* and *Problems* inscribed to Mondale. Adler offered his services: "Please tell Mr. Mondale that I am at his disposal at any time or place to help him to carry on this important debate with Ronald Reagan, or anyone else, in the campaign for nominations and in the next Presidential campaign." Note the any-time-or-place imperative. No record exists of whether Mondale accepted the offer. But this came in a year where the Democratic candidate was trounced. Mondale received 37.6 million votes to Reagan's 54.5 million, and lost the Electoral College 525 to 13. Despite the portrayal of Reagan, by his handlers, as "the personification of all that is right with or heroized by America," the offer shows how Adler could not be comfortably boxed into party polarities.⁴⁹ Great Books Liberalism indeed.

Despite Adler's personal politics, conservatives such as Diane Ravitch (at that time) and Linda Chavez found comfort in Paideia and the great books idea. They took solace in Paideia's goal of raising standards and maintaining a curriculum that still contained traditional readings. Ravitch took great pleasure in being involved with the Paideia group in the mid-1980s. As a professional historian and educational critic, Ravitch told Adler that she despaired of education professionals waiting "for 'the public' (and sometimes for the 'the students') to tell them what they should teach."⁵⁰ Linda Chavez, a prominent conservative columnist, explained her support for great books-based school curricula in the context of chastising the San Francisco public school board for imposing "a racial quota for authors on the required high school reading list." Chavez believed that "the universal truths we learn from great literature... transcend [identity] categories and teach us something enduring about the human condition." After recalling how her father bought her a Britannica *Great Books* set at the age of 13, she wrote: "Thankfully no one thought to tell me that the authors of such books were all dead, white males with whom I had nothing in common."⁵¹ Despite Chavez's Culture Wars rhetoric, the takeaway here is that she and Ravitch believed that common universal values (i.e., "the human condition") preceded and superseded recent ideology and social context.

But, in his external discussions of Paideia, Adler tended to concentrate on its underlying democratized view of education in contrast to other proposals. In the aforementioned letter to Spannaus, Adler drew a hard line between the radically democratic nature of Paideia and the narrowness of *A Nation at Risk*:

The commission's report (a) did not tell us anything we did not already know about the dismal condition of public education in the United States, (b)...was woefully inadequate, and (c)...was

outrageously elitist...It was concerned mainly...with the college-bound [high school] students...A truly democratic reform of our system...would have considered *all* twelve years of basic schooling...and also *all* the children in our public schools...That *The Paideia Proposal* does.⁵²

Adler repeated his elitism charge in an emphatic, nine-page letter to Ernest L. Boyer in November 1984. At that time Boyer was president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Adler wrote to argue against Carnegie commissioning a study to confirm the findings of a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) panel chaired by William Bennett. The report of Bennett's panel, entitled "To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education," was due out the next month. Adler argued to Boyer that the Bennett report's flaws mirrored those of *A Nation at Risk*: it was "evidence of the apparently incurable elitism" in American education in that it was "concerned *solely*" with higher education. In contrast, Adler pointed out that the only place for general education reform was where it would effect the quantitatively greatest, most democratic change: at the K-12 level. (Aside: Adler seems to have disliked William Bennett. In January 1988, he wrote the *New York Times* to criticize Bennett's proposal of an ideal high school curriculum.)⁵³ Adler's charge of elitism became a theme that recurred later, in the context of higher education, in his criticism of Allan Bloom.

Adler grew confident enough in *Paideia's* growth and prospects that he hazarded more explicit connections between it and the great books idea in early 1983. In an article for the *American School Board Journal*—unfortunately titled "Revive the Classics"—he recalled that his interactions with Ruth Love, when she superintended Oakland, California, schools, involved seminars whose great books contents mirrored those Adler had used for 30 years at Aspen Institute Executive Seminars. He relayed that he had recently conducted a similar seminar with Aspen high school students. Adler emphasized that the "average or slightly above average" students participating "did remarkably well." He believed that he "could conduct the same kind of seminars with students in the lower third of the normal distribution curve for intelligence *if* those students had demonstrated proficiency in reading." He conceded that this age range of students should be given "reading materials" that are "seldom more than 50 pages...and usually fewer than 30," but still "very rich in content"—preferably "philosophical texts, not merely factual or informational." And the moderator-discussion lead—"principal inquirer" for these seminars must "imitate Socrates, especially the calculated irony with which [he] pretends not to know the right answers" and "must always

ask, Why?" This was Adler's view of democratized culture through education: a "first among equals" in the lead, modeling Socrates (and John Erskine and himself) discussing complex texts. He even suggested that this method—"shared inquiry" as trademarked later by the Great Books Foundation—could be propagated via television and videotape.⁵⁴ It is a representative article, even down to its title which confused Great Books with the classics.

Paideia's critics

Growing awareness among educators and intellectuals of *The Paideia Proposal* continued in late 1983 when the *Harvard Educational Review* published a symposium on it. The symposium noted that the Paideia group contributed to "the great debate of the 1980s: How shall we structure educational reform so as to promote both equity and excellence?" Symposium participants purposed to examine the *Proposal's* "underlying assumptions regarding the structure of democratic society and the traditional purposes of education." Contributors, with their 1983 affiliations, were Diane Ravitch (Teachers College in Columbia University), Ronald E. Gwiazda (Boston Public Schools), Floretta Dukes McKenzie (District of Columbia Public Schools), Mary Frances Berry (Howard University), Martin Carnoy (Stanford University), Steven M. Cahn (City University of New York), and Adler himself as respondent.⁵⁵

The reviews were predominantly unfavorable. Two panelists affirmed the *Proposal* and four offered scathing criticism. Surprisingly only one panelist, Ravitch, mentioned great books. She and Cahn viewed the *Proposal* favorably. First the positives. Ravitch approved of its "implicit message" that "purposeless is not enough"—that "first principles" must be a higher concern in curriculum design. Even so, she inadvertently undermined her positive review by, unlike the rest, reducing the *Proposal* to a strategic product of Adler's thinking (e.g., he "chose to make his view appear close to the mainstream," he "refrained from mounting an attack" on progressive educators, etc.). Her citations of the great books were mostly historical, though she asserted that both Adler and Dewey agreed that "children needed to read, . . . to understand the past, [and] . . . to experience literature." For his part, Cahn believed "the *Proposal's* shortcomings are heavily outweighed by its merits." He approved of its perceived "emphasis on the acquisition of factual knowledge."⁵⁶

The four symposium critics uniformly disparaged the *Proposal's* neglect of context, historical and present, in terms of the social, political, and economic pressures brought to bear on schools. McKenzie called it "naive" on each front. Berry questioned the "inadequate

view of educational problems" underlying the *Proposal's* promised outcomes. Carnoy's semi-Marxist analysis assessed the *Proposal* as misleading for choosing "to ignore the undemocratic workplace as a primary influence" on the families of unprepared children. With that, Berry asserted that even the *Proposal's* goal of an equalized curriculum, of equalizing the quality of schooling, would not directly lead to more equal outcomes in quality of life. Gwiazda argued that "schools do not mold society as much as mirror it." The Paideia group, however, created an "inverted pyramid" of pressures that put "all of the weight of the point . . . unfairly on the public schools." The group did not see the increased demands, noted also by McKenzie and later by historians of education like William J. Reese, that society had placed on schools since the 1960s.⁵⁷

Gwiazda added, in diametric opposition to Ravitch and in no positive sense, that the *Proposal* was "deduced from principles rather than induced from facts"—from context. To him it was "a kind of educational Reagonomics," asking "for our dogged faith . . . regardless of facts that may stand in contradiction." McKenzie criticized the *Proposal* on four counts: the elitist composition of its authors ("noted college presidents, 'think tankers,' and foundation officials"), its "idyllic" vision of education, its relative lack of "direction" for reaching that vision, and, perhaps worst of all, "its wholesale condemnation of present educational practices." The last, she argued, "erodes the public confidence vital to any attempts at educational reform." Echoing points from each critic, Carnoy asserted that the Paideia group's approach to reform was "disquietingly—almost consciously—naive . . . analytically misguided and politically misleading."⁵⁸ These critics believed something more than a mere *academic* education revolution was needed to solve the crisis of overly high expectations afflicting public schools.

Writing for "his associates," Adler believed that many of the questions and criticisms raised in the symposium had already been answered in *Paideia Problems and Possibilities*. Since the second book appeared two months before the publication of the symposium and his response, the implication was that the symposium was already out of date. Despite this, Adler judged that "most of the essays show something less than a close reading" of the *Proposal*, making "inaccurate reports" of its contents and missing other points. Adler defended "long deliberations" conducted by the "eminent scholars" comprising the Paideia group. He also noted, but elected to "pass over all [the group's] unsupported assertions . . . concerning the quality of public school education." Even so, he asserted that "mountains of evidence" existed of poor quality. Despite these complaints, Adler regarded six topics from symposium contributors as legitimately noteworthy: vocational training, manual training, social and economic reform,

remediation, individual differences, and public cost. He briefly elaborated on each in his reply. Finally, he did argue, returning to the charge of the group's neglect of social context, that the group believed in an "interdependence" between the education, economic, and social spheres. This echoed Adler's writings in *The Common Sense of Politics*—his Great Books Liberalism period. Despite that interdependence, the group believed education was the causal agent; it would "most effectively initiate" changes in the economic and social spheres.⁵⁹

Other criticism would arise a few years later. In his 1988 work on class and gender in education, Michael Apple called the *Proposal* "eloquent" but "unsatisfactory." He began, in nondenigrating but still skeptical fashion, by classifying the *Proposal* as a "slogan system." By this he meant that it possessed a "penumbra of vagueness," but still owned an "ability to charm" and contained enough specifics for "practitioners here and now." Even so he observed many weaknesses in relation to elites and nonelites. The *Proposal* ignored gender in the teaching force, which added an "elitist element" that undermined "a possible base of support for its recommendations." It was also elitist in that it ignored how "basics" are defined by the working class and significant numbers (30 percent) of students themselves.⁶⁰

Apple noted, furthermore, that the *Proposal* neglected both "government officials" and "capital" in relation to its sponsors. On the latter Apple believed that "traditional cultural forms" in education (i.e., liberal arts and ideas) "are not progressive for capital and need to be replaced by ideologies of individualism," as well as "respect for possessions." Apple believed, much like the Symposium critics, that the *Proposal* would be ineffective in the long term because of its neglect of class considerations—again, the larger social and economic context. And Apple's Marxist analysis would be proven right in the long term in that Paideia would not advance, in terms of quantitative growth, much beyond its late 1980s peak. Apple was also right in the near term when he noted, without knowledge of Adler's letter to Spannaus, that no matter the *Proposal's* weaknesses, Adler was likely no supporter of the current capital-power structure, meaning "Reagan and his ideological allies."⁶¹

Paideia's expansion

In the near-term enthusiasm for Paideia grew in spite of these criticisms. By 1984, Adler even developed a separate Paideia letterhead for his 101 East Ontario Street professional address—the home of his Institute of Philosophical Research. The next year he and Jacques Barzun began a newsletter, *The Paideia Bulletin*.⁶² A number of schools experimented

with and permanently implemented aspects of the Paideia program. This began, experimentally, even before the *Proposal's* release, with Ruth Love's Oakland District and Skyline High School in 1981. The first official Paideia school appeared in Atlanta in 1983. When Love became superintendent of the Chicago Public Schools, she brought her interest in Paideia with her. By 1985 four Chicago schools were participating: Nathan Goldblatt Elementary on the far West Side of Chicago; Austin Community Academy (Goldblatt's "receiver high school"); Roger C. Sullivan High in Rogers Park; and Joyce Kilmer Elementary (Sullivan's feeder school). Funding for these programs came from a \$345,000 federal pilot grant from the Office of Equal Educational Opportunity.⁶³ In 1986, four more non-Chicago Paideia schools were constituted: Glen Arden Elementary (Arden, N. C.); Shroder Paideia Junior High (Cincinnati, OH); Chattanooga School for the Arts and Sciences (TN); and Andover High (MA). For his part, Adler had "barnstormed the country" in support of Paideia, helping especially in Chicago, Chapel Hill, and Cincinnati.⁶⁴

These schools received positive press coverage, good official reviews, and more-than-satisfactory scholarly evaluations. For instance, an April 1985 *Chicago Tribune* story emphasized Paideia's ability to operate successfully in diverse settings, citing Sullivan High. The article noted positive evaluations of two senior students, a teacher, the school principal, and a school board member. Nearly all their comments centered on the changed teacher-student relationship. Bill Glickman, a veteran Sullivan history teacher who began the profession in the 1950s, commented, "It's more like a community of teaching." The classroom had become more democratized. The next month another *Chicago Tribune* story centered on Austin neighborhood schools and Kilmer Elementary. This piece put the focus on race—highlighting the reading of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and the fact that Austin was a "predominantly black" neighborhood. Ruth Love argued that Paideia was not a pretender to education reform because it actually "changes the base structure of education." A fourth-grader at Goldblatt, La Shandra Henderson, said that the seminars were "fun," and that "talking about the stories helps me to read better and to understand what I read." With Adler being mentioned in both stories, the Paideia group could not have asked for a better endorsement.⁶⁵

What of non-Chicago schools? Alice Huff Hart explored four in Arden (NC), Cincinnati (OH), Chattanooga (TN), and Andover (MA). After an extensive qualitative analysis, she concluded that each school benefited from the Paideia program. In her 12-point list of final conclusions, none were negative. Most confirmed that the Paideia's changes did, in fact, alter the schools' academic cultures:

eliminating tracking and vocational education, visibly changing the curriculum, reorganizing the school day, emphasizing critical thinking, and exposing students to a common body of knowledge. Hart cautioned with a somewhat self-evident comment: it is easier to organize a new Paideia school than to reorganize an old one into the Paideia format.⁶⁶ Even so, Hart's analysis helped legitimize the Paideia group's recommendations.

By 1986, Adler could observe, with only mild exaggeration, that "Paideia reform is going great guns." Even a Paideia critic, Michael Apple, would acknowledge in 1988 that Paideia was "widely discussed and sponsored." Adler made plans to expand the project, starting with an aspiration to get John Van Doren a contract with Macmillan to construct three sets of Paideia readings in accordance with the reading lists in *The Paideia Program*.⁶⁷ Adler also hoped to extend Paideia beyond schools and to adults—as per his earlier efforts with *How to Read a Book*, the Great Books Foundation, Britannica's *Great Books of the Western World*, and Britannica's subsequent *Great Books* offshoot projects, such as *The Great Ideas Today*. Calling the transition to adult learning the "culminating phase," or "Paideia for the autodidact," Adler wrote a book on his plan: *A Guidebook to Learning: For a Lifelong Pursuit of Wisdom* (1986).⁶⁸

Paideia continued to grow in the late 1980s. The University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill eventually became a special place for Paideia. The relationship began with the taping of demonstration seminars for a recent Adler book, *We Hold These Truths* (1987), by the University's Center for Public Television in January 1987. That experience led Adler to formulate something called the "Wednesday Revolution." This called for non-Paideia, K-12 public schools to devote three hours on Wednesdays to conduct Socratic-style seminars on great books. About 100 schools participated.⁶⁹ By 1988 the University had become home to the National Center for the Paideia Program, created by Adler and the University's President, William Friday. As of January 2006, the Center, renamed the National Paideia Center, reported an average of "50 formal school partnerships"—though only 23 were active. Just under 20 are active as of early 2013. Alongside with Paideia and its Center, by the early 1990s Adler believed that, in the preceding ten years, only TheodoreSizer's Coalition of Essential Schools had proposed anything as effective for the reforming of U.S. K-12 education.⁷⁰

Even with its success, Paideia was limited, ironically, by the very democratic culture in education it sought to infiltrate. The local means by which schools in the United States were funded and controlled meant there was no central apparatus to which one could appeal for larger changes. The long-standing emphasis on local control prevented any

kind of populist revolution in education—no matter its reasonableness or unreasonableness. The Paideia group neither sought, nor tapped into, any process of redistributing funds for schools that might favor its philosophy or practical programs. The Paideia group could perhaps effect change in "public education," to use Lawrence Cremin's distinction, but not widely in public schools. This is, in part, why Adler and Hutchins had to turn, in the 1940s, to Daniel Boorstin's idea of "consumption communities" to propagate the great books idea. Democracy in the United States responds not only to ideas but also to power and funding—politics, in a word. No dream of a democratic culture, no matter its merits, could succeed without political power.⁷¹

Whatever the limitations of Paideia, Adler relished his newfound role as a populist public intellectual, adult educator, philosophical sage, great books popularizer, and promoter of lifelong learning. He continued to write education-oriented books, such as the rerelease of *Reforming Education* (1988), and articles, including several for *The Paideia Bulletin* in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He also continued to moderate, with Charles Van Doren, a long-standing great books class in Highland Park, Illinois.⁷²

Adler's work in philosophy still garnered some attention from the popular press and the populace. In addition to the aforementioned television programs featuring Adler and his books, *Time Magazine* ran complimentary articles about him and two of his books, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (1985) and *We Hold These Truths* (1987). Adler's favorite example of his effectiveness as a popular educator-philosopher derived from some correspondence with a group of plumbers in Utah. Headed by David Call, the plumbers began reading Adler's works in 1984 after viewing Moyers' program on the *Six Great Ideas*. Call, a Mormon, even sent Adler a manuscript wherein he "Mormonized" Adler's thought for an apologetic piece. Macmillan reprinted two of Call's letters, in full, in Adler's second autobiography, *A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror*.⁷³ Another enthusiast of Adler's work, Max Weismann, formed a nonprofit education institution in 1990 based on ideas forwarded in Adler's *Time of Our Lives*. Located in Chicago, that institution was named the Center for the Study of the Great Ideas (CSGI). To this day the Center continues to promote Adler's work.⁷⁴

In light of the fact that *We Hold These Truths* covered "the ideas and ideals" of the US Constitution, it is perhaps not surprising that Adler ventured into public political commentary in 1987. The Culture Wars topic of the year was Robert Bork's nomination for the Supreme Court. In a *Wall Street Journal* editorial, Adler wrote that the nomination ought to be opposed not strictly because of Bork's politics or prior judicial decisions, but because of his "positivist philosophy of

law." Supreme Court Justice William Brennan praised Adler's analysis, writing to Adler that "it was so very, very right." Adler likely gained Brennan's notice through Justice Harry Blackmun, who wrote the forward to Adler's *We Hold These Truths*.⁷⁵ Adler's foray into the Bork controversy demonstrated, as with *Nation at Risk* and Bennett earlier in the 1980s, a lack of full communion with conservative causes. But that perception would be put to the test at the end of the decade as the Culture Wars rhetoric escalated.

Conclusion: Great Books renewed in higher education

The feeling of crisis and decline represented so well in *A Nation at Risk* also extended, in some degree, to higher education. Pessimism pervades narratives that cover, in full and part, the history of higher education in the twentieth century—for example, Philip Gleason's *Contending With Modernity*, Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* (1987), and John Patrick Diggins' *The Rise and Fall of the American Left* (1992).⁷⁶ Only Lawrence Levine's optimistic *The Opening of the American Mind* (1997), which praised the benefits of pluralism in higher education, stands opposed to those accounts. Conservatives took a dim view of the status of colleges and universities. *Closing of the American Mind* caused the biggest stir. Bloom, moreover, advocated the great books as an antidote. Before analyzing *Closing* and the events that ensued—events that set the stage for Adler's final act as a great books promoter, it is useful to know that the great books idea was on the rise in higher education well before 1987. Indeed, Paideia and the larger rise of multicultural curricula had, ironically, already created a reactionary space in higher education for great books programs where they had not existed before.

Despite the efforts of Adler and his community of discourse during the 1930s and 1940s, the great books idea made few immediate inroads in higher education. The scholarship on the subject is incomplete, but it appears that the success of the great books idea at Columbia University and University of Chicago inspired other institutions to only experiment with great books programs. For example, Scott Buchanan helped create programs at Fisk University and Springfield (MA) College. Others came into being around the time of the publication of Britannica's set, including noteworthy programs at Ball State University (established 1959), Boston College (1959), Fordham University (1955), St. Mary's College of California (1955), St. Mary's University (1956), Shimer College (1950), University of Minnesota (1950), University of Missouri (1955), University of Montana (1950s), University of Notre Dame (1950), and Wesleyan University (1959).⁷⁷

Whether they began prominently or as experiments, many college-level great books programs were modified, in trouble, or moribund by the 1970s. Mundelein College, formerly a Catholic women's institution in Chicago (absorbed by Loyola Chicago in 1991), provides a case study of the twists and turns of great books and great books-related programs. In the 1938–1939 academic year, during the height of the Chicago Fight, Mundelein's English department began offering an upper division course, open to all students, entitled "Colloquium on Great Books." Its course description read: "Class analysis and discussion of great books selected by instructor in consultation with class." After 20 years, in 1958 it morphed into an "Honors Symposium" where "students may study one of the great books as a core book or select a great idea and trace its influences." After four years the course was retitled "Interdepartmental Symposium." In 1964, the description above changed terms from "great books" and "great idea" to "significant book" and "major issue," respectively. One year later, in the 1965–1967 course catalogue, the same course morphed into "Great Issues: An interdisciplinary course which explores in depth some current issue in the light of its philosophical, sociological, and religious implications." In the 1967–1968 catalogue, the course was gone, and all honors and interdisciplinary courses were gone by 1971–1972.⁷⁸ In a minor twist, Mundelein would renew its connection to the great books in 1974 when Adler and Van Doren's rewrite of *How to Read a Book* was used in an experimental course for first-year students, "Strategies for Learning." The book stayed in the course until Mundelein merged with Loyola University Chicago in 1991.⁷⁹

By the 1980s a surprising small-scale renaissance had occurred with great books-based courses and curricula. Given the timing of their appearances, these were seemingly a counter to the increased presence of multicultural programs in higher education. In this renewal period for the great books, which extended into the 1990s, programs took various forms: core curricula, certificate programs, colloquia, institutes, seminars, honors programs, or even perhaps a separate college within a university. The list of US institutions that have added great books programs (by name or under pseudonyms) since the late 1970s and 1980s is extensive. Prominent examples, in terms of location, prestige, or otherwise include: Ave Maria University, Boston University, Brooklyn College, Catholic University of America, Clemson University, Hillsdale College, Luther College (and its course was coincidentally named Paideia), New York University, Pepperdine University, Princeton University, St. Olaf College, Temple University, Washington University, and Yale University.⁸⁰ There can be little doubt that soldiers of the Culture Wars, or at least fears of related

complaints about multiculturalism, helped bring about some of these great books innovations. The existence of great books programs could help a school counter conservative criticism about gender and ethnic studies programs.

