Lifelong Learning: Between Modern Strategies and Romantic Ideals. Our Post-Moral Society and Its Cultural Models

Apprendimento permanente: Tra strategie contemporanee e ideali romantici. La nostra società post-morale e i suoi modelli culturali

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ABSTRACT
Teaching literature has been for me one of the highest spiritual missions. American literature has offered me the best examples of non-conformist literary texts, which can only convey between the lines the ultimate truth about human existence and its meaning. My essay consists of three parts, devoted to three of the most outstanding and best representative American writers, despite their professional and personal destinies, that were by no means "exemplary:" R. W. Emerson, Wallace Stevens, William Faulkner. What their epigons have always failed to capture is their paradoxical insight into the tremendous power of (self)teaching over the vitality of the creative mind. Although voiced in three different stylistic tones, each one of which sounds unmistakably unique, it is this one ineffable vision that sends us readers the same message: the secret of a longer (and better) life is learning. At all ages…

L'insegnamento della letteratura è stata per me una delle più alte missioni spirituali. La letteratura americana mi ha offerto i migliori esempi di testi letterari non conformisti, che riconducono alla verità ultima dell'esistenza umana e il suo significato. Il mio saggio consiste in tre parti, dedicate ai tre più eminenti e representative scrittori americani, nonostante I loro destini personali, che non potrebbero essere considerati in nessun caso "esemplari": R. W. Emerson, Wallace Stevens, William Faulkner. Ciò che i loro epigoni non sono stati in grado di catturare è stata la loro capacità di "insight" paradossale sul tremendo potere dell'autoformazione sulla vitalità della mente creativa. Nonostante essere portavoci di tre "toni" stilistici molto diversi, ogni uno di loro "suona" in un modo inconfondibilmente unico, ed è la loro visione ineffabile quella che manda ai lettori uno stesso messaggio: il segreto di una lunga (e migliore) vita è la formazione. A tutte le età...

KEYWORDS
Self-teaching, knowledge-&-creative curiosity, poetic paradox, the artist's mind and mission, endurance, evanescence, spiritual survival.
Auto-didattica, conoscenza e curiosità creative, paradosso poetico, mente e missione dell'artista, resilienza, evanescenza, sopravvivenza dello spirito.

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Motto: "*It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.*"
Wallace Stevens

Introduction

Lifelong education has always been more than just an ideal: it is a surviving necessity. It is the wisest strategy we can adopt to keep our minds sane, along with our sense of humor. Longevity itself is often the gift of such creative minds, used to reading and writing as the best of (serious) hobbies.

The minds I have best admired all my life (so far) are writers' minds. Teaching literature is more than just a job to me: I regard it as a mission. Particularly today, when reading literature tends to lose more and more of its main target audience: the young readers.

It is difficult to plead for one's belief and escape didacticism. Yet books have kept me good company for more than half of my life: this remains my best argument in any debate *on lifelong education*.

The writers we are going to consider here today have distinguished themselves individually by their successful (often double) careers. They are American writers of various generations and outlooks. One of them is R. W. Emerson (1803-1882): a romantic essayist; another one is Wallace Stevens (1879-1955): a modern poet; while the third of them is William Faulkner (1897-1962): a story-teller with an inexhaustible availability for stylistic experiment.

My choice is exquisite: each one of these writers earned his rank in *the universal literary canon*. Yet the unique ways by which every one of them has asserted his professionalism single them out.

Emerson was apparently meant for *a clerical career*. His option for a secular type of discourse instead expressed his vocation. His free-lancer's essay writing was the job of an artist; whereas the minister's sermon he had left behind him depended on a dogma both rigid and outdated. It was *teaching* that he believed in, rather than *preaching* from the pulpit. And moreover, he liked to call himself *"rather a learner than a teacher."* Therefore, *learning is the better (necessary) part of teaching*.

This amounts to my first argument to support the idea that *lifelong education* has been the ultimate aim of thinkers long before our time. Many of his conventional contemporaries suspected Emerson of being "a youth-corrupter," precisely because of his insistent encouraging their *self-reliance*. His plea for *individualism* and *self-assumed responsibility* is first and foremost a plea for *lifelong education*. An echo of Emerson's "Self-Reliance" will also prove us now that *lifelong education* belongs with a sound *nonconformist* attitude:

> *What I must do* is *what concerns me*, not *what other people think*. This rule, equally arduous in *actual* and in *intellectual life*, may serve for the whole distinction between *greatness* and *meanness*. It is the harder because *you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it*. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after your own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the *independence of solitude*. (Emerson, p. 136; my emphasis)

Wallace Stevens was apparently meant for a (financially successful) *lawyer's career*. That he actually did accomplish – not so much for the sake of *conformity*,

as rather to earn his right to practise his true calling: poetry. This he could never part with. He lost his well-deserved Nobel Prize for Literature to Hermann Hesse in 1946. "Success is counted sweetest by those who ne'er succeed" – as Emily Dickinson said in a witty poem of hers.

Still William Faulkner did get his Nobel Prize for Literature a couple of years later. Although few were those who had appreciated his work at the beginning of his literary career in his homeland, and though his own town-folk would nickname him "Count-No-Count," Faulkner made important and sophisticated professional French readers like Jean Paul Sartre admire and champion him without reserves.

I should like to talk about these three writers here in terms of their most profound messages, conveying the same notion: that *human life, no matter how long, is worth nothing without our/their books*.

1. R. W. Emerson and Our Quest for Truth

In self-knowledge we are interested as in a quest for truth. Lifelong education has the same aim – to search for an ultimate meaning, necessarily double: the meaning of *human existence* and that of *human nature*.

We tend to take our great thinkers for granted. Though in 1900 a building of Harvard University was named Emerson Hall in glorious memory of the romantic American writer, few readers care to consider now the irony of the fact: as an undergraduate student, Ralph Waldo Emerson did hardly anticipate *the American Scholar* he was meant to become. He graduated as an average student, by the middle of his class. Therefore it would be most unfair of us now to ascribe him to any conventional pattern of diligence and hard academic work – while still a very young intellectual. R. W. Emerson gave his tutors no promise of maturing into the essential author we know him to be.

In 1841, when he first published "Self-Reliance," his most often quoted essay all around the world, Emerson had just overcome a crisis of conscience himself. He could have cherished the dull routine of mediocrity and monotonous security of his successful career as a young minister of Boston's Second (Unitarian) Church, whose associate pastor he had become in 1829, following his father's family tradition. Yet this was not his destiny: he chose instead *intellectual honesty*.

Few readers still care to remember today that Emerson's 1832 crisis of conscience is related to a bitter revelation both professional and personal, which accounts for his change of mind. Doubts about the religious dogma he had stood for ("corpse-cold Unitarianism" as he called it) he had started having long before that time.

But what made Emerson quit his comfortable job and social position was the distinction he made one early morning, from his pulpit, between the *metaphorical meaning* and the parishioners' erroneous *ad literam* interpretation of the Eucharist. This happened after the young minister had opened the coffin of his young wife, Ellen Tucker, whom he had lost to the fatal romantic disease: tuberculosis of the lungs.

Thus, having the evidence before his eyes that Nature spares no (physical) body of its ritual of decay, Emerson had the shock that his mission