Apart from internal curricular maneuvering in colleges, some entirely new institutions sprang up wholesale in the spirit of St. John's College with whole curricula based explicitly on the great books. These included Gutenberg College (Eugene, OR, founded 1979), St. Thomas Aquinas College (Santa Paula, CA, founded 1971), and the College of St. Thomas More (Fort Worth, TX, founded as St. Thomas More Institute in 1981).⁸¹ These institutions shared a Protestant or Catholic Christian heritage. For some of these, great books reinforced the notion of a Bible-based, conservative, and traditionalist Western heritage. For others, however, it was more that the great books idea provided a kind of ready-made, unified curriculum. A great books curriculum could provide a distinct identity, or selling point, for schools with limited resources.

As a coda, by the early 1990s there was enough interest in great books and core-text programs at the college level that a secular professional organization, the Association for Core Texts and Courses (ACTC) in 1994, was created by two Temple University professors to serve the needs of college instructors. Despite the fact that the term "great books" is nearly absent from its history, mission, and promotional material, the ACTC's affiliated institutions and sponsors (i.e., Great Books Foundation and several of the colleges and universities mentioned above) reveal its connections to the great books idea.⁸²

Despite its secular professional nature, these colleges, and the ACTC, live within—consciously or not—strains of conservative educational thought. For instance, the ACTC's "Organizing Statement" echoes concerns for the loss of excellence by referencing that famous fragment from Matthew Arnold about the best in thought and culture. Here's the statement (italics are mine): "ACTC challenges both aimless curricular choice and the current dominance of vocational, professional and specialized curricula. ACTC is committed to the education of free citizens, equipped to conduct their public and private lives *informed by the best that has been thought and expressed in Western and other traditions.*"⁸³ This of course also echoes concerns expressed by Adler and his colleagues (i.e., vocationalism, professionalism, and citizenship). Many liberals shared those concerns during the Culture Wars. But another passage from the statement links, again consciously or not, the ACTC to a darker, more cynical strain of the Culture Wars: "At stake, we believe, is the soul of higher education in a democratic society." This is the language of another, much more famous advocate

for "the good old Great Books approach": Allan Bloom. It was *The Closing of the American Mind* that brought great books curricula and higher education into high relief a few years before the ACTC came into existence.⁸⁴ And it is by looking more closely at Bloom's book, as well as reactions to it, that one sees the full connections between higher education, the Culture Wars, the drive for democratic culture, Mortimer Adler, and his community of discourse.

8

“The Most Rancorous Cultural War”: Bloom, Adler, Stanford, and Britannica, 1988–2001

As the end of the 1980s approached Mortimer J. Adler served as merely a bit player in the Culture Wars. While his role was low-level, however, associations were accruing. His ongoing relationship with William F. Buckley, Jr., his work on education reform, his promotion of popularization of Aristotle, and his conversion to Christianity, accompanied by books on God and angels, had all given him a conservative sheen. Despite these accruals Adler had avoided any lasting, high-profile entanglements that might earn him the “culture warrior” label. Even when he ventured into the building fray, such as when he commented on the Robert Bork’s nomination to the Supreme Court in the *Wall Street Journal* in November 1987, few took notice. He earned no public rebuke from conservatives.

The beginning of the end of Adler’s bit-player status occurred in the spring of 1988 when he publicly needled Allan Bloom over the contents of *The Closing of the American Mind*. Adler did not offer immediate commentary on what would become known as the Stanford Debates as they occurred. But that infamous academic tug-of-war over the canon, Western civilization, and multiculturalism earned several ex post facto condemnations from Adler after the publication of the second, 1990 edition of Encyclopædia Britannica’s *Great Books of the Western World*. Indeed, the release and aftermath of the set’s publication transformed Adler into a full-throated, reactionary ideologue and warrior in what Daniel Bell called “the most rancorous cultural war” over the canon.¹ Adler’s anticipation of a negative reception to the set’s contents transformed him from a promoter of Great Books Liberalism and Pluralism into a Great Books Ideologue. That transformation appealed to conservatives, but undercut a wider appeal Adler had cultivated over the past 20 years. Adler’s embrace of the culture warrior role rendered the great books idea, by association,

into something preached and practiced by conservatives to defend tradition, guard Western culture, and uphold Christian morality. The educational process of discussion, of shared inquiry, that held wide appeal was overshadowed by book lists, purported contents, demographics of authors, and battles over the canon. Great books became an idea to be discussed on its own rather than groups of complex, excellent books (whose group boundaries could shift) and whereby one built, via the process of discussion, a shared cultural literacy. Great books would become a seemingly rigid curriculum of fragmented parts to be memorized for show, or for a school test.

Adler's transformation colored all of his prior work, no matter the merits and wider universal appeal of the older liberal causes he had espoused. Rather than bracket and praise portions his earlier work in relation to its real value, the historiography and remembrances by less sympathetic thinkers portrayed Adler as an out-of-touch, traditionalist reactionary who had always sought to pull the commonweal to the right. He was no longer a respectable public intellectual who held wide appeal for large chunks of the twentieth century. Adler's dream of creating a democratic culture through the great books idea—a dream shared by many of his colleagues over a long period of time—would be buried under an avalanche of Culture Wars associations. Adler's passing, in 2001, left the great books idea without a singularly gifted promoter even while his reactionary turn still colors the educational politics of great books. Except for Bloom, for a period of time, no public intellectual in the late twentieth century achieved Adler's prior wide fame as a great books promoter. Even so, the idea quietly lives on in all kinds of education circles, public and private.

Bloom, Adler, and the Straussian approach

Before Adler created his own conservative legacy, he would first quarrel with a prominent Great Books Conservative: Allan Bloom. The occasion was the 1987 publication of *Closing of the American Mind*. Its subtitle telegraphed its topics: "How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students." If the great books idea had established some degree of flexibility in the minds of educators and intellectuals up to that point, Bloom undermined that perception. His work reinforced the false notion that great books were the essence of a widespread, traditional core curriculum in higher education that was undermined by ungrateful, unappreciative 1960s-era nihilist rebels favoring multiethnic curricula. Indeed, Bloom actively bundled his support for "the good old great books

approach" with a long lamentation about the 1960s generation, post-modern or poststructuralist philosophy, and multiculturalism. Some of this critique echoed Adler's bluster in *The Time of Our Lives* (1970), when emotions related to the upheavals of 1968 were fresh. In what historian Peter Watson called a "breathhtakingly ambitious" thesis, Bloom's intellectual history argued that the "openness" resulting from America's paradigm switch to multiculturalism in the 1970s was really a "great closing" affecting 1980s college students. This "closing" came from Bloom's view that equality caused "conformism," "homogenization," and "cultural relativism." Resulting was a loss of respect for "truth" and an absence of "common culture."²

Bloom saw the great books as a sacred form of Western civilization. This was a point seconded by William J. "Bill" Bennett during the Stanford Debates (1986–1988), when Bennett cited Bloom in a speech titled "Why the West?" Bloom's "great books conviction" was that the "perennially fresh" insights of "great writers" can effect "authentic liberation" for students, forestalling the closing of the American mind. The great books were part and parcel, for Bloom, of the "great tradition" of high thought that he believed American universities had fully joined after World War II. Despite his praise for the great books idea, Bloom found a way to denigrate Adler in the process: "Adler's business genius recognized [America's desire for equal access] and made a roaring commercial success out of the Great Books. He was not even concerned about the translations he used, let alone about learning languages." The bluster worked. Bloom's *Closing* ranked second on the *New York Times* hardcover, nonfiction bestseller list for 1987; it sold over 500,000 copies in one year's time.³

Adler noticed Bloom's cavil, calling it an "*infra dig* slur" and confessing it "motivated" him to compose a thoughtful critique. His reply began with Bloom's book, which Adler despised. His dislike was both philosophical and visceral. From Adler's recent (if temporary) position as an advocate for a radically democratized great books idea, he pegged Bloom as "elitist" and "ignorant," particularly of the history of the great books idea. The charge of ignorance gave Adler's point of view some uniqueness, but the charge of elitism was less so given Bloom's reputation and erudition—he was a classics professor at the University of Chicago. Charges of elitism were somewhat inevitable, if not foreordained, from Adler in particular. But the strong "ignorant" charge might seem surprising given their mutual opposition to value relativism and subjectivism. For his part, Adler had been arguing against the relativism of college students since the 1930s, though he explicitly denied that the problem should be attributed to Nietzsche. Adler believed that skepticism about moral values

resulted from philosophical positivism and the rise of “noncognitive ethics, as well as sociology and anthropology, due to their emphasis on the ‘ethnocentric predicament.’” Adler’s *The Time of Our Lives* also addressed this issue, and had reaffirmed his position later in 1982 by way of a review of Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*.⁴

Adler wrote Bloom—carbon copying Henry Grunwald and Ezra Bowen at *Time*—almost immediately upon seeing *The Closing of the American Mind*. Adler personally scolded Bloom for the book’s “remarkable myopia about the causes of cultural malaise in this country.” Adler also pointed Bloom to several of his books, and encouraged Bloom to make a more thorough study of the history of ideas and of the University of Chicago. A little less than a year later, in a letter to William Buckley, Adler called Bloom’s book “totally misguided” and—accepting a prior invitation—proposed discussing *Closing* and recent Paideia developments for an upcoming *Firing Line* program.⁵

Buckley obliged. During a May 1988 *Firing Line* episode Adler scoffed at Bloom’s attempt to be an “innovator” on the great books’ behalf. He charged Bloom with ignoring the history of the great books movement. Adler argued against Bloom exactly as he had challenged *A Nation at Risk* and Bennett: “It isn’t the failure of our colleges that serves democracy so badly. It’s the failure of K through 12.” Adler also faulted Bloom’s Straussian view of truth in the great books:

Truth is certainly ascertainable, but both [Bloom] and his master, Leo Strauss... teach them as if the great books contain the truth. In my...60 years of experience, I find more error in the great books than truth... For every single truth there is a multiplicity of errors. And knowing what that multiplicity of errors is, I think is indispensable to understanding the truth. Strauss before him and Bloom now, when they read books with their students, they indoctrinate them with the truth... and... [ignore]... contradictions... Every book is full of contradictions.⁶

This echoed a point Adler claimed he had made regularly since the 1930s about errors—in Aristotle, ancient philosophy, and in the great books by implication. Despite Adler’s naïveté, or ignorance, of his own different approaches to great books, he clearly identified one with which he vehemently disagreed: the Straussian, or Strauss-Bloomian, Approach.⁷

On that subject, Buckley asked a follow-up question about Leo Strauss. This mattered because Strauss is seen by some scholars as a key intellectual figure in the post-World War II conservative movement. Since the secondary literature on Strauss is still growing, it is

worth noting Adler's view of the man's character in relation to Bloom and other "Straussians."⁸ Adler responded as follows:

When Strauss came to the University of Chicago in 1947 or '48, Hutchins and I had been there since '30, and I had been teaching the great books since 1923. And Hutchins said, "I think you'll like Leo Strauss. I think you ought to get to know him." And I made an effort... We talked about books and authors we were very fond of, Plato and Aristotle. And I discovered that Strauss read Aristotle in such a way that he thought he had excuses for Aristotle's, I think, most serious errors in oral and political philosophy, the inferiority of women, which Bloom shares. In that book I found [Aristotle] a sexist... I said to Hutchins, "Anyone that takes that view of Aristotle and Plato, I can't talk to." I find great truth in Aristotle, but errors as well. And I find great truth in Plato, but errors as well... Strauss [and Bloom read] Plato and Aristotle as if there was the truth.⁹

Adler's differences with Bloom could not be more plain. As Adler termed it in the Prologue to his rerelease of *Reforming Education* (1988), Bloom and Strauss favored the "doctrinal method" over the "dialectical method" of almost all other great books promoters—including, in Adler's view, "John Erskine, Mark Van Doren, Robert Hutchins, Stringfellow Barr, Scott Buchanan, Jacques Barzun, Lionel Trilling, [and] Otto Bird." In other words, all of Adler's community of discourse, past and present, would have opposed the *Strauss-Bloomian Approach* that made the ancients keepers of The Truth.¹⁰

Adler may have sounded similar to Bloom in 1970–1971, but in 1988 Adler was the condescending, somewhat hypocritical old sage. In the same *Firing Line* episode, he addressed that tumultuous earlier period: Bloom "thinks that the decline happened in the 1960s, with the terrible year of 1968. That's just superficial and crazy." In his letter to Bloom the year before, Adler similarly commented that America's "cultural malaise... did not originate in the 1960s," but rather "in American colleges in the thirties." Buckley apparently agreed with Adler's analysis, writing Adler after the taping: "It always distresses me that our meetings are so compressed... It never gives me the time I would like to tell you how brilliantly you perform and a superb guest you are, and how much I appreciate your friendship."¹¹

Shortly thereafter David Riesman, famed author of *The Lonely Crowd* and then a Harvard University sociology professor, also wrote Adler. Riesman complimented him on the "magnificent" discussion. He added, "I agree entirely with you that our problems are in K through 12, and that in contrast to these, and also to the rest of the planet, our

post-secondary institutions, with all their limitations, are somewhat less problematic. Surely, as you made plain, they have not closed the American mind *de novo*." Despite Adler's mild hypocrisy as a sage, he nevertheless touched the intellectual impulses of others with his critique. Indeed, he was most in touch with the American intellectual scene of the 1980s when he acted in concert with his own strains of Great Books Liberalism or Pluralism. On Bloom, however, Adler kept up his criticism well after 1988, taking shots at him in a March 1990 *Denver Post* article and in a December 1990 letter to editor published by the *New York Times*.¹²

The rhetoric of reactionaries: The Stanford Debates

Bloom's book colored Adler's reactions to the subsequent rhetoric surrounding both the Stanford Debates and the 1990 release of the Britannica's *Great Books of the Western World*. The latter involved Adler's last serious work on the great books idea. The most important task involved updating it with authors and works from the twentieth century. Alongside Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* came E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s seemingly conservative critique of the non-canonical, fragmented content of American education by way of his idea of "cultural literacy." His theory first appeared in a 1983 article and then again in a 1987 book. Daniel Rodgers astutely explained that Hirsch's apparent conservatism derived from the fact that cultural literacy advocated for the "compensatory powers of heritage," even though Hirsch was a political Democrat. In any case, left-liberal and liberal critics of great books realized they needed to formulate responses to calls from Bloom, Hirsch, and others for renewing "the classics," "the basics," great books, and other forms of real and perceived essentialism in college curricula.¹³ As a long-tenured supporter of the great books idea, Adler would naturally feel obliged to both correct misappropriations of it by supporters and defend the idea against attackers. And the attackers certainly appeared during the Stanford Debates.

What were the "Stanford Debates"? The notation is a shorthand for a series of discussions, both at Stanford University and beyond, about the nature, necessity, and curriculum of a standardized, first-year introductory course sequence called "Western Culture." These discussions began in 1986, and culminated in a decision, made in the spring of 1988, where "Western Culture" was replaced by a course called "Culture, Institutions, and Values," or CIV, in the fall of 1989. There is no agreed-upon name for this series of historical events; it has been called the "Stanford Debate" (singular), "Stanford Affair," and "Stanford Canon Debate."¹⁴ Whatever the shorthand, those debates

were about three abstract things: (1) the idea of multiculturalism (i.e., diversity, rigor, and excellence); (2) the failings of curricula anchored in Western civilization or culture; and (3) the types of books to be used in those curricula (i.e., great, good, representative, etc.).

A very brief review of the timeline and issues involved in the Stanford Debates is necessary. In the 1960s, Stanford faculty questioned the assumptions behind the Western Civilization course that had begun there in 1935 as a version of Columbia's famed Contemporary Civilization course (which began in 1919, and is not to be confused with Erskine's General Honors that began in 1920).¹⁵ This first Stanford Debate took place in 1968, fitting with the social and cultural symbolism of the year. It resulted in a multivolume report titled *The Study of Education at Stanford*, and Western Civilization was dropped from required status in 1969. Curiously, however, by the mid-1970s faculty were concerned enough about core experiences for first-year students that a new, two-term "Western Culture" course with different tracks was instituted in 1980. Though the tracks allowed for different readings, 15 core great books—or selections from them—were used to create a "shared experience." Readings came from the Bible (both Testaments), Plato, Homer, one Greek tragedy, Augustine, Thomas More, Machiavelli, Martin Luther, Galileo, Voltaire, Marx and Engels, Freud, and Darwin.¹⁶

But by the mid-1980s numerous faculty members fielded a variety of complaints about the course's parochialism—that is, too few post-1600 texts, no authors from the United States or Western hemisphere, the "other" was ignored, and large swaths of Europe were not present. The time frame for this response was not unnatural. Several literary conferences on black literature occurred in the 1970s and after, resulting in anthologies that explicitly sought to revise and expand the "canons" of American literature. One of the earliest conferences began in 1974; it was sponsored by the Modern Language Association and funded by the National Endowment of the Humanities. A 1979 event sponsored by the English Institute resulted in a collection titled *English Literature: Opening Up the Canon*. Returning to the effects of these efforts at Stanford and related complaints, "faculty opposition," in Lawrence Levine's words, "was not to Western culture but to the narrow geographical, aesthetic, and intellectual ways in which that culture was construed and represented." By 1988 faculty would resolve to drop "Western Culture" in favor of a new version called "Culture, Ideas, Values," or CIV. In place of a "fixed core list," each year faculty would choose CIV's "common texts and authors."¹⁷ To detractors, Stanford's newest offense was two-pronged; it killed both Western civilization and the great books idea as worthy objects of study.

What mattered more, however, than any actual historical, internal time line of change, debate, and adaptation at Stanford was the ensuing external cultural phenomenon. *Newsweek* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* ran prominent stories that essentially referred to the death of the Western Civilization course. Secretary of Education William Bennett condemned the changes in a speech—a speech that was supposed to have been a debate with Stanford President Donald Kennedy, at Stanford, in April 1988.¹⁸

Bennett's speech is filled with more reactionary rhetoric than substance. Bennett could have used the opportunity to compare and contrast the merits of both a Western- and non-Western-centered curriculum, but he chose a defensive tone. He spent half of his speech upbraiding oppositional students for their tactics, which included sit-ins and the now-famous disruptive chants of "Down with racism, down with Western Culture, up with diversity!" and "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western Culture's got to go!" After citing Martin Luther King, Jr.'s immersion in the great Western philosophers and thinkers (perhaps referring to "Letter from Birmingham Jail"), Bennett painted the Stanford Debates as a dichotomous choice between King or Jesse Jackson. He said, "Either Reverend King was right, or Reverend Jackson is right. I'll stand with King."¹⁹ For Bennett it was the West, which meant truth, goodness, "intellectual complexity," and "freedom and equality." Otherwise, Stanford descended into chaos, anarchy, ideology, and black power. The "Western Culture" course, for Bennett, clearly meant the presence of the great books idea—which he saw in 1950s terms, and equated with one kind of excellence in higher education.

Four years later, Bennett provided more detailed reflections on both the speech and the Stanford Debates. His Culture Wars rhetoric was no less provocative but it does provide some clues about how his vision of the great books idea correlated with the approaches present in Adler's work. On the speech, he felt that "as many students agree with me as disagreed." He accused Stanford faculty of wanting to "avoid the debate." He added: "It's still hard to know exactly what accounts for the contempt many academics bear toward the West in general and America in particular... Theirs is not an America that has served as a beacon to the world [but rather is]... corrupt with a host of unholy 'isms,' such as racism, elitism, sexism, and imperialism." On the great books, Bennett asserted that "for a person who seeks serious answers to the great [perennial] questions, there is no better place to look for guidance than the great books of the Western tradition." Were it not for the American exceptionalism on display here, one might assert that Bennett's was the Great Ideas Approach. It is probably most accurate, however, to place Bennett's view as

somewhere closer to the Straussian Approach. As Daniel Rodgers described him, Bennett was on a Bloomian "quest to discern the essential nature of 'man'" and against perceived Nietzschean nihilism and antifoundationalism.²⁰

Liberals' fears were the opposite of Bennett's. They were afraid of a return to overly rigid, foundational-traditional views of what constitutes excellence. An article by University of Delaware sociologist Margaret Andersen, published in *Signs*, best approximates the liberal-left view. Appearing in the midst of the Stanford Debate (if not the furor associated with it), she efficiently summarized the collision of conservative interests, feminist views, the great books, and multiculturalism. Even so, and given the venue, her primary concern was a feminism "interested in the deep power of words"—in great books and otherwise.²¹

Arguments about the canon, wrote Andersen in 1987, were actually arguments, a backlash, against intellectual advances of women and minorities since the 1960s. She argued that "current appeals for educational reform threaten to reinstate education privilege along lines determined by race, class, and sex." Andersen noted the "various national reports" that defined "a crisis in education" linked to "the erosion of academic standards and the collapse of traditional values." She then brought those appeals home for her feminist readers by observing that, in each crisis, "the decline of academic standards is clearly linked to the proliferation of scholarship and educational programs in women's studies and black studies." To Andersen, "conservative academic arguments" that took advantage of these reports to argue for a "return to the basics" and "the classics" were really an "attempt to reinstate patriarchal authority." Conservatives assumed, as a result, that neglect of "the classical... liberal arts" was a loss of "academic rigor." "By implication," Andersen summarized, "women's studies and black studies are...intellectually weak and politically biased."²²

She argued in concert with Henry Louis Gates, Jr. At the time Gates was an English professor at Duke University but also an African-American public intellectual and literary critic on a par with Cornel West and bell hooks. Around the same time Andersen's essay appeared, Gates would confess black and feminist studies scholars had been "engaged in the necessary work of canon deformation and reformation"—of "decentering" the canon. He asserted that "the return of 'the' canon, the high canon of Western masterpieces, represents the return of an order in which my people were the subjugated, the voiceless, the invisible, the unrepresented, and the unrepresentable. Who would return us to that medieval never-never land?"²³ Gates and Andersen effectively laid down the terms that continue

to haunt those who feared a widespread great books revival: namely, a return to the great books meant a delegitimization of post-1960s, inclusionary intellectual advances. As was the case with Bennett and Bloom, when they thought of “great books” they thought of only the Great Ideas/Syntopical Approach.

Mary Louise Pratt, then Professor and Chair of the Program in Modern Thought and Literature at Stanford, gave the faculty perspective on the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and the great books idea in a 2001 collection of essays titled *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*. Pratt used the 1983 testimonial biography of a Guatemalan woman, titled *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, as an example of the kind of book hated by reactionaries and conservatives. Pratt reflected: “Opponents represented new curricular proposals as acts of substitution (or murder) in which the great books written by European men were displaced by inferior books written by unknown and marginal figures.” The great books were “besieged by barbarism” (echoing Bloom for her own uses) in the form of texts assigned for “ideological reasons.” In Pratt’s estimation conservatives like Bennett succeeded in “defining the issue as a debate over books rather than ideas.” She concluded that, “having taken this form, the debate inspired many stupidities.”²⁴

Returning to direct participants in the Stanford Debates, one person who was clearly not a source of stupidities was the 21-year-old president of Stanford’s Black Student Union, William King. He may have been echoing some thoughts from an in-the-know faculty member, but in retrospect King seems the rational actor and representative of a slice of student opinion. King relayed that “the Western culture requirement has had a very significant impact” on students because of its mandatory nature. To his constituency that course “really says... we’re different.” He added: “We want a sense that America, where we are now, is not just the progress that came from England and France... Other groups contributed significantly.” On the core list of books, King reflected: “We’re not trying to get rid of the Great Books. But these men didn’t write and think in a vacuum.” For him the issue was “not the destruction or preservation of Western history” but “the acknowledgement that the West... is not European but international in its origin and tradition.” King’s most controversial and mildly contradictory claim, for the Black Student Union, was that “we want the idea of a canon eliminated.”²⁵ Since he had stated that they were not trying to get rid of Great Books, this likely meant he and his community wanted the notion of a *fixed, immovable set* of Great Books eliminated. They wanted additions and Great Books Pluralism, or a new kind of Great Books Multiculturalism, not the rigid Straussian or Great Ideas Approaches. It was not that the Black Student Union engaged in anti-intellectualism (i.e., to eliminate rigor, distinctions,

rationally authoritative readings) or even desired, in Daniel Bell's terms, postmodern "pastiche," "jumbling" and "parody."²⁶ They wanted diversity and inclusion—a democratized sense of culture.

Revising Britannica's *Great Books*

Although a year and a half would pass between the Stanford Debates and Britannica's release of the second edition of the *Great Books of the Western World*, this was the intellectual and cultural climate into which the set came into being and was released. Britannica's staff and Adler would enable negative reactions to the set by essentially maintaining all the selection structures from the late 1940s—the Great Ideas approach. As such there is no need here to rehash every detail of selection. Still, there were some noteworthy changes.

Briefly, advisory committees were set up and led by Adler, Fadiman, and Philip W. "Tom" Goetz. Fadiman and Goetz were associate editors. The set's selection criteria included three now familiar principals: (1) "contemporary significance" ("not...archaeological relics" or "monuments"); (2) "infinite rereadability" or "studiability"; and (3) "the relevance of the work to a very large number of great ideas and great issues" from "the last 25 centuries" in the West—the so-called "great conversation." In rewriting *Syntopicon* essays Adler maintained his quest for "dialectical objectivity." He also revised Hutchins' *The Great Conversation* for reuse in the set's introduction. Adler recalled after publication that only 10 percent of the texts caused disagreement among staff. Lastly, in a nod to the politicized Culture Wars intellectual climate, Adler tried to split the middle by assuring readers that no "affirmative action" or "quotas" influenced the process, nor did any amount of "truth" in "an author's opinions or views."²⁷

Most of the debates about the set's changes took place in 1988. Adler, Fadiman, and Goetz led those efforts, which were then subjected to the opinions of the larger Editorial Board. Some recommendations of the Board were heeded, but no major reworking of past decisions took place. Aside from the six twentieth-century additions (volumes 55–60), only 13 new authors were added to an original main list of 74. Because the new total for pre-twentieth-century authors was 84 (in 54 volumes) that meant three authors were dropped. The resulting net change to the main set was a 13.5 percent addition (appendix 13)—not far from Adler's 10 percent claim. To mollify future critics of the set's exclusiveness Adler added a list of significant (good-but-not-great) black, female, and Latin American authors to the *Syntopicon* (appendix 14). In terms of changes to the *Syntopicon's* Great Ideas, Adler noted that the most extensive revisions occurred in (1) astronomy and cosmology, (2) element, (3) evolution, (4) mathematics,

(5) mechanics, (6) space, (7) time, (8) wealth (new economics), and (9) world.²⁸ In sum, only an updating, not a major reworking of the older effort took place.

As was the case with the 1952 set, and with the Franklin Library endeavor, business considerations were important. Indeed, they occasionally trumped the intellectual criteria for revision. Practical business thinking would worsen Adler's regression from the democratic apex reached with Paideia. And proof of that regression would eventually come from Paideia participants. Paideia matters in relation to the Britannica endeavor because Adler had explicitly hoped, during the summer of 1987, that the success of Paideia would help Britannica exceed the set's 1960s "peak sales record." But business considerations also sometimes bothered Adler. He expressed concern, for instance, in his memoirs that major works such as Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* were excluded due to their length (though Adler had trashed *Magic Mountain* in his 1965 *Playboy* article—see chapter 4). Chosen instead were Mann's *Death in Venice* and Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. "Considerations of space," or business, trumped greatness.²⁹ By again engaging in the market of cultural commodities rather than the market of ideas, Adler compromised the higher ideals cultivated with the populist Paideia project.

It would appear, moreover, that Adler deemphasized his inclusive Great Books Pluralism, or Liberalism, such that the greatest intellectual concerns of the twentieth century were ignored *while* in the midst of a cultural and political war of ideas. How so? It is always hazardous to think in terms of historical contingency, but the project could have gone another direction using a revised version of Adler's own historical Great Ideas approach. For instance, simply acknowledging the relevance of current questions in the West by including, or underscoring more prominently, the controversial "ideas" of woman, race, ethnicity, or class (e.g., instead of "wealth") would have opened the set up to a number of new works.

Indeed, the topic of why the idea of equality was excluded arose as early as 1968 in *The Great Ideas Today*. Inclusions of that and other ideas would have also allowed for a greater utilization of works already in the set, such as with Aristotle's sexist views on women. On race, especially in relation to Africans and intelligence, the editors could have included writings by David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Thomas Jefferson, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Including the aforementioned topics/ideas would have, perhaps, both saved the set from a great deal of criticism and helped promote Paideia. Here, however, Adler's voluntary removal from the academy—his status as a hybrid, wealthy form of what Russell Jacoby called "the

last intellectuals"—kept him from a full understanding of the importance of the multiculturalism debate that had occurred in intellectual circles since the 1970s. Adler's status as an intellectually out-of-touch, and now somewhat tin-eared, great books promoter was on display in his private correspondence. In a letter to Buckley, wherein Adler discussed "the stupidity of professors," he lamented the inability of academicians to distinguish between books popular and significant at a particular time versus all-time. Adler mocked this by calling "the reigning academic theory, the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* theory of what is worth reading."³⁰ While the literary point may have had validity, Adler's expression was horrible—an omen of things to come.

The release and high-profile reactions: The beginning of the end

A kickoff party at the Library of Congress on October 25, 1990, catalyzed press coverage of the *Great Books* release. The event was heavily scripted: a morning press conference, an afternoon colloquium led by William F. Buckley, Jr., and an evening banquet where James Billington, Librarian of Congress, officially received the revised set from Britannica.³¹ If the aftermath and symbolism of the Stanford Debates mattered as much as the on-campus events, the same logic applies to the revised Britannica set. Reactions to Britannica and Adler's choices, in effect, continued the Stanford Debates, except here one sees Adler's direct reactions. The event began a precipitous decline in his relevance as a public intellectual. His public expressions in interviews gradually reveal him as so out-of-touch and insensitive, in relation to his recent past, that one wonders whether a mental health problem were in play (e.g., senility or dementia). In any case, after this few people looked to him as spokesman for the future of the great books idea.

Coverage began with an uncontroversial preview of the Library of Congress press conference in a newspaper from the proving grounds, the home, of the great books idea: the *Chicago Sun-Times*. In that story a Britannica publicist, Roald Hasse, discussed selection criteria for new authors—namely, that "judgments weren't made on the entire twentieth century." He added: "Many of these works are just too new to know how they'll fare over time. The cutoff point, in essence, was 1950, with a little bit of slop-over here and there." Adler would later cite 1955 as the key year. While that cutoff was arbitrary and perhaps reasonable, it was interlocked with other more controversial thinking that came out during the October press conference. Although the general press presentation took place that morning, reporters from the *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune*, Edwin McDowell and John

Blades respectively, also received full previews and gathered reactions in time for their stories to appear on the day of the kickoff party. Both stories corroborate each other and triangulate both Britannica's presentation and the fireworks that followed. The tone of each, however, differs dramatically. This may be because the Blades story derived from an in-person interview.³²

Britannica and Adler appear reasonable and thoughtful in the *Times* story, even while being out-of-step with the current academic scene. McDowell counts that of the 130 authors only 4 are women (Jane Austen, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and Willa Cather)—and they were included for “the first time.” On the twentieth-century portion of the set, 43 of the 45 new authors were male. He observed that “with no black represented among the 130 authors...the revision seems likely to intensify criticism that any such claims to greatness are expressions of Western cultural bias by and [on] behalf of white males.” McDowell proceeded to put Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Adler into an indirect, unsatisfactory conversation about the selections.³³

In McDowell's portrayal Gates focused on the final decisions and Adler on the decision process. The effect was that they spoke past each other. Gates relayed distress over the limited number of women and persons of color in the set, especially in relation to recent context. He added: “There's still a ‘whites only’ sign on what precisely constitutes a great thinker.” Gates was “especially disturbed by the failure to include W. E. B. Du Bois,” who he argued was “the most important African-American intellectual in history.” Adler, for his part, acknowledged DuBois' prominence but replied that “his more important book, his autobiography, does not meet all three of the criteria established for inclusion.” As for other black writers, Adler argued that if Britannica's selection criteria appeared racist, “Eurocentric,” or elitist, that was merely a product of historical circumstance. “There were almost no women and black writers” before the eighteenth century, he added. Without diminishing the historical accuracy of Adler's assertion, it is also true that Adler still could not, or would not, acknowledge the subjective decisions he and his staff had made in the construction of *the Great Ideas* and *the Great Conversation*—both being products of “a” (i.e., his) theory of the history of philosophy and literature. Adler was precisely right then when, at the same Library of Congress event, he relayed that “our editorial principles were the same in the 1980s as they were in the 1940s.”³⁴ And that, for many intellectuals and people of color, was precisely the problem.

The *Tribune* story put Adler the culture warrior on display. He became a divisive, unrepentant, and callous Great Books Ideologue. Blades began with some relatively benign observations about the intellectual tenets behind the revision. Adler noted, for instance, that

the 1950s cutoff limited the depth of new additions. It meant that the new volumes were "not meant to be definitive judgments but short works that exemplify their authors' brilliance." Accidentally revealing the 1970s-era thinking behind the additions, he noted that the new works were "nominations for a future set that might be called 'Great Books of the 20th Century.'" When Blades noted the set's price, \$1500, Adler observed that set's per volume average of \$25 was still something of a bargain "when hardcover best-sellers routinely top \$20." Speaking of expenditures, Adler relayed that Britannica's Chairman, Robert P. Gwinn (Figure 8.1), became an "enthusiastic ally" despite \$4.5 million outlay "for what might be considered a risky commercial venture." Also interviewed for Blades' article, Gwinn conceded



Figure 8.1 The 1990 *Great Books* set stacked next to Robert Gwinn, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Encyclopædia Britannica (photo 1990).

Source: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

a lack of demand for new translations, but observed that Britannica thought of themselves “as the guardians of a semipublic trust.” They felt obligated to bring the set “right up to date.”³⁵ Gwinn’s invocation of the term “guardian” explains, in part, what happened next.

When the interview turned toward topics under the wide umbrella of multiculturalism—race, ethnicity, and gender—so did Adler’s aggressive defensiveness. He filled two roles he had denied in the past: guardian of tradition and ideologue. Blades pointed out that “the absence of black writers . . . seems certain to rile an increasingly vocal body of critics who maintain that the standard literary texts (or canon) slight or ignore the work of women, blacks and various religions and ethnic groups.” Blades observed that Adler “visibly bristled with anticipation over the accusations of Eurocentricism, racism and sexism.” His verbal response: “All that is irrelevant, and we’re absolutely prepared for it.” If Adler can be taken at his word, it seems clear that Britannica staff, as well as the set’s Editorial Board and perhaps its Committee of Consultants, would not be merely reacting to criticism. They were going to engage the Culture Wars on their terms. When Blades noted academic disputes over the canon, Adler responded: “Utter nonsense. Rubbish, rubbish, rubbish . . . We had 90 percent agreement on the board of editors, and you can’t get any better than that. This is the canon, and it’s not revisable.” Adler’s response on the topic of black authors seemed rehearsed. Here is Blades’ narration:

Adler insisted there are no “Great Books” by black writers before the 1955 cutoff. “There are good books by blacks—about 10—that are worth reading for one or two ideas, and they are in the Syntopicon.” Among those considered for canonization by Adler and his editorial and advisory boards (which included one black) were works by Gwendolyn Brooks, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston.³⁶

The story ended with a note of rigid finality in relation to Adler and Britannica’s set: “It took 40 years to do this one. It will take 130 years to do the next.” So much for staying up-to-date.

Blades’ Adler is decidedly not the rationalist promoter whose thought contained flexible strains of Great Books Liberalism and Pluralism. What of the great books idea as a process of reading—an educational process—that buttressed those prior approaches? This was the process whereby reading and studying the most challenging, complex texts served as a means for creating a national polity invigorated by democratized intellectual culture. Those noble goals were suddenly subsumed under a newfound identity: Great Books Ideologue, Guardian, and Culture Warrior. The October 1990 change (i.e., irrelevant, utter nonsense, rubbish, the canon is not revisable) is

so striking as to be nearly inexplicable without resort to a near canard, or stereotype—that is, the diminished intellectual capacity, or dementia, that sometimes accompanies aging. And if one is inclined to question the accuracy of Blades' story versus McDowell's, it is difficult to deny Blades' narration of observed emotion that correlated with Adler's already explosive words. Blades got the unscripted truth.

What is one to make of the change? Historical hindsight allows one to coolly note the ongoing fallibility of people, their always existent contradictions and ironies. Biographical studies, for instance, of Blades, Gwinn, Gates, Haase, Fadiman, Goetz, et cetera. would likely reveal numerous contradictions in their lives. On Adler, what of his contemporaries? What did they see in relation to his prior arc of progressiveness?

Reactions by thoughtful people, both in the academy and outside, were intense and swift. Illinois native James W. Loewen, then a sociology professor at the University of Vermont and soon-to-be author of the critically acclaimed *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (1995), dashed off a one-page, single-spaced, six-paragraph letter to Adler the same day as the Library of Congress event. Loewen did not reference his precise source of information, but began by noting that "thoughtful discussions" could indeed be provoked by works like Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and James Baldwin's essays. "By keeping 'Great Books' white," he added, "you also send a message that great thinking is done by whites, not by people of color . . . intended or not." By citing text and representation, Loewen accidentally appealed to parts of every prior great books approach in Adler's thought: General Honors, Great Ideas, Great Books Liberalism, and Great Books Pluralism. That those approaches existed helps explain, furthermore, why Loewen could sincerely write that he had "admired your work before today." Adler's work had been admirable to Loewen. The latter finished the letter "harshly" (his words) with the following: "Where have you been during the last decade?"³⁷ The emotion reveals a sense of betrayal. Adler was a traitor to liberalism and pluralism—to the goal of democratizing culture. Worst of all, Adler was a traitor to himself, to his own dreams.

Another scholar took issue with Adler's discussion of W. E. B. Du Bois in McDowell's *New York Times* article. Continuing the discussion begun by Gates, John J. Simon, former Random House editor and then television executive, noted in a letter to the editor (also dated October 25) that Adler only addressed Du Bois' autobiography. Simon countered that scholars assess the autobiography as a "minor work" in relation to the three selections included in Du Bois' Library of American volume: *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), and *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade* (1896). Simon asked, "Were

Dr. Adler and his colleagues at the Encyclopedia Britannica simply ignorant” of Du Bois’ best work, or “having chosen to exclude Du Bois for whatever reason, did they compound that folly by disregarding his acknowledged contributions to Western social thought?”³⁸ It seems reasonable to assert that space, via an essay by Du Bois, could have been found in the six twentieth-century volumes had the editors valued contributions on race and equality in the Western world.

Irving Louis Horowitz, then the Hannah Arendt Distinguished Professor of Sociology and Political Science at Rutgers University, also wrote the *New York Times* (on October 26) in reference to the McDowell article. He asserted that Gates’ criticism of Du Bois’ absence is “not the point.” The point, as Horowitz saw it, was that the new *Great Books* was a “marketing scam” and an “absurdity.” No mere “sales staff,” he added, “can define or determine which authors are most meaningful for what group of people at any given time.” Horowitz’s notion of a great books idea rested on the relativistic premises of an individual’s self-awareness of her/his needs. He might have been more upset if he knew that the selections had been made with the consent of an Advisory Board of intellectuals. Horowitz also castigated the general notion of great books, saying they perpetuated the myth of “knowledge as a closed room, a box that one enters to live a charmed life of meaning.” The letter ended by bringing the discussion back to Britannica’s chief promoter. In a not-so-veiled reference to Adler’s age and diminished intellectual capacities, Horowitz lamented that “the idea of Western culture has no more difficult chore than to outlive its erstwhile most deadly defenders.” Western culture was mere “Western hype” in the corrupted hands of marketers, salesmen, and self-interested, ossified ideologues.³⁹

Closer to home the *Chicago Tribune* published at least two letters immediately reacting to Adler’s sentiments. The text of both letters links them to the Blades story. Margaret Perry, then Director of Libraries at Valparaiso University, matter-of-factly charged that Adler “displayed as much stupidity as racism” in his claim about no pre-1955 “great” black authors. She cited Du Bois’ *Souls of Black Folk* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* as prima facie examples to the contrary. Michael Bérubé, then a relatively young assistant professor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, mocked and savaged Adler. In the first half of his letter Bérubé prefaced: “I’m just a third of Adler’s age, but I’ve been alive long enough to have read and taught *The Souls of Black Folk*, and sapling though I be, I will presume to tender some advice.” He continued, “About matters outside your expertise, don’t trumpet your ignorance to the press: If you haven’t read any great books published before 1955 by African Americans, don’t say that there just aren’t any. Make something up; be creative,

such as you'd love to reprint Du Bois but there aren't any decent translations (Du Bois was an American). Don't appeal to your 23-man editorial board as if their '90 percent agreement' were a guarantee of scholarly neutrality, when 22 of the 23 (or 96 percent) are white... As some philosophers will no doubt tell you, it is not surprising, though not inevitable, that homogeneous groups agree." Mocking that Adler had "switched off the hearing aid," Bérubé wished "there were more 87-year-old white men... who were capable of understanding and confronting the changes that have taken place during their lives." Given Bérubé's own professional interest in the canon and canonical authors that would soon find expression in his own book, *Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers* (1994), it is telling that he declined to be more philosophical.⁴⁰ Adler's display was ridiculous and did not merit serious engagement.

Black critics did, however, take Adler's mistakes seriously. They were justifiably incensed with Adler's apparent racism. Another response from the Chicago area, from the African-American intellectual Leon Forrest, further demonstrated how emotions about great books ran higher near the idea's unofficial home. Forrest was professor and chair of Northwestern University's African-American Studies Department, as well as a writer of historical fiction. His forthcoming work, *Divine Days* (1992), would later be considered one of the top-40 novels about Chicago life. More than a month after the Library of Congress event, the *Chicago Tribune* published an article-length response by Forrest. He chafed, in particular, over Ellison's absence from "from Adler's revised list." After noting that he too was raised on Britannica's set, Forrest relayed the ever present Du Boisian obligation of African Americans to "be conversant with both traditions." This situation occurred "sadly" even though "my white peers, more often than not, know nothing of black literary traditions; and most of them couldn't care less." Forrest blamed and mocked Adler for perpetuating the double standard: "Why should they? After all, when a master scholar like Dr. Adler speaks from the heady heights of the Caucasian mountaintop, who would have the intellectual range to fire back?" Forrest reminded Adler and readers that, in 1965, "200 major critics" selected *Invisible Man* when "asked to name the single most important novel written by an African American since the end of World War II." Forrest also reminded "the belittling professor" that at least seven full-length books had been written about Ellison's *Invisible Man*.⁴¹

One of Forrest's most interesting points, in an effort to attempt to tease out the thinking of Britannica editors, involved a thought experiment. Forrest speculated that the editors, if they had read "a first-rate work by a black author," might discover "that the black

experience is always going to reveal . . . various meanings of the issues of slavery, white supremacy and racism, even as it deals with a range of . . . traditional verities." One could add equality, politics, and history to that list of issues. Forrest continued, offering that "for Adler and associates these thematic patterns are not universal enough." This was because black authors are oppositional. "Any superb work," Forrest argued, "by a black writer would . . . challenge the very fabric of [the] Western intellectual tradition." Whether conscious or not, Adler's list "pays homage to white intellectual chauvinism." Forrest stylishly and pointedly concluded: "When it comes to the life of the mind, blacks are indeed invisible men on Adler's bookshelf."⁴² Comparatively, the responses from Bérubé, Horowitz, and Loewen letters show that Adler's reactionary, ideological tone made it difficult to express much more than exasperation in return. Forrest, at the very least, hurdled that low bar.

Forrest's lengthy response might have been inspired by either Blades' *Tribune* article or a *Jet* magazine piece, for which Forrest had been interviewed a few weeks before. That *Jet* article voiced strong complaints from black intellectuals about Adler's ill-conceived utterances. Michelle McCalope used quotes from Adler, as well as from associate editor Tom Goetz given during a CNN interview, as the baseline for response. Replies came from Forrest and Gates, as well as a diverse pantheon of prominent black intellectuals including Alice Deck (then acting director, Afro-American Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), Ann Allen Shockley (professor, Fisk University), Oba T'Shaka (chair, Black Studies Department, San Francisco State University), Rev. James Mack (retired Elmhurst College professor), Vernon Jarrett (columnist), Lerone Bennett, Jr. (author), Andrew Brimmer (executive director, Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History), Doris Saunders (former director, Johnson Publishing Company and acting chair, Mass Communications Department, Jackson State University), and Margaret Walker Alexander (author).⁴³

Jet's title captured the mood: "Blacks Furious Over Exclusion from New Great Books of the Western World." The article consisted of rational rebuttal mixed with surprise, exasperation, and sadness. McCalope acknowledged, with appreciation, the self-help autodidact tradition catalyzed by Adler and Hutchins and captured in the *Britannica* set. But McCalope then asked the age-old question: "How does one define greatness?" Some of those she interviewed attempted to answer this, but others could not get past recent events. After supplying a list of noteworthy great black authors excluded from the set—including Zora Neale Hurston, Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, and Anna Julia Cooper—Gates colorfully echoed his *New York Times* response: "Segregation may have ended in the admissions

office of the American academy but not intellectually. Intellectually, we are still represented in this society as not being smart enough and that is just an undeniable remnant of racism." Forrest reflected that the *Great Books* revision demonstrates "how racist attitudes permeate the highest level of White Western scholarship."⁴⁴

Andrew Brimmer found Adler's statement "reprehensible and unfounded in any kind of historical experience." Margaret Alexander called the editors "ignorant." Oba T'Shaka criticized in the vein of *Black Athena*, Martin Bernal's famous three-volume series on the "Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization" (the book's subtitle, volumes published in 1987, 1991, and 2006). T'Shaka asserted that many of the ideas of Plato originated in "the mystery teachings of ancient Egypt." Saunders echoed this by noting that the earliest, greatest mathematicians were African. Reverend James Mack offered another criterion for greatness beyond those proposed by the Britannica editors. To him books that respond to important "great times" are de facto great because of their singular excellence. By this criterion, several books by Du Bois met the threshold of great in that they provided numerous shades of nuance to exceedingly important and relevant great ideas: equality and racism. But beyond Du Bois and Gates' suggestions, *Jet* critics offered other black authors that could, or should, have been considered: Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, Margaret Walker, and Robert Hayden. Vernon Jarrett effectively understated the situation: "I'm a little surprised that Mortimer Adler would make a statement like that because he represents what academia would consider a well-read man."⁴⁵ He pointed to a mood more damning than fury: sadness.

The same day the *Chicago Tribune* published Forrest's extensive reflections another piece, focused on Adler, appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*. Authored by Elizabeth Venant, the colorful story captured the recent negativity surrounding Adler. It also gave him an opportunity to clarify, backtrack, or apologize for the statements made in October. He declined, doubling down on his recent rigidity as a Great Books Ideologue. That tactic cemented for him a new reputation among academics and intellectuals, whether African American or otherwise. Titled "A Curmudgeon Stands His Ground," Venant opened as follows:

Mortimer J. Adler is puffing on the thick stub of a pungent post-prandial cigar, addressing the subject of what it means to be educated in America. The 89-year-old warhorse of the 'great books' battles... doesn't actually discuss the matter. Rather, in hallmark curmudgeon style, he pronounces, denounces, dismisses, and, when a challenging notion seems too contemptible to consider, merely stares it down like a cur.⁴⁶

This was the first impression offered. An accompanying picture displayed a frowning Adler staring down the reader behind large-lens, 1980s-vintage, plastic frame polarized sunglasses—hands clasped in a power pose, elbows on a desk. The image conveyed a sense of brooding, stubborn traditionalist. Venant described Adler as “uncannily free of scholarly doubts.” And she labeled the “business of high-brow list-making” as “prejudicial and passe.” These are the associations many retain of Adler and the great books idea.⁴⁷

In her piece Venant arrayed a “formidable enemy line” of critics opposed to Adler’s negative reversion on the great books idea. James Atlas, author of *The Book Wars* (1990), argued that Adler’s (re)invocation of the Great Ideas Approach was “a very old-fashioned form of the debate” wherein Adler classified “books and ideas in a simple and popular way.” Atlas’ simplistic and quaint portrayal of Adler as having a singular approach corresponded with Atlas being a fan of Allan Bloom. Atlas characterized the latter as “eloquent” and as someone who believed that “ideas are complicated and deserve rigorous study.” Venant enabled a connection with the Stanford Affair by bringing in Paul Seaver, director of Stanford University’s CIV Program. Seaver focused on Adler’s subjectivity, noting that “we can all make up lists” relative to our interests. Adler’s interest in philosophy “is not wrong,” Seaver observed, “but it isn’t the only way of looking at things.” Venant also garnered E. D. Hirsch’s view. He argued that canons are “not necessary...as long as there is a shared knowledge of cultural ‘items’” that effected shared literacy and discussion. Duke University English professor Jane Tompkins took the discussion in a different direction for Venant. Tompkins asserted that “books” by themselves are “totally out of date culturally speaking.” Students wanted to study media (e.g., movies, TV shows, and songs) that, to them, “adequately reflect the real world.” Venant also cited Gates, who noted that Adler and the Britannica committee missed their chance to “redefine what our notion of the great tradition really is.” To him their failure “will be seen historically as a great mistake.”⁴⁸

Adler had little patience for the criticism. His general overview: “They’re all ignorant. They have no background, they have no depth of knowledge, no memory. I would not be so impatient if they were relevant.” What of the absence of certain ethnicities? Adler’s replies:

If there are no Latinos, it’s because “Octavio Paz didn’t recommend any.”

No blacks? “They didn’t write any good books.”

Too Eurocentric? “(Asians) came to the West, they better learn Western culture. If they want to stay Japanese, they should stay in Japan.”⁴⁹

These are the dramatic images that stuck with contemporaries. These responses undermined a life's work in education and philosophy. The images and associated perceptions relayed by Venant also undermined one's colleagues (i.e., Adler's communities of discourse) and employers (e.g., Britannica).

Low-profile consequences: Avoidance, denial, and Adler's passing

After these stories the narrative of the larger great books idea becomes, for a time, about the decline and fall of both Britannica and Adler. Both had betrayed the public's trust. Some of Adler's heat and emotion, of course, could be passed off as posturing. Time and work had gone into the set's creation, and it was natural for its creators to defend their work. Even a month will not always help cool those emotions. But when Adler had the chance *a few years* later to correct, or at least massage, the record in his second autobiography, *A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror* (1992), he demurred. He avoided addressing the difference between the candid comments he provided reporters and the less divisive speeches he gave the day of the Library of Congress event. He avoided addressing a single critic by name, making no mention of either journalists or intellectuals such as Venant, Blades, McCalope, Gates, Hirsch, Seaver, Atlas, Tompkins, Forrest, Horowitz, Loewen, Bérubé, Simon, or Perry. On McCalope's *Jet* article, Adler acknowledged neither it nor a single black intellectual in it.⁵⁰ His initial emotional reactions made their absence conspicuous.

Rather than philosophically engage his critics, Adler simply and generally lamented the short-term situation after October 25. In *Second Look*, he chose to focus on historical context—on “the strikingly significant difference between the environment in which the first edition had been published in 1952 and the present state of affairs in 1990.” His state of denial is revealed in a litany of “no’s”: “There was [in 1952] no academic or public controversy about the authenticity of the canon...no outcries about...omission from...women, blacks... [and] no snide remarks or sneers about... dead white males.” Adler blamed the “brouhaha” at Stanford for the changes. He tweaked critics, only generally, for not reading the caveats in Britannica's *The Great Conversation Revisited*. On why “certain black and female writers,” as well as Latin American authors, were excluded, he again cited the mid-century cut-off and selection committee criteria.⁵¹ In the end, the controversies of late 1990 were something that happened to, or around, him, and not something he actively created. He was, by definition, out of touch.

Even in the aftermath of the set's release Adler continued to crusade on behalf of the larger great books idea. He appeared, in December 1990, to promote the Paideia program, particularly its "Wednesday Revolution" component, at Tinley Park High School (IL). Tinley Park is a Chicago suburb, located about 30 miles southwest of the city. The high school drew students from the nearby suburbs of Oak Forest, Markham, and Country Club Hills. Adler's presence brought media attention. The *Chicago Sun-Times* came to see him lead a seminar, for 20 or so "honors students," on Machiavelli's *The Prince*. The article not only highlighted how Tinley students applied Machiavellian thinking in their career aspirations but also covered Adler's technique. "Hitting them with questions," Adler put pupils on "the hot seat" by prodding them with why-questions and exhortations to be more specific. One senior honors student, Becky Lindish, confessed being "intimidated" by Adler but appreciated the fact that he "lowered our egos." She also appreciated Adler's energy, that he was not "just standing there, writing on the board." For his part, Adler "seemed frustrated" at the fact that the students' language was "sprinkled with 'like' and 'um.'" Adler said that students' speech habits were "much worse than...20 years ago."⁵² Not even a relatively straightforward report about the workings of the Paideia program in Chicago schools could avoid Adler's pessimism and negativity.

The aftermath of Adler's late-1990 interviews and pronouncements produced more than just pessimism. Thoughtful, lower profile believers in the great books idea had become disillusioned. Jessie Rivers and Dhamana Shauri, teachers at the primarily African-American populated Nathan Goldblatt Elementary School (a Paideia school located in Chicago's West Side), cited the *Tribune* and *Jet* magazine articles in a letter that, in essence, called Adler a traitor. They wrote: "The racism implicit in [your] remarks is rivaled only by their untruth." They continued: "It is sad that people such as yourself...are allowed to ignore all bodies of knowledge that do not [originate in a]...western-European worldview." Unaware of the vigorous responses from Loewen, Horowitz, Bérubé, and other non-African-American scholars, they added that it was "even sadder...that your arrogance and racism have been validated by the general silence of the academic community." Rivers and Shauri cited Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, Wright, Ellison, and Frederick Douglass as authors worthy of the designation of "great." Reminding Adler that Goldblatt had named a seminar room after Adler earlier in 1990, they sarcastically concluded that if had he made his "more recent comments" during the dedication ceremony, perhaps "the afternoon would have taken a decidedly different turn."⁵³ Even in a state of repugnance the letter's overriding tone is sadness. A hero had fallen.

Adler's response to Rivers and Shauri—composed one month later—reveals the Scylla and Charybdis of explanation and empathy he would have to navigate to reach black educational and intellectual communities. The letter begins with Adler in the role of condescending, unapologetic explainer and ends with him attempting to be an empathizing father figure. He regrets "the distress you say you feel," and offers to "come before you all" (he copied Goldblatt's principal, Paideia Coordinator, and the Superintendent) to "explain...the difference between" readings "appropriate for Paideia schools" and Britannica's "too complex and too difficult" *Great Books*. He emphasized that the latter comprised "a very small fraction...of the good and useful books that [this] world has produced." For the Paideia readings, Adler continued, "many readings by black authors are used...with my entire approval and support." He cited Sophocles' *Antigone* as an example of a book that existed in both categories, calling it "relatively simple, though not less profound."⁵⁴

Yet Adler's explanation reveals more problems than it solves. If Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk* is complex and profound in its dealing with the great idea/topic of the twentieth century, and is therefore also relevant, why not modify Britannica's selection criteria to include it? On the subject of criteria—especially the hierarchy of ideas and issues in Western history—at the end of the letter Adler states that "I would expect teachers to distrust me if I had maintained there was any superiority in books by white authors, and I would myself distrust any teacher who claimed that the only good books were by black authors."⁵⁵ This statement is both half false and half relevant. The second part of Adler's statement is irrelevant because Shauri-Rivers did not assert it. The first part is false because, while Adler did not purposely socially construct the *Syntopicon* to exclude black authors, he and Britannica's editors did not revise the Great Ideas it contained to increase the volumes' relevance in a society that had been socially reconstructed by the Civil Rights Movement. A hierarchy of ideas put down in print—especially print for sale—is a compromise between the interests of the reader and author. Adler and his community had not given sufficient thought to how audiences had changed over the intervening 40 years.

An attempt at empathy also rang hollow. Adler conveyed that he meant "no disrespect to black authors, and certainly not to black teachers or black children." He rightfully noted that he had "spent the last ten years of my life in an effort to establish the proposition that all children deserve the very best schooling that can be devised—schooling such as I would wish for my own children, and would endeavor to see that they got." Yet this sincerity was exactly why he garnered such negative reactions from the black community. He

had broken a silent compact with the black community. Cordoning off his “lower” great books-related school reform from his “higher” efforts on Britannica *Great Books* smacked of separate but (un)equal. Because of the “non-apology apology” given above, the delayed response time, and the aggrieved attempt at empathy, his effort to acknowledge the dignity of the black community seems halfhearted. Adler, however, must have believed the issue was resolved by 1992 because two pictures of his Goldblatt encounters were included in *A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror*.⁵⁶

In any case, Adler never made a public effort at reconciliation. And neither did his community—either for Adler’s or Britannica’s sake. Yet another letter of condemnation, from the Urban League of Rochester, voiced more concerns and garnered the attention of Britannica staff. The correspondence was sent to Britannica’s Robert Gwinn and signed by Urban League President and CEO, William A. Johnson. Johnson was insulted by the set’s contents: “I take singular exception to your claim that [the set] represents a sincere effort to be truly representative of great thinking and writing in the Western . . . tradition.” Because of the supreme importance of education to the black community, Johnson added, improprieties in relation to the “widely marketed and respected” set would of course be noticed by thoughtful African Americans. The Britannica name would suffer. The editors must correct “their egregious mistake,” Johnson concluded, or their “failure . . . amounts to intellectual colonialism.” Gwinn passed the letter to Tom Goetz, who then forwarded it to Adler. Goetz assessed the situation as “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” and asked whether they “should . . . reply at all?” He feared the reply would be circulated through all Urban League offices and be taken out of context—and used to “to mount an attack” on Britannica. Goetz was clearly more concerned with the decreased revenues inherent in bad publicity rather than being, in Britannica Chairman Robert Gwinn’s words, responsible “guardians of a semipublic trust.”⁵⁷

The sales did occur, for a while at least—proving, perhaps definitively, that there is no such thing as bad publicity. During the beginning and middle of the 1990s annual sales were as follows: 28,854 sets (1990); 27,614 (1991); 28,239 (1992); 34,558 (1993); 22,540 (1994); 13,894 (1995); and 7,265 (1996), respectively. The dramatic drop in 1995 occurred, in part, because of “the virtual elimination of the sales force,” reported one source. Those were not the 1960s era numbers that Adler had hoped, in 1987, would result from Paideia enthusiasm. Even so, based on the \$1500 retail price per set, this meant potential revenues (notwithstanding sales and discounts) as follows: \$43,281,000 (1990); \$41,421,000 (1991); \$42,358,500

(1992); \$51,837,000 (1993); \$33,810,000 (1994); \$20,841,000 (1995); and \$10,897,500 (1996). That is grand total of \$244,446,000 for the seven-year period. If the \$4.5 million production cost cited in the *Blades* article accurately reflects the total labor expenditure for the set, then the investment returns were 54 times greater than cost, less ongoing material and sales force outlays. If Adler earned a \$1 commission on each set, then his bonus was \$162,964 for the seven-year period.⁵⁸

In the end, Adler turned himself into the bugbear of the black intellectual community. Caught up in the moment, as well as afflicted with late life pride and rigidity, he made the great books idea an object of derision among people of color. Adler damaged his prior decade's work in fostering a flexible version of the great books curriculum for schools. This dramatically undercut his and other promoters' dreams that the great books idea might democratize culture.

Adler's work on the 1990 edition of the *Great Books* represented his last direct and substantial contribution to the great books idea. For the rest of the decade he concentrated, before his energy and eyesight faded, on his philosophical work, writing eight more books on the topic (sans the second autobiography): *Truth in Religion* (1990); *Intellect: Mind Over Matter* (1990); *Desires, Right and Wrong* (1991); *Have Without Have-Nots* (1991); *A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror* (1992); *Four Dimensions of Philosophy* (1993); *Art, the Arts, and the Great Ideas* (1994); and *Adler's Philosophical Dictionary* (1995). Sales numbers for each are unavailable, but sometime in this period Adler retired to California, where he passed, without fanfare, in San Mateo on June 28, 2001.

Obituaries and other reflections on Adler from his discourse communities, his friends, admirers, and even his enemies reveal, not surprisingly, a mixed intellectual legacy. That mix derived from conflicting assessments of his personality and association with the great books. His *New York Times* obituary proclaimed that he had "helped create" the "study of the classics." This was untrue, and Adler himself would have denied it. Indeed, he had consistently attributed his inspiration for studying the great books to John Erskine, and would have also objected to using the term "classics," and its ancient connotations, instead of great books. However, Adler would not have disparaged the obituary's other assertions. He did believe, for instance, "that the ordinary citizen [possessed] a philosophical duty to think clearly and exercise free will wisely." This part of the obituary captured the political half of Adler's efforts to promote a democratic culture. The obituary also addressed the education half in describing Adler's 1980s work on behalf of the *Paideia* project.⁵⁹ Despite the historical consistency of these assessments with Adler's life, they would have seemed overly

complimentary, even false, ten years earlier. And it is doubtful that African-American thinkers agreed the *Times'* assessment.

In another reflection for Chicago readers, Wayne Booth, a University of Chicago literature professor, said he "often" found Adler to be "a bit dogmatic." But, Booth added, "his devotion to the reading and teaching of classical texts, . . . [his] concern for education, . . . and his devotion . . . to the public schools were admirable, valuable and deserving of praise."⁶⁰ Writing for Columbia University alumni, Charles Van Doren reflected that "America lost a true original." Calling Adler "a cocky, impatient, brilliant and quintessential New Yorker," Van Doren concluded that Adler's "disappointments were largely his own fault."⁶¹ In a remembrance for *Education Week*, Terry Roberts, director of the National Paideia Center, suggested that Adler's dedication to great books, "combined with what was often a difficult, even autocratic, personality, has led to his being dismissed by far too many contemporary educators." But Roberts also noted a positive, if paradoxical, side: "Adler saw a profound connection between democracy as a fragile, idealistic experiment and the function of universal education . . . For all his reputation as an elitist, Adler argued vehemently for the democratization of schools."⁶² The consensus, even from close associates, was that Adler's personality negatives could overshadow his contributions to philosophy—as well as his work for the great books idea.

One alternative assessment, however, revealed an amusing note of dissent about even Adler's personality. Shedding the seriousness and high ideas of other meditations, Peter Norton, former "British naval officer" and former president of Encyclopædia Britannica, offered a lighthearted memory of Adler. At one of Britannica's corporate functions in Hawaii, Norton recalled that "sin attacked him" during an "afternoon session" and he skipped out for a treat. When he entered a nearby ice-cream parlor he noticed a man, in a "far corner," fawning over a "very large ice-cream and chocolate concoction." When that man returned his gaze, with a "wonderful, very large, ear-splitting grin," Norton realized it was Mortimer. Ever afterwards Norton used this episode to remember that behind Adler's "austere intellectual façade was a fun-loving, excitable, and very happy, life-loving little boy."⁶³ Singular positive and negative events do not reveal character, but this anecdote reminds us lives are complicated.

Conservative evaluations of Adler at his passing tended toward glowing. The Evangelical Christian Chuck Colson called Adler one of the century's "greatest philosophers and educators." Colson remembered Adler as "a hero to many in my generation" for his lifelong battle with "the forces of relativism." Citing the authority of the *New York Times*, Colson noted that it "devoted some forty column inches

to [Adler's] obituary." Despite the space Colson lamented that Adler's obituary "never mentioned the most significant thing in his life." That, to Colson, was when Adler made "the leap from logic to faith" in Christianity while "bedridden with illness" in 1984. Near the end of Adler's life Deal Hudson, then editor and publisher of *Crisis*, a magazine for conservative Catholics, prefigured Colson's praise on two points. First, Hudson praised Adler for a religious event not mentioned in his *Times* obituary (Adler's December 1999 conversion to Catholicism). Second, Hudson also declared Adler "the most influential American philosopher of the twentieth century."⁶⁴ Evangelicals and Catholics were working together, here at least, to ensure that Adler would be remembered by the Religious Right as a Christian intellectual.

William F. Buckley, Jr., of course, admired Adler a great deal apart from Adler's late-life conversion to Catholicism. Reflecting on Adler's death, Buckley wrote that "phenomena like Mortimer Adler don't happen very often." He characterized Adler as "an exuberant practitioner of philosophy, [and] ambitious proponent of the extraordinary proposition that... philosophy is the great granary of mankind."⁶⁵ Whether or not they agreed on all issues, Buckley's admiration for Adler, and Adler's engagement with Buckley, helped cement the perception of Adler's alliance with conservative causes—of Adler the culture warrior.

A less politicized assessment of Adler's life, in terms of democratizing culture, came from author and journalist Philip Terzian. He opined that if readers felt a "pang" when they learned of Adler's death, "it is not so much Dr. Adler that we mourn... but the age that produced and nourished him." Whether that "age" (mid-century America) actually produced Adler or not, Terzian and others saw it as a time when "a world unified by common knowledge" seemed possible. Susan Jacoby remembered the same period as a kind of high noon for middlebrow culture, which she defined positively as a "culture of aspiration" with an affinity for books, rationalism, and self-education. It was "a reading culture." But it was also imperfect, Terzian noted, in that "mediocrities... were treated with reverence." This was the "Age of Adler." Others might call it the height of mid-century liberalism. In any event, Terzian correctly observed the problem evident in October 1990: "while Dr. Adler flourished in his heyday, he survived well past his prime."⁶⁶ This is why Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Leon Forrest, and none of the other *Jet* magazine critics elected to recall the "Age of Adler" with any reverence, or even at all.

Coda and Conclusion: Lessons for the Twenty-First Century

The story of the great books idea today is fluid and ongoing, but one that nevertheless indirectly involves the remnant efforts of mid-century promoters. Adaptable promoters still exhibit various levels of concern for close reading, citizenship, cosmopolitanism, pluralism, tradition, the liberal arts, and the history of ideas. Some are enamored with cultural politics and political ideology, and some care about democratizing culture (though, like Adler, they do not explicitly use that phrase). Unlike Mortimer Adler, however, most of today's great books enthusiasts are not dogmatic about the composition of book lists. They also engage multiple criteria, not just the "Great Ideas," to select works. For instance, although Adler was a founding member of the Great Books Foundation's Board of Directors, the organization does not strictly abide by Adler's criteria for determining a book's greatness. The Foundation and its reading groups use their own great books lists, sometimes simply voted on by a group's members. The Foundation cares about civic engagement and humanistic education, and promotes "shared inquiry" as a method of group-based deep reading in the spirit of Adler and Van Doren's *How to Read a Book*. But the Foundation is, today, willing to publish and sell edited collections of excerpts to tease people into "primary texts."

The fluidity of the great books idea today also means that some promote the idea without ever using, or barely using, the phrase. The idea is more covert than overt. Permutations of the idea include popular and obscure programs such as Oprah Winfrey's (former) Book Club, urban reading projects like the 12-year-old, much-copied "One Book, One Chicago" program, and Earl Shorris's "Clemente Course in the Humanities," which serves low-income populations.¹ While these efforts do not consistently use "great books" phrase as a public identifier, there can be little doubt of connections due to their work with "primary texts," emphasis on discussion and cultural dissemination, and focus on larger (read: great) ideas. These traits betray them as descendants of the mid-century movement and Adler.

Earl Shorris' program illustrates a number of these traits and topics. Shorris, who died in May 2012 at the age of 75, was a legitimate

heir to some of the best traits in Adler's thinking on the great books idea. Chicago born, Shorris designed and experimented with his great books-based "Clemente Course in the Humanities" in New York City in 1995. Inspiration for it derived from his research on American poverty, eventually published as *New American Blues* (1997). He had come to believe that the skills of the humanities—reflection and critical thinking—could alleviate poverty as effectively as job skills programs. Shorris believed, in other words, in the power of cultural capital to effect a democratic culture. The course's name derived from Shorris' association with the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center. The curriculum included works by Plato, Shakespeare, Montaigne, and Melville among others. Shortly before the course began, New York's Bard College offered a certificate to graduates of the eight-month program. As a result, the course is now often called the Bard College Clemente Course in the Humanities. Shorris actively promoted the Clemente Course, and seven were running by 1999 in the United States with "40 more planned in the next five years." At Shorris' passing the program existed in 20 American cities and three other countries. His effort puts on display the observation by Andrew Delbanco that "the distinctive American contribution" to the history of the liberal arts "has been the attempt to democratize it, to deploy it... [for] all persons, regardless of origin."²

The Clemente Course's reputation rested on its target students and their subsequent raised aspirations. Shorris selected students for the course based on four factors: age (18–35), household income (less than 150 percent of the federal poverty level), educational level (ability to read a tabloid newspaper), and educational goals (i.e., an expression of intent to complete the course). The course is free, and students are given books, carfare, and child care. After the first year, students who had moved on to community colleges reported back "that the Clemente Course was far more demanding." Bard College accepted five of those first-year students (some with scholarships), and another student was accepted by New York University. A study of an early program cohort confirmed its successes. The analysis focused on 31 students, 68 percent female with a racial mix of 46 percent African American, 36 percent Latino, and 14 percent white. Among participants 43 percent "completed the eleventh grade or less, and 80 percent... completed high school (or GED)." The study found that the students gained self-esteem, decreased tendencies toward "verbal aggression," and improved their skills in "problem definition and formulation." Students also increased their valuation of the ideas of benevolence, spirituality, universalism, and collectivism. Apart from studies, informal validation came directly from participants. Moise

Koffi, an Ivory Coast immigrant, Bronx resident, and Clemente Course student, said simply that it “changed the direction of my life.”³

The connections between Shorris’ Clemente Course and Chicago are clear, even though Shorris’ connection to Adler is indirect. The course derived from Shorris’ experience at the University of Chicago in the 1950s, which he attended at the same time as Allan Bloom. Although mutually inspired by Hutchins and Great Books, Shorris remembered his experience much differently. Indeed, Shorris was intrigued by how his own “difficult and formative” experience resulted in a much different view of life than Bloom’s. Shorris observed that while “Leo Strauss led Professor Bloom to the right,” it was “the world”—or Shorris’ experience after—that turned him to the left and, we should add, anti-Straussianism. In concert with Adler, Shorris saw Bloom and Strauss as elitists who marshaled the great books idea for an ideology, conservatism. Shorris was drawn instead to Hutchins’ form of “radical humanism.”⁴ Shorris’ preferred variation of the great books idea, however, seems to have been Adler’s post-1960s strain of Great Books Liberalism-Pluralism. Whatever his inspiration, Shorris saw that the great books idea had great potential as a democratic, egalitarian cultural form—if put in the right hands.

* * *

What lessons, new or old, can we derive from this study? Along with Adler’s earlier work, Shorris’ project demonstrates that the great books idea exists today under a big tent—within a larger social and historical context. As such, arguments about the idea’s inherent conservatism, as presented by advocates like William Bennett or detractors like Margaret Andersen, lose their force. Katherine Chaddock noted this when she argued that “the stubborn dualisms of canon controversies” are not tenable, and “that universalism does not always align with conservative political thought, just as contextualism does not always align with liberal political thought.” It is not a choice, in the words of Jackson Lears and Richard Wightman Fox, “between cultural pluralism...and reverence for tradition” where liberals and conservatives line up neatly on either side of canon debates. This study has shown that great books lists have the potential to be rigorous, diverse, and abide by the so-called great ideas even while avoiding the extremes of cultural politics and the desires of political ideologues. For the great books idea is, in the end, a powerful part of our shared public culture. The choices we make about it, returning to Fox and Lears, “concern matters of candor, explicitness, and our willingness to reappraise our

method of historical inquiry.”⁵ This is true. The great books idea is less about book lists than an educational process that can, if we let it, foster a democratic culture respecting communities and individuals, rigor and reason, access and excellence, and good citizenship. It is a shame that Mortimer Adler lost sight, at the very end, of this larger dream.

This study has proven, furthermore, that the long-running problem of the “one and many” in Western thought, covered in *Britannica’s Syntopicon*, applies also to the great books idea. Adler and his community gave rise to many iterations of, and approaches to, that idea: the General Honors strain, the Great Ideas Approach, Great Books Conservatism, the Straussian Approach, Great Books Liberalism, and Great Books Multiculturalism (or Pluralism). And these are only those that arose out of studying Adler and his community of discourse. In regular conversation, “the great books” cannot be considered a stable, unified, and homogeneous category—either between people or institutions—to be referenced without further inquiry. The origins, present situation, and future ends of each instantiation must be queried. And these instabilities do not touch the fact that books and ideas are contested, reinterpreted, and recontextualized by audiences. The meanings made by readers, or readers’ responses, differ from the author’s intentions.

This historical inquiry reveals that more problems occur for great books proponents when they attempt greater universality. The most controversial iteration has been, of course, “Great Books of the Western World.” One can imagine other problematic iterations: “Great Books of the World,” “Great Books of the Eastern World,” “Great Books of the Americas,” et cetera. No matter what intellectual or publisher is attached as an authority, no consensus will ever exist for any of these more globalized, seemingly cosmopolitan designations. At best these lists will be introductions to topics that need several caveats and further explanation. At worst they will be ideological constructions, with buried and explicit assumptions, that indoctrinate and condition you rather than educate. They will constrict your intellectual freedom rather than inculcate liberal learning.

Given these cautions, more limited lists of great books still hold forth great practical value. They speak to our utilitarian nature, and are therefore invaluable sorting mechanisms. If, after interrogation, you can trust the authority behind a list, that list will invariably save you time in a world where the written word, in book form, is ubiquitous. The field of human learning is too vast for any one person to legitimately construct their own reading lists, or great books or otherwise, *ex novo*. If you are curious, and want to challenge yourself with the best books, you will need help. It is fine to seek help from your

local librarian, Penguin Publishers, *Time* Magazine, Oprah Winfrey, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Earl Shorris, Gloria Steinem, Clifton Fadiman, William Bennett, or even Mortimer Adler, so long as you explore the motivations, assumptions, and selection criteria behind each list. Great books promoters of all stripes, as this study has shown, often are well intentioned. None are evil. Their lists and strategies can often be evaluated on the criteria of good, better, and best. Matters of taste are always at work, but the best lists have an edge. They make a point or several points. The best lists present books as works of art that promote critical thinking. They provide tools and ideas that promote individuality even while helping you be a better human—a better member of the human community.

What of Adler's lists? What of his motivations and biases, his strengths and weaknesses? There can be little doubt that "early Adler" was an intellectual who made real contributions to American culture in the fields of education and philosophy. Philosophically, he was an eclectic critical realist with strong affinities for Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy. Politically, he was clearly a mid-century, New Deal-oriented liberal. While friendly with some conservatives, Adler was never a true conservative. He came closest to traditionalist conservative thinking, inasmuch as Jacques Maritain and Jose Ortega y Gasset's Euro-cultural conservatism might translate into an American context. But Adler never promoted American traditionalist thought in the writings of Albert Jay Nock, Richard Weaver, Leo Strauss, John Hollowell, or even of his friend William F. Buckley, Jr. It is true that the late 1980s Adler was racially and culturally insensitive at best. He deserves condemnation for his borderline racism circa 1990. Even so, his early and middle bodies of work reveal center-left liberal motivations behind his promotion of great books. Given his weaknesses, one must bracket discussions of Adler's intellectual work.

Although some care was taken by Adler and his colleagues in relation to forming their *Britannica* canon, that mattered less than the promotion of liberal education and close reading. The books that went into *Britannica*'s list were, apart from the works of science and mathematics, very similar to Erskine's older lists. This put the focus back on education, particularly (a) the teaching and learning the process of deep, careful reading, and (b) informing parochial Americans about the larger Western intellectual world in which they lived. The latter presaged E. D. Hirsch's effort to promote "cultural literacy." Hutchins, Fadiman, the Van Dorens, Adler, Diane Ravitch, and even Shorris were more Western cosmopolitans than they were global cosmopolitans. Similarly, they were pluralists rather than multiculturalists. Given those conditions, great books were, to them, the means to a certain kind of democratized culture—the

best they could imagine, or dream of, given their cultural context and mid-century intellectual milieu. Their weaknesses matter, but so do their intentions. Just as one should not praise Adler too much for his prior work, one should not utterly dismiss his prior efforts, on the great books and otherwise, for his late-life arrogance, vanity, and irrationality.

* * *

What of my relationship to the great books idea, Mortimer Adler, and Britannica? I first heard of the great books idea, via Britannica's set, around 1994–1995. Several friends and acquaintances owned individual volumes of the 1952 edition, and at least one owned an entire set. Shortly thereafter, in June 1995, I bought a vintage copy of the 1940 version of Adler's *How to Read a Book*. That book, warts and all, changed my life. It tapped into a deep inner discomfort I had with my undergraduate education (in chemistry, B. S. 1994). Indeed, Adler's hope for this kind of engagement was evident in the book's subtitle: *The Art of Getting a Liberal Education*.

The hardest part of tackling Adler's work was looking past the mildly demeaning title. In buying the book, I had to summon, like many others before me, some humility to be seen with a book that laid bare a weakness. The deliberately overstated opening lines of the first page forced me to swallow my pride: "This is a book for readers who cannot read. That may sound rude, though I do not mean to be. It may sound like a contradiction, but it is not."⁶ I have since wondered whether the opening should be reworded: "This is a book for readers who *can do nothing more than passively* read." I suppose that detracts from the needed effect. In the end, however, none of these problems prevented me from carefully reading the book twice within a month of ownership.

Adler rewarded my effort. In the most fundamental sense, *How to Read a Book* taught me something that all undergraduate students of the liberal arts are supposed to master: the art of close reading. More importantly, I believe, it also explained something more philosophical: how to *think about* what I was reading. Adler was slowly imparting in me a philosophy of liberal education. Practically speaking, although I had gradually been taking more and better notes on all the books I read, those from *How to Read a Book* were exceptionally detailed and intense. I expect that was because Adler was instructing me on note taking (especially marking my text). Adler was also teaching me about asking good questions, "the vice of passive reading," and the value of "primary books."⁷ On the last Adler wrote,

The great books in all fields of learning are, in some good sense of the word, “original” communications. These are the books which are usually called “classics,” but that word has for most people a wrong and forbidding connotation—wrong in the sense of referring to antiquity, and forbidding in the sense of sounding unreadable. Great books are being written today and were written yesterday as well as long ago. And I am going to try and show that, far from being unreadable, the great books are the most readable and those which deserve to be read.⁸

I was up for the demonstration—for the challenge.

As can sometimes be the case after a first positive encounter with anyone, my esteem for Adler was as high as it would ever be. I maintained this level of appreciation for his work, however, for several years after. As I matured as a reader and was trained as a historian—an interest that developed, by the way, from reading in Britannica’s set—my esteem for Adler would eventually diminish. My appreciation for great primary works evolved into a desire to be a better historical thinker. It is worth noting, however, that Adler himself gave me some of the fundamental tools for thinking more critically about everything I would read from that point onward. That, in turn, reverberated through my life: my job, career, religion, family, and friends—as well as my past, present, and future. Nothing was the same after I had upped my critical reading skills. Going forward, nothing would be taken at face value; nothing would be taken for granted.

Shortly after reading *How to Read a Book* I turned my attention to challenging myself with the hardest reading I could find. Like some college students, I suspect, over the course of my education I had been accumulating a list of books to read. As a chemistry major whose contact with the humanities was necessarily limited, I freely sought and accepted book recommendations. The sources of my book list—effectively the beginning of my alternative education in the liberal arts—consisted of references from a hodgepodge of sources: my close friends, my pastor, classmates, popular culture, and a medley of jumbled interests. Footnotes and endnotes from nonfiction readings provided more additions to my list. By early 1995 my catalog of authors and texts to read had grown quite long, numbering well over 100. In fact, the list had grown unmanageable. I had no concrete sense of priority for tackling the backlog. Given that confusion and my enthusiasm for *How to Read a Book*, I made a fateful decision: I would buy Britannica’s *Great Books*. I made the set a present to myself on the eve of my twenty-fourth birthday, purchasing a crisp, new 1990 set on August 25, 1995 for \$922.85 after taxes.

Thus began my pursuit of a kind of unofficial second bachelor's degree in the liberal arts. It was what kids call a "do-over." Shortly after the purchase I moved, alone, into a small studio apartment. In order to concentrate on reading, I spent the rest of the year and most of 1996 without a television. I attended few to no movies, and barely read the newspaper. Every night after work, and on the weekends, I proceeded to study—or sometimes merely read—the *Great Books*. I began at the beginning of the set, with Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. I decided that I would attempt a loose chronological reading, skipping ahead when inspired and then going back. By the winter of 1996–1997, I had read well over 100 works.

Although today I no longer read in the set as intensely as I did during those first two years, my reading has continued—with many welcome and unwelcome interruptions. With some exceptions (Plotinus, blah; Tacitus, boring!), I continue to find the set, in the main, rewarding and enjoyable. Nothing I have learned about the strengths and weaknesses of great book promoters has caused, in me, a desire to discontinue my almost 20-year-old effort to read the set. So for me there will be no end to this story.

Appendices

1. Amended Erskine List as of 1927¹

Homer

Bible, Old Testament

Aeschylus

Sophocles

Euripides

Herodotus

Thucydides

Aristophanes

Plato

Aristotle

Cicero

Lucretius

Virgil

Horace

Ovid

Plutarch

Lucian

M. Aurelius Antoninus

Plotinus

Bible, New Testament

St. Augustine

The Volsunga Saga

The Song of Roland

St. Thomas Aquinas

Dante

Francesco Petrarca

Chaucer

Leonardo da Vinci

Machiavelli

Erasmus

Thomas More

Rabelais

Montaigne

Cervantes

Bacon

Shakespeare

Galileo

Grotius

Hobbes

Descartes

Corneille

Milton

Molière

Spinoza

Locke

Racine

Isaac Newton

Swift

Montesquieu

Voltaire

Henry Fielding

David Hume

Rousseau

Adam Smith

Kant

Gibbon

Jeremy Bentham

Goethe

Thomas Malthus

Hegel

Schopenhauer

Balzac

John Stuart Mill

Darwin

Thackeray

Dickens

Karl Marx

Dostoevsky

Pasteur

Francis Galton

Ibsen

Tolstoy

Thomas Hardy

William James

Nietzsche

Freud

2. The 102 Great Ideas
(From the 1952 edition)²

Angel

Animal

Aristocracy

Art

Astronomy

Beauty

Being

Cause

Chance

Change

Citizen

Constitution

Courage

Custom and Convention

Definition

Democracy

Desire

Dialectic

Duty

Education

Element

Emotion

Eternity

Evolution

Experience

Family

Fate

Form
God
Good and Evil
Government
Habit
Happiness
History
Honor
Hypothesis
Idea
Immortality
Induction
Infinity
Judgment
Justice
Knowledge
Labor
Language
Law
Liberty
Life and Death
Logic
Love
Man
Mathematics
Matter
Mechanics
Medicine
Memory and Imagination

Metaphysics

Mind

Monarchy

Nature

Necessity and Contingency

Oligarchy

One and Many

Opinion

Opposition

Philosophy

Physics

Pleasure and Pain

Poetry

Principle

Progress

Prophecy

Prudence

Punishment

Quality

Quantity

Reasoning

Relation

Religion

Revolution

Rhetoric

Same and Other

Science

Sense

Sign and Symbol

Sin

Slavery

Soul

Space

State

Temperance

Theology

Time

Truth

Tyranny

Universal and Particular

Virtue and Vice

War and Peace

Wealth

Will

Wisdom

World

**3. "List of authors and works unanimously agreed upon
as of unquestionable merit"
Early 1944³**

- | | |
|--------------------|--|
| 1. Homer: | Iliad; Odyssey. |
| 2. The Bible: | (all of the Old and New Testaments unexpurgated, including the Apochrypha). |
| 3. Aeschylus: | Agamemnon; Furies; Libation Bearers; Seven Against Thebes; Persians; Prometheus |
| 4. Sophocles: | Oedipus Rex; Oedipus Coloneus; Antigone; Electra; Ajax; Philoctetes. |
| 5. Euripides: | Medea; Electra; Hippolytus; Alcestis; Bacchae; The Trojan Women; Iphigenia in Aulis; Iphigenia in Tauris. |
| 6. Herodotus: | Histories. |
| 7. Thucydides: | History of the Peloponnesian War. |
| 8. Euclid: | Elements of Geometry. |
| 9. Plato: | Apology; Phaedo; Crito; Symposium; Meno; Protagoras; Phaedrus; Ion; Sophist; Philebus; Politicus; Gorgias; Republic; Parmenides; Thaetetus; Timaeus; Laws. |
| 10. Aristotle: | Organon; Physics; Metaphysics; Ethics; Politics; Poetics. |
| 11. Galen: | Of the Natural Faculties; The Utility of Parts. |
| 12. St. Augustine: | Confessions; Enchiridion; Of the Teacher; On Christian Doctrine. |
| 13. St. Thomas: | Summa Theologica, Part I and Part I-II (except Treatise on Human Acts). |
| 14. Dante: | The Divine Comedy. |
| 15. Machiavelli: | The Prince, with a few selected Discourses added. |
| 16. Cervantes: | Don Quixote. |
| 17. Shakespeare: | Hamlet; Macbeth; Lear; Othello; Julius Caesar; Romeo and Juliet; Much Ado About Nothing; Tempest; Antony and Cleopatra; Twelfth Night; |

- As You Like It; A Midsummer Night's Dream; Henry IV (I and II); Merchant of Venice; Sonnets.
18. Galileo: The Two New Sciences.
 19. Harvey: On the Motion of the Heart; On Generation.
 20. Newton: Principia Mathematica; Optics.
 21. Hobbes: Leviathan.
 22. Descartes: Discourse on Method; The Passions of the Soul; Meditations on the First Philosophy; Geometry; Harmony.
 23. Spinoza: Ethics.
 24. Pascal: Meditations.
 25. Locke: Essay Concerning Human Understanding; second essay of Civil Government.
 26. Hume: A Treatise of Human Nature.
 27. Rousseau: Social Contract; Dissertation on Political Economy; Confessions.
 28. Gibbon: Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.
 29. Dostoievski: The Brothers Karamazov; Crime and Punishment.
 30. Marx: The Communist Manifesto; Capital.
 31. Tolstoi: War and Peace.
 32. Freud: Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex; Interpretation of Dreams; New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis.

4. List of 65 from October 20, 1944⁴
(divided by potential volumes)

1. Homer
2. Aeschylus/Sophocles
3. Euripides/Aristophanes
4. Herodotus/Thucydides
5. Bible
- 6–7. Plato
- 8–9. Aristotle
10. Euclid
11. Hippocrates/Galen
12. Lucretius/Marcus Aurelius/Epictetus
13. Plutarch
14. Tacitus
15. Virgil
16. Plotinus
- 17–18. St. Augustine
19. Apollonius/Nicomachus/Archimedes
20. Burnt Njal
21. Dante
- 22–23. St. Thomas
24. Chaucer
25. Cervantes
26. Rabelais
27. Shakespeare
28. Bacon
29. Montaigne
30. Machiavelli
31. Copernicus/Kepler
32. Ptolemy
33. Galileo

34. Gilbert
35. Descartes
36. Spinoza
37. Harvey
38. Newton
39. Pascal
40. Milton
41. Hobbes
42. Molière
43. Locke
44. Swift
45. Fielding
46. Adam Smith
47. Rousseau
- 48–49. Gibbon
50. Hume
51. Montesquieu
52. Kant
53. Federalist Papers
54. Lavoisier
55. Goethe
56. Hegel
57. Marx
58. Mill
59. Tolstoi
60. Dostoevski
61. Melville
62. Faraday
63. Darwin
64. James
65. Freud

5. Great Books of the Western World (From the 1952 edition)⁵

Introductory Volumes

1. A Liberal Education
2. The Great Ideas I
3. The Great Ideas II
4. Homer
5. Aeschylus, Sophocles,
Euripides, Aristophanes
6. Herodotus, Thucydides
7. Plato
8. Aristotle I
9. Aristotle II
10. Hippocrates, Galen
11. Euclid, Archimedes, Apollonius, Nicomachus
12. Lucretius, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius
13. Virgil
14. Plutarch
15. Tacitus
16. Ptolemy, Copernicus, Kepler
17. Plotinus
18. Augustine
19. Thomas Aquinas I
20. Thomas Aquinas II
21. Dante
22. Chaucer
23. Machiavelli, Hobbes
24. Rabelais
25. Montaigne

26. Shakespeare I
27. Shakespeare II
28. Gilbert, Galileo, Harvey
29. Cervantes
30. Francis Bacon
31. Descartes, Spinoza
32. Milton
33. Pascal
34. Newton, Huygens
35. Locke, Berkeley, Hume
36. Swift, Sterne
37. Fielding
38. Montesquieu, Rousseau
39. Adam Smith
40. Gibbon I
41. Gibbon II
42. Kant
43. American State Papers, The Federalist, J. S. Mill
44. Boswell
45. Lavoisier, Fourier, Faraday
46. Hegel
47. Goethe
48. Melville
49. Darwin
50. Marx, Engels
51. Tolstoy
52. Dostoevsky
53. William James
54. Freud

6. Adler's Writings and Reprinted/Transcribed Speeches on Teaching, Learning, and General Education

(Arranged chronologically, by date of first appearance)⁶

- 1939 "A Christian Educator," *Orate Fratres* 13 (Jan. 22)
 "The Crisis in Contemporary Education," *The Social Frontier* 5 (Feb.)
 "Are the Schools Doing Their Job?" *Town Meeting* 4 (Mar. 6)
 "Education and Democracy," *Commonweal* 29 (Mar. 17)
 "Tradition and Novelty in Education," *Better Schools* 1 (June)
 "Liberalism and Liberal Education," *The Education Record* (July)
- 1940 "Education in Contemporary America," *Better Schools* 2 (Mar.-Apr.)
 "Docility and Authority," *Commonweal* 31 (Apr. 5)
 "Docility and History," *Commonweal* 32 (Apr. 26)
 "This Pre-War Generation," *Harper's Magazine* (Oct.)
- 1941 "Invitation to the Pain of Learning," *The Journal of Educational Sociology* 14 (Feb.)
 "What Is Basic About English?" *College English* 2 (Apr.)
 "Are There Absolute and Universal Principles on Which Education Should Be Founded?" *Educational Trends* (July-Aug.)
 "The Order of Learning," *The Moraga Quarterly* (Autumn)
 "The Chicago School," *Harper's Magazine* (Sept.)
 "Progressive Education? No!" *The Rotarian* (Sept.)
- 1942 "What Every Schoolboy Doesn't Know," *Pulse* (Mar.)
- 1945 "Liberal Education—Theory and Practice," *The University of Chicago Magazine* (Mar.)
 "The State of the Nation's Higher Education—Two Views of Benjamin Fine's New Book," *Saturday Review* (Dec.)
- 1951 "Labor, Leisure, and Liberal Education," *The Journal of General Education* 6 (Oct.)
- 1952 "Adult Education," *Journal of Higher Education* 23 (Feb.)
 "Doctor and Disciple," *Journal of Higher Education*, 23 (Apr.)
- 1956 "Controversy in the Life and Teaching of Philosophy," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*
- 1957 "Liberal Education in an Industrial Democracy," lecture in San Francisco (Apr.)

- 1958 *The Revolution in Education* (with Milton Mayer)
- 1959 "The Professor the Dialogue?" *The Owl* (Santa Clara University)
- 1962 "Liberal Schooling in the Twentieth Century," Pitcairn-Crabbe Foundation lecture series
- 1974 "The Joy of Learning," *KNOW* 1
- 1976 "Education and the Pursuit of Happiness," University of Denver commencement address (May 29)
 "Teaching and Learning," in *From Parnassus* (Dora Weiner and William Keylor, eds.)
 "The Schooling of a People," in *The Americans: 1776*, Vol. 2 (Irving Kristol and Paul Weaver, eds.)
- 1977 *Reforming Education: The Schooling of a People and Their Education Beyond Schooling* (Geraldine Van Doren, ed.)
- 1978 "Books, Television, and Learning," in *Television, the Book, and the Classroom* (John Y. Cole, ed.)
 "Children Must Be Taught How to Learn," *Long Island Newsday* (Sept. 17)
- 1979 "Education in a Democracy," *American Educator* 3 (Spring)
- 1982 *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto* (on behalf of the Paideia group)
 "A Great Teacher Tells—Step by Step—How to Teach Great Ideas," *American School Board Journal* 169 (Jan.)
 "The Essential Elements for a New Educational System," *The Institute Newsletter* 1 (Feb.–Mar.) from the Dallas Institute of Humanities & Culture
 "The Paideia Proposal," *American School Board Journal* 169 (July)
- 1983 *Paideia Problems and Possibilities* (on behalf of the Paideia group)
 "The Reform of Public Schools," *The Center Magazine* 16 (Sept.–Oct.)
 "The Paideia Response," *Harvard Educational Review* 53 (Nov.)
 "Revising American Education," *The Commonwealth* 77 (Dec. 19)

Appendix 6 (continued)

- 1984 *The Paideia Program* (on behalf of the Paideia group)
- 1985 "Narrative Grading," *The Paideia Bulletin* 1 (Dec.)
- 1986 *The Guidebook to Learning: For a Lifelong Pursuit of Wisdom*
 "Minimal vs. Maximal Reforms," *The Paideia Bulletin* 2 (Mar.–Apr.)
 "The Wednesday Revolution," *The Paideia Bulletin* 2 (May–June)
 "Teaching as a Cooperative Art," *Basic Education* 30 (June)
 "The Latest Educational Mania—Critical Thinking," *The Paideia Bulletin* 2 (Sept.–Oct.)
 "'Critical Thinking' Programs: Why They Won't Work," *Education Week* 6 (Sept. 17)
 "Schooling Is Not Education," *New York Times* (Dec. 2)
- 1987 "The Three Columns Revisited," *The Paideia Bulletin*, Special Edition (May)
 "Column One—The Stumbling Block," *The Paideia Bulletin* 3 (Sept.–Oct.)
- 1988 *Reforming Education: The Opening of the American Mind*, revised (Geraldine Van Doren, ed.)
 "Declaration of Principles," by Adler and Paideia Associates, for National Center for the Paideia Program
 "Learning Disputes," *Los Angeles Times* (Jan. 10)
 "Further Reflections on Column Two," *The Paideia Bulletin* 4 (Jan.–Feb.)
 "Reforming Education—No Quick Fix," lecture at the University of North Carolina (Sept. 21)
 "Sexism, Racism, and the Recommended Reading for Paideia Seminars," *The Paideia Bulletin* 4 (Nov.–Dec.)
- 1989 "The Intrinsic and Extrinsic Obstacles to Good Schooling for All," *The Paideia Bulletin* 5 (May–June)
- 1990 "No Watered-Down Seminars," *The Paideia Bulletin* 6 (Jan.–Feb.)
 "The Great Books, the Great Ideas, and a Lifetime of Learning," Lowell Lecture, Harvard (Apr. 11)
 "A Realistic Appraisal of Paideia's Future," *The Paideia Bulletin* 7 (Sept.–Oct.)

**7. The Great Ideas Program, Vol. VII, Imaginative
Literature II**
Excerpts from the Fifth Reading:
Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*⁷

Guide to Fifth Reading, Part VIII

Why is the narrator called “Ishmael”?

Ishmael, in the Old Testament, is the son of Abraham and the bondswoman Hagar. (See Genesis 16:11–16.) The name means “God hears (or will hear).” It has come to mean “social outcast,” following the role assigned to Ishmael by the angel of the Lord—“And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man’s hand against him” (Gen. 16:12).

Why does Melville give this name to his narrator? Is the Ishmael of the story an outcast from society because of his wanderlust and his quest for the remote? Is he one of those men who do not belong to the common life and ways of men—an “Isolato”? Was Melville also such an outcast? Does he identify himself with Ishmael? Why does he choose an “Ishmael” to tell his story? Does Ishmael every play a part in the story in accordance with his name? Is there any particular significance in having the ship that rescues him called the “Rachel”? (p. 166)

Is *Moby Dick* defective in formal structure?

This work includes various literary genres—travel, history, saga, drama, epic, natural history, philosophy, mythology, and fictional narrative. This nineteenth-century American author often borrows language, images, and dramatic devices from Shakespeare. The work is extremely episodic in form, jumping from one scene and event to another in 135 chapters, some of them only a page or less in length. Also, the work is said to have very little plot, in the sense of a logical progression of events to a climax and conclusion. Melville uses little if any of the narrative devices of the conventional novelist, merely introducing subjects and events as he sees fit, as the voyage of the “Pequod” proceeds. He jumps frequently from the first-person account by Ishmael to the third-person account of an omniscient narrator. For these and other reasons, many readers consider *Moby Dick* confusing or dull.

Does this work confuse or bore you? Do you accept Melville's unique manner of narration with interest and enjoyment, or does it annoy and hamper you? Does this work have a unity? If so, where does the unity lie—in its form, its mood, its style, its theme, or its general over-all effect? If we do not have the traditional plot, as a definite line of action, what sort of plot do we have here? Is this a plot centered on characters, ideas, or something else? (p. 168–169)

Self-Testing Questions

1. What are the sights of New Bedford?
2. What is the menu at the Try Pots Inn?
3. What do the upper classes in Queequeg's country use for sofas?
4. What is a Specksynder?
5. Does Ahab retain his intellectual power in his madness?
6. What is a "gam"?
7. What is a "brit"?
8. What is the difference between a Fast-Fish and a Loose-Fish?
9. What is the "cassock"?
10. What led the blacksmith to his ruin? (p. 170)

8. Excerpt from *Great Ideas from the Great Books* Chapter 9: The Meaning of History⁸

Dear Dr. Adler,

Some wit once remarked that all that we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history. Can we derive any knowledge or guidance from the study of history? Do the great thinkers discern any meaning in the flow of historical events? What are the basic views about the meaning of history?—E. D.

Dear E. D.,

We seek various kinds of significance in the study of history. In the first place, we find meaning and value in historical knowledge for its own sake. Having an ordered and accurate picture of the past satisfies our desire for objective knowledge and our need for solidarity and contact with the former generations. It is good not to be restricted to the present moment; our lives are enriched by having a sense of the past.

The great historians have been motivated by this desire to record or recover the past. Thucydides tells the story of a war in which he himself had participated, and Gibbon recreates the fall and decline of an ancient empire. They and other fine historians try to put into a meaningful pattern the material they relate. They do not give us a mess of unrelated particular facts. Through their thoughtful selection and significant arrangement of past events, they enable us to find some meaning on the level of mere historical description.

But historians and their readers have sought another more practical type of meaning in history. Herodotus seeks to commemorate glorious deeds; Tacitus wants to perpetuate conspicuous instances of virtue and vice; Polybius points to the alternation of triumph and disaster as a warning against pride. Many people seek moral edification from history, and claim to find moral lessons in the annals of the past. Plutarch's biographies of illustrious Greeks and Romans belong to this type of historical edification.

Still another type of meaning is sought in the basic pattern of the historical process as a whole. There are two different answers to this quest for historical meaning.

According to the first answer, history moves in recurrent cycles. States and societies move through stages of birth, growth, decline, and death, and then the cycle starts all over again. This cyclical view was dominant in ancient Greek and Roman thought about history. The ancient historians were sure we could profit from the study of

history because history repeats itself. Certain modern philosophers of history, such as Vico, Spengler, and Toynbee, have resuscitated this ancient notion as an essential element in their theories.

According to the second answer, history moves continuously toward a goal or fulfillment. The pattern of historical change is progressive, not cyclical. This is the Biblical, or Christian conception of history, and it was first propounded in systematic form by St. Augustine in *The City of God*. In his view, human history proceeds under the guidance of divine providence toward the Kingdom of God at the end of time and beyond history.

Some religious leaders and groups have interpreted the Bible as saying that the Kingdom of God would come in time and on earth. In modern times this religious view has been translated into secular terms. The German philosopher Hegel sees history as progressively achieving its ultimate goal, epoch after epoch, culminating in the German-Christian world of his own day. His student Karl Marx sees the goal and terminus of human history in a classless society of perfect freedom and equality, to be attained after a series of class struggles, imperialist wars, and bloody revolutions.

Most professional historians and philosophers would agree that the meaning of history cannot be fully discovered in history itself—the objective record of past events. What we think about history depends on our basic view of the nature and destiny of man, and on our conception of man's relation to God, and of the causes at work in the human world as a whole.

9. Fadiman's Entry on Adler in *The Lifetime Reading Plan*⁹

99. Mortimer J. Adler (1902)

How to Read a Book

For half a century, I have been an amateur reader and a for a third of a century both an amateur and a professional one. But I am still learning how to read. I do not mean how to decipher words. That is merely a useful trick, just slightly above the capacity of a chimpanzee. It is taught, more or less, in the schools, and suffices for the reading of most books and magazines, virtually all newspapers, and absolutely all lavatory signs. I mean the reading of books of some weight and density, into which went hard mental work and out of which comes real mental change. Such are the ones we have been considering in the Plan. Such reading involves a complex, often intense activity, not the passive reception of the author's message. And the result of such reading is not "finishing the book" but starting something endless in the reader's mind.

Mr. Adler's well-known work is an honest one, but it is not quite honestly titled. It should be called something like *How to Read a Great Book* or *How to Read an Original Communication*. He says, "I have tried to write a light book about heavy reading." Always clear, he is not light. But the "heavy reading" part is true enough. His rules, in fact, are more useful for philosophy and the sciences than they are for the reading of pure works of the imagination. Yet they are of some profit in all cases.

I speak of rules; and there are rules here, and concrete tips, and a whole course of instruction. Still, this is no manual. Rather is it, as the author says, "a books about reading in relation to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." It is less about reading as a specific action than about a liberal education in general, about the links that connect great literature with free minds and so with free men. The ideas animating *How to Read a Book* are those animating the book you now hold in your hand; and it was from Mr. Adler, among other great teachers, that I learned them.

As I suggested in the introductory talk with the reader, perhaps you should digest Mr. Adler first, before starting on the Plan. But this is not essential, any more than it is essential that you follow his prescriptions literally. It is the spirit, not the letter, of his exhortation that counts.

The Appendix [of Adler's book] lists a whole library of great books, duplicating our own in part, but laying much greater stress on works of theology, philosophy, and the physical and social sciences.

10. Participants in Moyers–Adler Six *Great Ideas* Series¹⁰

Note: Listed alphabetically with titles from press release.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Occupation</u>
Bernstein, Jeremy	Physicist at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, NJ
Bullock, Lord Allen	Historian and Fellow of the British Academy
Deng, Francis	Sudan's Ambassador to Canada
Duke, Robin	Business and Population Advisor
Flowers, Betty Sue	Associate Dean of Graduate Studies at the University of Texas
Highwater, Jamake	Native American Author and Artist
Hufstедler, Shirley	Judge, US Court of Appeals, Los Angeles, CA, and formerly US Secretary of Education
Kwapong, Alexander	Assistant Rector of United Nations University in Tokyo
Love, Ruth B.	Chicago Superintendent of Schools
Mosbacher, Robert	Independent Oil Producer
Newman, Jon O.	Judge, US Court of Appeals, Hartford, CT
Slater, Joseph	President, Aspen Institute of Humanistic Studies in Colorado
Soedjatmoko	Indonesian Philosopher and Rector of United Nations University in Tokyo
Tyler, Gus	Assistant President, International Ladies Garment Workers Union
von Wechmar, Rudiger	German Ambassador to the United Nations

11. Paideia Group Members¹¹

Note: Listed alphabetically with titles from *The Paideia Proposal*.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Occupation</u>
Mortimer J. Adler	Director, Institute for Philosophical Research; Chairman, Board of Editors, Encyclopædia Britannica
Jacques Barzun	Former Provost, Columbia University; Literary Adviser, Charles Scribner's Sons
Otto Bird	Former head, General Program of Liberal Studies, University of Notre Dame
Leon Botstein	President, Bard College; President, Simon's Rock of Bard College
Ernest L. Boyer	President, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Washington, DC
Nicholas L. Caputi	Principal, Skyline High School, Oakland, CA
Douglass Cater	Senior Fellow, Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies
Donald Cowan	Former President, University of Dallas; Fellow, Dallas Institute of Humanities and Cultures
Alonzo R. Crim	Superintendent, Atlanta Public Schools, Atlanta, GA
Clifton Fadiman	Author and critic
Dennis Gray	Deputy Director, Council for Basic Education, Washington, DC
Richard Hunt	Senior Lecturer and Director of the Andrew W. Mellon Faculty Fellowships Program, Harvard University
Ruth B. Love	General Superintendent of Schools, Chicago Board of Education
James Nelson	Director, Wye Institute, Inc., Queenstown, MD

James O'Toole	Professor of Management, Graduate School of Business Administration, University of Southern California
Theodore T. Puck	President and Director, Eleanor Roosevelt Institute for Cancer Research, Inc., Denver; Professor Biochemistry, Biophysics, and Genetics, University of Colorado
Adolph W. Schmidt	Former Chairman, Board of Visitors and Governors of St. John's College, Annapolis and Santa Fe
Adele Simmons	President, Hampshire College
Theodore R. Sizer	Chairman, A Study of High Schools; former Headmaster, Philips Academy—Andover
Charles Van Doren	Associate Director, Institute for Philosophical Research; Vice President/Editorial, Encyclopædia Britannica
Geraldine Van Doren	Senior Fellow, Institute for Philosophical Research; Secretary, Paideia Project
John Van Doren	Senior Fellow, Institute for Philosophical Research; Executive Director, <i>Great Ideas Today</i>

12. The 30 Questions In *Paideia Problems and Possibilities*¹²

1. Is not *The Paideia Proposal* just another form of the “back to basics” movement?
2. Does not *The Paideia Proposal* amount to little more than a call for the restoration of a classical education, its only novelty being that it advocates giving such an education to all the children instead of only to some—the college-bound?
3. There is much talk today about strengthening the humanities in our schools. Is *The Paideia Proposal* an effort to do just that?
4. Is not *The Paideia Proposal* implicitly, if not overtly, elitist in its recommendations?
5. *The Paideia Proposal* reiterates that little word “all” and stresses it by adding “all without exception.” Is this merely for rhetorical effect? Do the members of the Paideia group really believe that what they are advocating is applicable to all—all without exception? If so, how can they persuade those of us who have grave doubts about the soundness of their belief?
6. There are many reform movements today that demand that the quality of education in our public schools be improved. Are the Paideia group’s efforts to be identified with one of these?
7. You say that your required course of study should be the same for all the children in school? Does this mean that you are calling for the elimination of the special education programs that now exist?
8. *The Paideia Proposal* calls for the elimination of all electives, except the choice of a second language, the study of which is itself required. Will this not stultify the individuality of individually different students, with different interests, propensities, or talents? Will this not work hardship on the specially gifted, who should be allowed to make the most of their special gifts? And is not your elimination of electives an authoritarian infringement on individual liberty and freedom of choice?
9. In a Paideia school, what will happen to the extracurricular activities so prevalent and so preoccupying in today’s secondary

schools? Specifically, what role do you see for student activity on debating teams, school newspapers, and in athletic events?

10. You say you are not prescribing a *rigid* curriculum, that you allow for differences between schools and among different school districts. At the same time, you insist not only upon a required course of study, but you indicate subject-matters such as history, mathematics, biology, and so forth which you obviously think cannot be left out of any school anywhere. Is this not contradictory, not to say disingenuous, on your part?
11. You have mentioned computer literacy among the skills to be developed in Paideia schools. What position does the Paideia group take on the new technologies?
12. Does *The Paideia Proposal's* elimination of all particularized job training from the prescribed course of study mean that it calls for the dismantling of our vocational high schools? Does the Paideia group think that vocational training, in the sense of specialized training for this or that line of work, is without value? Is there no need to help the young prepare to earn a living?
13. What age should Paideia schooling begin and how long should it last?
14. What is the position of the Paideia group with regard to state-mandated courses, such as state history, personal hygiene, driver education, or sex education?
15. What about state-mandated competency exams?
16. How does the Paideia program take care of civics and the formation of moral character? Neither of these things appears to be mentioned as part of the required course of study.
17. Your education manifesto mentions only public schools. Does it apply equally to private or independent schools, both parochial and other?

30 Questions (cont.)

18. [Excerpted] *The Paideia Proposal* fails to recognize the grave social and economic inequalities that still prevail in our society, especially the absence of an equality of economic opportunity that confronts a substantial portion of schoolchildren. Is it not whistling in the dark, or just making empty gestures toward an ideal, to suppose that an effort to establish equality of educational opportunity can succeed before our society has first succeeded in equalizing social and economic opportunity and conditions?
19. [Excerpted] How does the Paideia group define the minimum standards of accomplishment for graduation in each of the three types of learning that it insists upon as ingredients of basic schooling? What sort of tests, examinations, or other measures are to be used for determining whether students have met the minimum standards? How do these Paideia standards and measurements support your claim that a Paideia schooling will be of much higher quality than any that now exists?
20. Does the Paideia plan apply to younger children—children in the first six grades? It would appear to be much more applicable to high school students or at most to those from grade seven up. Is that the case?
21. Will the Paideia program hold the interest of students? Can they be motivated to do the kind of work it calls for? If they are not given training for particular jobs by which to earn a living, will not many of them drop out of school? If, for that reason or any other, they lack interest and motivation, how can discipline be maintained?
22. How does the Paideia program deal with the nonacademic interests of the students—their social life, their games and sports, their outside activities?
23. Clearly, the success of the Paideia program depends upon the number of good teachers available. They appear to be in short supply. Can we find enough teachers competent to teach calculus and physics? May not this fact militate against putting the Paideia proposal into practice?

24. Do [the three modes of teaching] imply that a Paideia school will have three distinct types of teachers on its instructional staff? If not do you envisage every member of the staff as being competent in all three modes of teaching and as teaching in all three ways?
25. Does *The Paideia Proposal* require teachers to be competent in all areas of the subjects to be taught didactically? Or, if not all subjects, then at least more than one—the one in which that teacher majored in college or in the course of teacher training?
26. Does not coaching, especially with regard to the skill of writing, required, on the part of students, that they do much more than is now expected of them and also, on the part of teachers, that they spend much more time in criticizing and commenting on the written work turned in?
27. Does the size of the school make a difference to the possibility of success in carrying out the Paideia program?
28. Ideally, what should the appropriate numbers be—what should the teacher–student ratios be—for the different modes of teaching?
29. Will the Paideia program require structural changes in school buildings? Should there be different types of rooms for different modes of teaching and learning?
30. Does the Paideia program call for a daily and weekly schedule of class hours different from the customary schedules now in operation?
31. Will the Paideia program in full operation cost more than the existing programs?

13. Changes to GBWW-2¹³

Updated Translations

Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; Aeschylus' *Complete Plays*; Sophocles' *Complete Plays*; Euripides' *Complete Plays*; Aristophanes' *Complete Plays*; Lucretius' *The Way Things Are*; Virgil's *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid*; Augustine's *Confessions*; Dante's *Divine Comedy*; Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Canterbury Tales*; Montaigne's *Essays*; Cervantes' *Don Quixote*; Goethe's *Faust* (parts I and II).

New Authors and Works (in main 54 volumes):

Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; Molière's *School for Wives*, *Critique of the School for Wives*, *Tartuffe*, *Don Juan*, *Miser*, *Would-Be Gentleman*, and *Would-Be Invalid*; Racine's *Berenice* and *Phaedra*; Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*; Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*; Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*; Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*; Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*; Austen's *Emma*; Eliot's *Middlemarch*; Dickens' *Little Dorrit*; Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*; Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, *The Wild Duck*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Master Builder*.

Twentieth-Century Works and Authors (last six volumes):

Vol. 55 – Philosophy and Religion: W. James' *Pragmatism*; Bergson's *An Introduction to Metaphysics*; Dewey's *Experience and Education*; Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World*; Russell's *Problems of Philosophy*; Heidegger's *What Is Metaphysics?*; Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*; Barth's *Word of God and the Word of Man*.

Vol. 56 – Natural Science: Poincaré's *Science and Hypothesis*; Planck's *Scientific Autobiography and Other Papers*; Whitehead's *An Introduction to Mathematics*; Einstein's *Relativity: The Special and the General Theory*; Eddington's *The Expanding Universe*; Bohr's *Selections from Atomic Theory and the Description of Nature*; Hardy's *A Mathematician's Apology*; Heisenberg's *Physics and Philosophy*; Schrödinger's *What is Life?*; Dobzhansky's *Genetics and the Origin of Species*; Waddington's *Nature of Life*.

Vol. 57 – Social Science I: Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*; Tawney's *Acquisitive Society*; and Keynes's *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*.

Vol. 58 – Social Science II: Frazer's *Selections from The Golden Bough*; Weber's *Selections from Essays in Sociology*; Huizinga's *Waning of the Middle Ages*; Lévi-Strauss' *Selections from Structural Anthropology*.

Vol. 59 – Imaginative Literature I: H. James' *Beast in the Jungle*; Shaw's *Saint Joan*; Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; Chekhov's *Uncle Vania*; Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*; Proust's *Swann in Love*; Cather's *A Lost Lady*; Mann's *Death in Venice*; Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Vol. 60 – Imaginative Literature II: Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*; Kafka's *Metamorphosis*; Lawrence's *Prussian Officer*; T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land*; O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*; Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*; Faulkner's *Rose for Emily*; Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*; Hemingway's *Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber*; Orwell's *Animal Farm*; Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

14. A Sampling Given and Classified by Adler of Black, Female, and Latin American Authors Listed as Additional Readings in the Syntopicon¹⁴

Black Authors

Chinua Achebe

James Baldwin

Gwendolyn Brooks

Ralph Ellison

Zora Neale Hurston

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Toni Morrison

Wole Soyinka

Alice Walker

Richard Wright

Female Authors

Hannah Arendt

Margaret Atwood

Mary Ritter Beard

Simone de Beauvoir

Ruth Benedict

Charlotte Brontë

Emily Brontë

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Rachel Carson

Marie Curie

Emily Dickinson

Isak Dinesen (Karen Dinesen)

Karen Horney

Jane Jacobs

Suzanne Langer

Harper Lee

Doris Lessing

Margaret Mead

Flannery O'Connor

Sylvia Plath

Mary Shelley

Harriet Beecher Stowe

Barbara Tuchman

Anne Tyler

Simone Weil

Eudora Welty

Edith Wharton

Latin American Authors

Jorge Luis Borges

Carlos Fuentes

Gabriel García Márquez

Pablo Neruda

Octavio Paz

Mario Vargas Llosa

Notes

Introduction

1. W. B. Carnochan, "Where Did Great Books Come from Anyway?" *The Book Collector* 48, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 352–371; Hugh Stephenson Moorhead, "The Great Books Movement" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1964), 13–17; Tim Lacy, "Dreams of a Democratic Culture: Revising the Origins of the Great Books Idea," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 7, no. 4 (October 2008): 403–407; Paul Tankard, "Reading Lists," *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism* 28, no. 3 (2006): 337–360; Susanne Beyer and Lothar Gorris, "SPIEGEL Interview with Umberto Eco: 'We Like Lists Because We Don't Want to Die'," *SPIEGEL Online*, November 11, 2009, available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/spiegel-interview-with-umberto-eco-we-like-lists-because-we-don-t-want-to-die-a-659577.html>; Jane Austen, *Emma*, vol. 46 in *Great Books of the Western World*, (ed.) Mortimer J. Adler (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1995), pp. 3, 16.
2. Moorhead, 13–17; Mortimer J. Adler, *Philosopher at Large: An Intellectual Autobiography, 1902–1976* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 55; Stephen Greenblatt and Joseph Leo Koerner, "Glories of Classicism," *The New York Review of Books*, February 21, 2013, available at: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/feb/21/glories-classicism/>; David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 92.
3. I first saw the precise phrase "great books idea" in Graff's *Professing Literature* (p. 134). James Sloan Allen, however, used the phrase often in his book, *The Romance of Commerce and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 86. Allen linked the phrase to the "Bildungsideal" he used to characterize the total program "espoused" by Hutchins and Adler (p. 80). The oldest occurrence of the phrase I have found came as the title of a 1964 article by Mortimer Adler (in *KNOW* magazine, vol. II, no. 1, pp. 2–5, 22).
4. Adler, *Philosopher*, 30–31, 35, 55–58, 237–238; Lacy, 405; Lowenthal, xv, xvi, 46–47, 63–64, 66, 68–69, 231, 373–375. The Friedrich Nietzsche reference comes from *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* (1873–1876).
5. For more on Adler's life, see his two autobiographies *Philosopher at Large* (New York: Macmillan, 1977) and *A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror* (New York: Macmillan, 1992).
6. For more on "community of discourse," see John Higham and Paul Conkin (eds.), *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 42–63. Other intellectual historians have used Hollinger's idea directly and indirectly, including

- Thomas Bender, Roland Marchand, Louis Menand, and Lewis Perry. The most recent of these is Menand's *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001). In 1998, Randall Collins restated Hollinger's concept in the broader terms of networks and social links in the *Sociology of Philosophies* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), xviii.
7. Daniel Bell, "The Cultural Wars: American Intellectual Life, 1967–1992," *The Wilson Quarterly* (Summer 1992): 96.
 8. For more on cultural capital, see Bourdieu, "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction," in *Power and Ideology in Education*, (eds.) Jerome Karabel and A. H. Halsey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 487–511, and "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, (ed.) John G. Richardson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 242–258; Douglas B. Holt, "Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption?" *The Journal of Consumer Research* 25, no. 1 (June 1998): 21–22; Elliot B. Weininger and Annette Lareau, "Cultural Capital" and "Cultural Capital in Schools," in *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, (ed.) George Ritzer (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2007).
 9. Many works use the concept "democratic culture" but few theorize about it alone. Given that, the following have influenced my thinking over time: George Kateb, "A Glance at Democratic Individuality," *Intellectual History Newsletter* 24 (2002): 38–46; David Zaret, *Origins of a Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, and the Public Sphere of Early-Modern England* (Princeton, 1999); Larry Diamond (ed.), *Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993); Henry Giroux, "Living in the Age of Imposed Amnesia: The Eclipse of Democratic Formative Culture," *Truthout*, November 16, 2010, available at: <http://www.truth-out.org/living-age-imposed-amnesia-the-eclipse-democratic-formative-culture65144>; Michael Boylan, "Are There Natural Human Rights?" *New York Times: Opinionator: The Stone*, May 29, 2011, available at: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/29/are-there-natural-human-rights/>.
 10. "Democratic Culture, 1800–2000," Google Ngram Viewer, August 30, 2012, available at: <http://books.google.com/ngrams/graph>.
 11. Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973; Reprint, London: Fontana Press, 1993), 84; "Culture, n." *Oxford English Dictionary* online (entries 5–7).
 12. Holt, 21–22 and note 8. See also John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). In this highly technical, impressive work of literary theory, Guillory argues that "the category of 'literature' names the cultural capital of the old bourgeoisie, a form of capital increasingly marginal to the social function of the present educational system" (p. x). Canon formation, then, consists of the "works...appropriated as the cultural capital of a dominant fraction. That appropriation is...justified by representing the ideational content of the great works as an expression of the same ideas...realized in the current social order" (p. 41). Guillory asserts that

- these works are distributed today via “school culture,” particularly prestigious higher education institutions (p. 133). I appreciate Guillory’s literary critical arguments about canon formation and distribution, especially in relation to fiction literature. But my work deals with people, institutions, books, and historical contexts not covered in *Cultural Capital*. I believe this work affirms, questions, and modifies some of the themes in Guillory’s magnificent Culture Wars intervention.
13. Holt, 1–25; Daniel Boorstin, “Welcome to the Consumption Community,” in *The Decline of Radicalism: Reflections on America Today* (New York: Random House, 1969), 22; Michael Davis, “Boorstin Proposes New Concept of Communities of Consumption,” *Rice Thresher* [Rice University Student Newspaper] 53, no. 12 (December 9, 1965): 3; Albert M. Muniz and Thomas C. O’Guinn, “Brand Community,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 27, no. 4 (March 2001): 412–432. Boorstin put his idea to work in *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Random House, 1974), Part Two passim; David Steigerwald, “All Hail the Republic of Choice: Consumer History as Contemporary Thought,” *Journal of American History* 93, no. 2 (September 2006): 399–400.
 14. John Higham and Paul Conkin (eds.), *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 42–63.
 15. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. by Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), xix; James Bohman, “Critical Theory,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed., available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/critical-theory/>.
 16. Bohman. For more on the interplay of public and private spheres over time, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. by Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).
 17. My thinking on common sense in democracies has been influenced by the following works: Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006); Nicholas Christakis, “The Trouble with Common Sense,” *New York Times*, June 24, 2011, sec. Sunday Book Review, BR10; Lee Trepanier and Khalil M. Habib, “Introduction,” in *Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Globalization: Citizens Without States*, (ed.) Trepanier and Habib (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2011), 1–10; Manfred B. Steger, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Mark T. Mitchell, “Liberal Education, Stewardship, and the Cosmopolitan Temptation” Blog, *Front Porch Republic*, October 2009, available at: <http://www.frontporchrepublic.com/2009/10/liberal-education-stewardship-and-the-cosmopolitan-temptation/>.
 18. Historians who have documented these unconscious and conscious efforts at cultural democratization include: James Sloan Allen, *The Romance of Commerce and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Lawrence Cremin, *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); Lewis Erenberg, *Swingin’ the Dream: Big Band*

- Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Michael Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999); Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); and Jay Satterfield, *"The World's Best Books": Taste, Culture, and the Modern Library* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).
19. Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 1–2; Habermas, *Structural*, 168.
 20. Charles F. Richardson, *The Choice of Books* (New York: American Book Exchange, 1881), 6. The publication estimate came from a librarian, F. B. Perkins.
 21. My thinking here is influenced by Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1963); Walter Lippmann, *The Public Philosophy* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1955); Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger eds., *Agnology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason* (New York: Pantheon, 2008); John Tracy Ellis, *American Catholics and the Intellectual Life* (Chicago: The Heritage Foundation, 1956); Daniel Rigney, "Three Kinds of Anti-Intellectualism: Rethinking Hofstadter," *Sociological Inquiry* 61, no. 4 (October 1991): 434–451; Todd Gitlin, "The Renaissance of Anti-Intellectualism," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 47, no. 15 (December 8, 2000): B7.
 22. Rubin, xii–xiv, xix; Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 8; Neil Jumonville, *Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 8–9, 239n19; Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6 (1939); Dwight Macdonald, "Masscult and Midcult," *Partisan Review* (Spring 1960); Dwight Macdonald, "The Book-of-the-Millennium Club," *New Yorker* (Nov. 29, 1952); Louis Menand, "Introduction," in *Masscult and Midcult: Essays Against the American Grain*, (ed.) John Summers (New York: New York Review of Books Classics, 2011), xv, xx, ; Jennifer Szalai, "Mac the Knife: On Dwight Macdonald," *The Nation*, December 12, 2011, available at: <http://www.thenation.com/article/164752/mac-knife-dwight-macdonald>;
 23. Rubin, 192, xv–xvi, xix.
 24. Rubin, 186–197; Radway, 12, 152.
 25. Rubin, xix; Menand, xx.
 26. Moorhead; Amy Apfel Kass, "Radical Conservatives for a Liberal Education" (PhD diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 1973). Other

- significant dissertations covering the great books idea and/or Mortimer Adler: Kenneth Harvey Hansen, “The Educational Philosophy of the Great Books Program” (University of Missouri, 1949); Joselito Bernardo Jara, “The Educational Philosophy of Mortimer Adler (University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, 1976); Alice Huff Hart, “Cultural Change and Conservation: The Implementation of The Paideia Proposal in Four Schools” (University of North Carolina-Greensboro, 1989); and Bennie R. Crockett, Jr., “Mortimer J. Adler: An Analysis and Critique of His Eclectic Epistemology” (University of Wales-Lampeter, 2000). Of this list, only Crockett’s originates outside of an education program.
27. Carnochan, 354–355, 358; Lacy, 408–417, 420–425, 428; Daniel Walker Howe, “American Victorianism as a Culture,” *American Quarterly* 27 (December 1975): 508, 510, 520; Lowenthal, 37.
 28. Katherine Chaddock, “A Canon of Democratic Intent: Reinterpreting the Roots of the Great Books Movement,” *History of Higher Education Annual* (2002): 5–32 (quote from pp. 5–6).
 29. Katherine Chaddock, *The Multi-Talented Mr. Erskine: Shaping Mass Culture through Great Books and Fine Music* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 3, 5, 7, 9, 13, 29, 81–82, 182–185, chapter 6 passim.
 30. Lawrence Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), xiii-xiv, 3, 6, chapters 1–2, 10 passim (chapter 2 covers great books); Michael O’Malley, “Lawrence Levine,” *Perspectives* 45, no. 5 (May 2007). Full citations of Allen’s and Graff’s book are in earlier notes.
 31. Alex Beam, *A Great Idea at the Time: The Rise, Fall, and Curious Afterlife of the Great Books* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 6, 203.
 32. *Ibid.* 2, 60, 85, 127–128.
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1 The Great Books Movement, 1920–1948

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2. Harmon, 6; Hartmarx, “About Us,” available at: <http://www.hartschaffnermarx.com/about-hsm/> (accessed April 10, 2013).
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4. McNeill, 34–35, 37.

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6. "Great Books Classes in 4 Cities," *New York Times* (May 26, 1946), E7; Robert M. Hutchins, "Education in Review: Great Books Foundation Sponsors a Campaign for Adult Re-Education in America," *New York Times* (August 24, 1947), E9.
7. Mary Ann Dzuback, *Robert M. Hutchins: Portrait of an Educator* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 71, 80–81.
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10. *Ibid.*
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14. Adler, *Philosopher*, 131–132, 137–138; Dzuback, 101–104, 273; Kass, 122–128; "Hutchins' Own Students Get Working List," *Chicago Tribune*, October 3, 1930, 21; Philip Kinsley, "Hutchins Views Education as a Pathway to Life," *Chicago Tribune*, October 1, 1939, 23; June Provines, "Front Views and Profiles," *Chicago Tribune*, April 27, 1940, 11.
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16. Lewis Perry, *Intellectual Life in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 386, 400; Philip Gleason, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 163–164, 246, 253–255.

17. Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 201–202, 204.
18. Mortimer Adler, *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940), xi, 124, 293–371, 373–389.
19. Clifton Fadiman, *Party of One* (New York: World Publishing Company, 1955), 320, 369–370, 379–381; Richard Severo, “Clifton Fadiman,” *New York Times*, June 21, 1999, B8; Adler, *Philosopher*, 65; Chaddock, *Erskine*, 95–96, 168, 172, 180.
20. Severo, “Fadiman”; Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), xix, 103, 144, 320.
21. Fadiman, *Party*, 437–445; Clifton Fadiman, *Any Number Can Play* (New York: World Publishing Company, 1957), 101–113, 255–265, 295–307; Severo, “Fadiman”; “People in the News,” *U.S. News & World Report*, July 5, 1999, 14; Al Silverman, “Eulogy,” *Time*, July 5, 1999, 29; Mortimer J. Adler, *A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 289.
22. University of Chicago Special Collections (UCSC), Mortimer J. Adler Papers (MJAP), Box 58, Folder: “Kip – HTRAB” (Adler to Fadiman, February 24, 1939; Adler to Kip, March 3, 1939, with cover letter).
23. UCSC/MJAP, Box 58, Folder: “Kip – HTRAB” (Adler to Kip, March 3, 1939).
24. UCSC/MJAP, Box 76, Folder: “Max/Dick – Contract” (Schuster to Kip, March 17, 1939).
25. UCSC/MJAP, Box 58, Folder: “Kip-HTARB” (Kip to Mort, May 16, 1939).
26. UCSC/MJAP, Box 58, Folder: “Kip-HTARB” (two “Aug. 1939” letters from Adler to Kip, Monday (“Marlboro”) and Sunday morning; “Notes on M. J. Adler’s Book on Reading” by Polly Fadiman, August 1939).
27. UCSC/MJAP, Box 58, Folder: “Kip-HTARB” (Kip to Mort, September 7, 1939, p. 1–4).
28. UCSC/MJAP, Box 58, Folder: “Kip-HTARB” (Mort to Kip, Wednesday evening, attached to September 7, 1939, letter from Kip to Mort, probably as a reply, p. 1).
29. Here are all of the nonfiction bestsellers from 1940: (1) *I Married Adventure* by Osa Johnson; (2) *How to Read a Book* by Mortimer Adler; (3) *A Smattering of Ignorance* by Oscar Levant; (4) *Country Squire in the White House* by John T. Flynn; (5) *Land Below the Wind* by Agnes Newton Keith; (6) *American White Paper* by Joseph W. Alsop, Jr., and Robert Kintnor; (7) *New England: Indian Summer* by Van Wyck Brooks; (8) *As I Remember Him* by Hans Zinsser; (9) *Days of Our Years* by Pierre van Paassen; (10) *Bet It’s a Boy* by Betty B. Blunt. (from Michael Korda, *Making the List: A Cultural History of the American Bestseller, 1900–1999* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2001), 88).
30. Adler, *Philosopher*, 204; “Best Sellers of 1940” 139 *The Publisher’s Weekly* no. 3 (January 18, 1941): 226–229; UCSC/MJAP, Box 75, Folder: “Advertisements” (M. Lincoln Schuster Memorandum to Booksellers, January 25, 1940); Rubin, 191; Charles Hart, “Review of *How to Read a Book*, by Mortimer Adler,” *New Scholasticism* 14 (July 1940): 314.
31. Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 204.
32. “Review of *How to Read a Book*, by Mortimer Adler,” *New York Times Book Review* (March 10, 1940): 4; “Review of *How to Read a Book*, by Mortimer Adler,” *Time* (March 18, 1940): 94–96.

33. Jacques Barzun, "Review of *How to Read a Book*, by Mortimer Adler," *Saturday Review* (March 9, 1940): 6–7; Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 67.
34. Barzun review; Rubin, 190.
35. Barzun review.
36. Barzun review.
37. Inside cover, *Interracial Review* 13 (June 1940).
38. Harry McNeill, "Review of *How to Read a Book*, by Mortimer Adler," *Interracial Review* 8 (June 1940): 97.
39. "Review of *How to Read a Book*, by Mortimer Adler," *The Atlantic* (July 1940): "Bookshelf" (italics mine).
40. Ibid.
41. C. R. Morey, "Review of *How to Read a Book*, by Mortimer Adler," *Commonweal* 32 (June 7, 1940): 149.
42. Adler, *Philosopher*, 204–205. "How to Mark a Book" was published by *Reader's Digest*, and Adler claimed that it was "reprinted more frequently than any other" of his pieces.
43. Mortimer J. Adler, "The Great Books Idea," *KNOW* II, no. 1 (Fall 1964): 4; Adler, *Philosopher*, 228, 230–232.
44. Benjamin Fine, "Urges Adults Get Broad Education," *New York Times*, June 21, 1946, 25; Fine, "Library Conference Stresses the Importance of Community and World-Wide Services," *New York Times*, June 23, 1946, E9; Fine, "Great Books Foundation Sponsors a Campaign For Adult Re-education in America," *New York Times*, August 24, 1947, E9; Harold C. Gardiner, "What About Great Books Courses?" *America*, June 28, 1947, 353; "Benjamin Fine Is Dead in Korea; Was Education Editor of Times," *New York Times*, May 17, 1975, 25.
45. Hutchins, "Education in Review"; Hugh Russell Fraser, "Unlocking the Great Books," *Pathfinder* 55, no. 4 (February 25, 1948): 20; "Kennelly Proclaims Great Books Week," *Chicago Tribune*, 25 September 1948.
46. Lowenthal, 39, 41, 46–49.
47. Gardiner, 353; Hutchins, "Education in Review."

2 Branding the History of Ideas: Adler, Lovejoy, and Britannica's *Great Books*, 1943–1952

1. "54-Volume Summary of Western Culture Hailed as History-Making at Dinner Here," *New York Times*, April 16, 1952, 25; "The Marvelous Encyclopedia Business," *Forbes*, February 15, 1965, 17–18; "Services: Cashing in on Culture," *Time*, April 20, 1962, 94; University of Chicago Special Collections (UCSC), Mortimer J. Adler Papers (MJAP), Box 59, Folder: "Waldorf Dinner"; Mortimer Adler, *Philosopher at Large: An Intellectual Autobiography 1902–1976* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 257–258; University of Nebraska-Lincoln, University Archives/Special Collections (UNLA), Robert E. Dewey Papers (REDP), Box 34, Folder: "Great Books Presentation Dinner" transcript.
2. UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folder: "GBWW Publicity"; Adler, *Philosopher*, 257–258.

3. Adler, *Philosopher*, 255–258.
4. UNLA/REDP, Box 34, Folder: “Great Books Presentation Dinner,” transcript.
5. Ibid. For more on Maritain, see Bernard E. Doering, *Jacques Maritain and the French Catholic Intellectuals* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) and William Sweet, “Jacques Maritain,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy online, available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/maritain/>.
6. George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America: Since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1996), 21, 30, 35–37, 48–49, 68–70.
7. UNLA, “Dinner” transcript.
8. Ibid. For more on Maritain and common human nature, see his *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), chapter 4 passim.
9. Ibid.
10. UNLA, “Dinner” transcript; UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folders: “Waldorf Dinner” (table roster) and “Data for...Project” (Adler’s “Outline of the History of the Great Books Project, 1943–1950,” 8); Herman Kogan, *The Great EB: The Story of the Encyclopædia Britannica* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 242.
11. UNLA, “Dinner” transcript.
12. Nash, 30–34, 38–39, 44–45, 49.
13. Mary Ann Dzuback, *Robert M. Hutchins: Portrait of an Educator* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 160, 200–202, 226–227, 231, 240, 243, 248; Harry S. Ashmore, *Unseasonable Truths: The Life of Robert Maynard Hutchins* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1989), 128–129, 245, 329–330, 374–376.
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15. Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 196; Michael Wreszin, *A Rebel in Defense of Tradition: The Life and Politics of Dwight Macdonald* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 275–277; Lawrence Cremin, *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience, 1876–1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 416; Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Partisan Review* 6 (1939); Dwight Macdonald, “The Book-of-the-Millennium Club,” *New Yorker* (November 29, 1952); Jacques Barzun, *The House of Intellect* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959; Harper Torchbook, 1961), 96n; Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 237.
16. Tim Lacy, “Dreams of a Democratic Culture: Revising the Origins of the Great Books Idea, 1869–1921,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 7 (October 2008): 421–423; Rubin, 27–30; Cremin, 385–386; Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (1944; New York: Continuum, 1997), 120–167 passim; Michael Kammen, *American Culture American Tastes: Social Change and the Twentieth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), xii, chapter 1 passim.
17. Nash, xv, 30.
18. Adler, *Philosopher*, 239. Adler claimed these roles, and the archival records seem to confirm his claim.

19. Horkheimer/Adorno, 154, 157.
20. UCSC, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., Board of Editors Records, Box 1, Folder: 1 “Minutes, 1949–1953” (“Report of the 17th Meeting, October 12, 1949,” p. 196); Adler, *Philosopher*, 238–239.
21. Analysis of the *a priori/a posteriori* issue is in Lacy, “Making,” 191–193, 199–203.
22. Sidney Hyman, *The Lives of William Benton* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 3, 138, 159.
23. Hyman, 3–5; Adler, *Philosopher*, 236; Rubin, 193; Mary Ann Dzuback, *Robert M. Hutchins: Portrait of an Educator* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 163–166; William H. McNeill, *Hutchins’ University: A Memoir of the University of Chicago, 1929–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 66; Harry Ashmore, *Unseasonable Truths: The Life of Robert Maynard Hutchins* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1989), 31, 179–186; Charles A. Madison, *Book Publishing in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966), 382; Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 36, 38, 46, 307, 310.
24. Hyman, 163, 174, 179; Ashmore, 181–182; Dzuback, 165; Congress, *Memorial Addresses and Other Tributes in the Congress of the United States on the Life and Contributions of William Benton*, ninety-third Cong., first session (Washington: GPO, 1973), v, 4; Robert Maynard Hutchins, “Educator,” in *The Record of a Tribute to the Honorable William Benton* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 22. “Cooking things up” comes from Alden Whitman’s obituary, reprinted in the Congressional Record.
25. Hyman, 245–247, 258–261, 286; Hutchins, “Educator,” 22–23; Congress, *Benton*, v; Mortimer J. Adler, “The Great Books Idea,” *KNOW II*, no. 1 (Fall 1964): 2, 4; Paul G. Hoffman, “Businessman,” in *The Record of a Tribute to the Honorable William Benton* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 18. See also Ashmore (255–259), Adler (235–236), and Madison (381–382). Sears first worked with Britannica during the 1910s, and gained full control in 1928 (Madison, 380–381). In Benton’s *New York Times* obituary (March 19, 1973), Alden Whitman reported that, through Benton’s leadership of Britannica, the University earned “more than 25 million dollars in 25 years.”
26. Hyman, 286; Adler, *Philosopher*, 237; UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folder: “Story on Syntopicon: Life” (Adler memo to Staff, November 1, 1951, p.1); UCSC/ Presidents’ Papers, 1925–1945, Box 34, Folder: “2” (Benton to Hutchins, June 3, 1943).
27. Marchand, xviii, xxi–xxii, 1. For more on the connection between efficiency, time, and Western modernity, see Stephen Kern’s *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983) and Marshall Berman’s *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982).
28. UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folder: “Story on Syntopicon: Life” (Adler memo to staff, November 1, 1951, p. 1); Adler, “Great Books Idea,” 4; Adler, *Philosopher*, 237 (source of quote attributed to Hutchins); Ashmore, 259; Dzuback, 219; Hyman, 287. Hyman recorded that Benton said, “Why not

- some kind of index?" I excluded this here because it seems inconsistent with regard to Benton's limited knowledge of the publishing business. Benton's "allure" statement, however, is consistent with his personality. Most accounts credit Adler for index's creation.
29. UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folder: "Data for...Project" (Adler's "Outline of the History the Great Books Project, 1943–1950," p. 1, and Henry A. Grunwald's "Notes on M. J. Adler (Syntopicon), February 28, 1952," p. 1); UCSC, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., Board of Editors Records, Box 1, Folder: 1 "Minutes, 1949–1953" ("Report of the 17th Meeting, October 12, 1949," p. 196); Adler, *Philosopher*, 238–239.
 30. Adler, *Philosopher*, 237.
 31. Mortimer J. Adler, review of *The Story of Philosophy*, by Will Durant, *The Nation* (September 29, 1926): 298. This section is a radically abbreviated version of Tim Lacy, "The Lovejoyian Roots of Adler's Philosophy of History: Authority, Democracy, Irony, and Paradox in Britannica's *Great Books of the Western World*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 71, no.1 (January 2010): 113–137.
 32. Daniel J. Wilson, *Arthur O. Lovejoy and the Quest for Intelligibility* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 85; Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 165–166, 260; Arthur O. Lovejoy, "Pragmatism Versus the Pragmatist," in *Essays in Critical Realism: A Co-Operative Study of the Problem of Knowledge*, (ed.) Durant Drake et al. (1920; repr., New York: Gordian Press, 1968), 35–84; Frederick Copleston, S. J., *A History of Philosophy, Volume 8, Part II* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Image Books, 1967), 150–153; Bruce Kucklick, *A History of Philosophy in America, 1720–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 210–211.
 33. Wilson, 194–195, 230n16; Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936; repr., 1964), 3.
 34. Lovejoy, *Chain*, 4.
 35. Adler, *Philosopher*, 38, 40, 45, 186–197, 200, 268, 304–305; Wilson, 88–93; Arthur O. Lovejoy, "On Some Conditions of Progress in Philosophical Inquiry," *The Philosophical Review* 26 (March 1917): 123–163; Mortimer J. Adler, *The Idea of Freedom: A Dialectical Examination of the Conceptions of Freedom* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1958), 1: v, xv; Bennie R. Crockett, Jr., "Mortimer J. Adler: An Analysis and Critique of His Eclectic Epistemology" (PhD diss. University of Wales-Lampeter, 2000), 11, 51, 56–62, 77–83, 128–137.
 36. Adler, *Philosopher*, 313; Mortimer J. Adler, "The Principles and Methods of Syntopical Construction," in *Great Books of the Western World*, (ed.) Robert M. Hutchins, Vol. 3, *The Great Ideas: A Syntopicon of Great Books of the Western World*, (eds.) Mortimer J. Adler and William Gorman, Vol. II (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952), 1259–1262.
 37. Adler, "Principles," 1254–1265; Adler, *Idea of Freedom*, xviii–xix; David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970), 135–142.

38. UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folder: "Yust, 1943–1948" (Adler to Yust, August 10, 1943) and "Miscellaneous Lists Compiled During Staff Meetings" (Mayer to Adler, August 8, 1943); Adler, *Philosopher*, 190; Allen, 100; Ashmore, 117–119, 173; Dzuback, 219.
39. *Ibid.* (Adler to Yust, August 10, 1943).
40. UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folder: "Yust, 1943–1948" (Adler to Yust, August 10, 1943).
41. UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folder: "Data for...Project" (Adler's "Outline of the History the Great Books Project, 1943–1950," p. 1) and (Adler to Yust, September 3, 1943); Kogan, 239.
42. Adler, *Philosopher*, 238.
43. UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folder: "Data for...Project" (Adler's "Outline of the History the Great Books Project, 1943–1950," p. 2–3) and Folder: "Story on Syntopicon: Life" (Adler's "List of Suggested Corrections on Points of Fact," p. 6).
44. UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folder: "Data for...Project" (Adler's "Outline of the History the Great Books Project, 1943–1950," pp. 1–2); Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 238–239.
45. UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folder: "Data for...Project" (Henry A. Grunwald's "Notes on M. J. Adler (Syntopicon), February 28, 1952," 1).
46. UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folder: "Data for...Project" (Adler's "Outline of the History the Great Books Project, 1943–1950," 7).
47. *Ibid.* (Adler's "Outline of the History . . .," 7–8); UCSC, Presidents' Papers, 1925–1945, Box 12, Folder: 2 ("Mr. Mayer's Report of the Meeting of the Advisory Board," May 19–20, 1944, 9–10).
48. Adler, *Philosopher*, 239; UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folder: "Data for...Project" (Adler's "Outline of the History the Great Books Project, 1943–1950," 2–3); Adler, "The Great Books Idea," 4 (italics mine).
49. Robert Hutchins (ed.), *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 1, (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952), iii (after long list of subscribers and donors, but before *The Great Conversation*); Adam R. Nelson, *Education and Democracy: The Meaning of Alexander Meiklejohn, 1872–1964* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 233–256; Harold Rugg, *Foundations for American Education* (New York: World Book Company, 1947), 5, 7–8, 12, 30, 37, 574, 613–627; Adler, *Philosopher*, 49–50, 63, 81, 136, 160, 190, 214, 239; Allen, 99; Ashmore, 228; Dzuback, 68–69, 110, 123–124, 130–131, 169, 214, 270; McNeill, 111.
50. UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folders: "Hutchins and Adler and GBWW" (Hutchins to Advisory Board, November 30, 1943); "Data for...Project" (Adler's "Outline of the History the Great Books Project, 1943–1950," pp. 4–6).
51. UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folder: "Data for...Project" (Adler's "Outline of the History the Great Books Project, 1943–1950," pp. 4–6); UCSC/Presidents' Papers, 1925–1945, Box 34, Folder: 4 ("Report of Sub-Editorial-Advisory Committee"); Adler, *Philosopher*, 240.
52. UCSC, Presidents' Papers, 1925–1945, Box 34, Folders: 3 (Advisory Board minutes, October 19–20, 1944) and 5 (Advisory Board minutes, August 30, 1944); UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folder: "Hutchins and Staff GBWW Editors" (Barr to Hutchins, April 19, 1945); Adler, *Philosopher*, 239–241.

53. UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folders (three): “Yust, 1943–48” (Adler to Yust, November 8, 1943); “Data for...Project” (“Outline of the History of the Great Books Project,” p. 3); and “Story on Syntopicon: Life” (“List of Suggested Corrections on Points of Fact,” 6); Adler, “The Great Books Idea,” 4; Hutchins, *Syntopicon* Vol. 1, p. v.
54. Syracuse University/Bird Library/Special Collections, Mortimer J. Adler Papers (M-69–14; January 8, 1969, unprocessed), Box 1 of 2, Folder: “Habit” (E. F. White to Adler, October 17, 1945); Adler, “The Great Books Idea,” 4; Adler, *Philosopher*, 249.
55. Adler, “Principles,” 1263, 1268; Adler, *Philosopher*, 270, 306; SUBLSC/MJAP, (M-95; December 19, 67) Box 1 passim; Box 4 passim; Box 5, Folders: “Memos – to and from Bird re Introductions” and “Bird Drafts”; Box 6 passim; SUBLSC/MJAP (M-69–14; January 8, 69) Boxes 1 and 2 passim. Boxes from both Syracuse accessions (M-95 and M-69) contain drafts of each idea and extended correspondence with indexers.
56. UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folder: “Data for...Project” (Henry A. Grunwald’s “Notes on M. J. Adler (Syntopicon),” February 28, 1952, pp. 2–3); Adler, *Philosopher*, 241–246.
57. UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folder: “Data for...Project” (Henry A. Grunwald’s “Notes on M. J. Adler (Syntopicon),” February 28, 1952, pp. 2–3). See also Adler, “Principles,” 1250.
58. “The 102 Great Ideas: Scholars Complete a Monumental Catalog,” *Life* 24, no. 4 (January 26, 1948): 92–102; University of Chicago Special Collections, William Benton Papers, Box 82, Folder: 3 (Benton to Adler, February 7, 1948); “Worst Kind of Troublemaker,” *Time*, November 21, 1949, 58–64 (on Hutchins); “Fusilier,” *Time*, March 17, 1952, 76–78 (on Adler).
59. UCSC/MJAP, Box 59, Folder: “Benton re GBWW” (Adler to Benton, December 18, 1951); Adler, *Philosopher*, 241–242, 248–250, 259; Adler, “Principles,” 1303.
60. The 1990 edition used Britannica’s logo.
61. Robert M. Hutchins (ed.), *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 1, *The Great Conversation: The Substance of a Liberal Education*, by Robert M. Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952), xvi–xvii; Rubin, 194.
62. Adler, “Principles,” 1219; Adler, *Philosopher*, 243.
63. Narratives of building of Britannica’s set and the *Syntopicon* include, in order of merit and detail: Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, 235–259; Hugh S. Moorhead, “The Great Books Movement” (PhD diss. University of Chicago, 1964), 419–469; Allen, *Romance of Commerce and Culture*, 101–103; Rubin, *Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 193–196. This account rests primarily on Adler’s papers.
64. Adler, *Philosopher*, 237–239; Adler, *Second Look*, 142; Rubin, 194; Adler, “Great Books, Democracy, and Truth,” in *Freedom in the Modern World: Jacques Maritain, Yves R. Simon, Mortimer J. Adler*, (ed.) Michael D. Torre (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press/American Maritain Society, 1989), 45.
65. W. E. Garrison, review of *Great Books of the Western World*, Robert Hutchins, ed., *The Christian Century* 69 (October 1, 1952): 1127. Also June 25, 1952, pp. 751–752.

66. Garrison (June 25, 1952), 751.
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70. I. Bernard Cohen, review of *Great Books of the Western World*, Robert Hutchins, ed., *Saturday Review* September 20, 1952, 20, 39.
71. Gilbert Highet, review of *Great Books of the Western World*, Robert Hutchins, ed., *New York Times Book Review* September 14, 1952, 1, 34.
72. Jacques Barzun, review of *Great Books of the Western World*, Robert Hutchins, ed., *The Atlantic* 190 (December 1952): 82.
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3 Making “Seventy-Four Corpses . . . Pay Off”: The Context and Commerce of the *Great Books*, 1952–1968

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5 The Common Sense of Great Books Liberalism, 1965–1970

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25. Ibid. 118–119.
26. Ibid. 120.
27. Ibid. 121.
28. Ibid. 120–121.
29. Ibid. 131.
30. Ibid. 139.
31. Ibid. 140.
32. Ibid. 133.
33. Ibid. 143–144.
34. Ibid. 123, 124, n.4.
35. Chapter 2 of *Politics* repeats and summarizes points made in *Lives*: 11 of 11 total endnotes in the chapter refer back to *Lives*.
36. Adler, *Lives*, 110–111, 137–138, 153–154; Adler, *Politics*, 19.
37. Adler, *Lives*, 113, 139; Adler, *Politics*, 20–27.
38. Adler, *Lives*, 123, 145; Adler, *Politics*, 6–7, 19–27; Robert Hutchins, “Doing What Comes Scientifically,” *The Center Magazine* (January 1969).
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6 Diminished Dreams: *Great Books* in an Age of Crisis, Fracture, and Transition, 1968–1977

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32. Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, “Take by Prescription Only,” *New York Times*, December 25, 1972, 15.
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7 "The Poobah of Popularizers": Paideia, Pluralism, and the Culture Wars, 1978–1988

1. Mortimer J. Adler, *A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror: Further Autobiographical Reflections of a Philosopher at Large* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 71; Mortimer J. Adler, *The Paideia Proposal: An Education Manifesto*

- (New York: Macmillan, 1982), 6. The slogan originated in Hutchins, *The Conflict in Education in a Democratic Society* (New York: Harper, 1953).
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 4. Daniel Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 11–12, 145, 181; Daniel Bell, "The Cultural Wars: American Intellectual Life, 1965–1992," *The Wilson Quarterly* (Summer 1992), 79; Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 2, 213, 215–216; James T. Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), chapter 8 passim. My thinking about the Culture Wars has been influenced by Andrew Hartman's work, currently available at the *U.S. Intellectual History* weblog (e.g., "The Culture Wars: Notes Towards a Working Definition," March 11, 2011) and also soon as a book tentatively titled *The War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars, from the Sixties to the Present* (contracted with University of Chicago Press). Hartman argues against the Culture-Wars-as-distraction theses (i.e., identity obsessions, tool for political power) offered by left-liberals such as Thomas Frank, Todd Gitlin, and E. J. Dionne to Hartman the Culture Wars were a necessary adjustment mechanism in the wake of postmodernism and postindustrialism.
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8 "The Most Rancorous Cultural War": Bloom, Adler, Stanford, and Britannica, 1988–2001

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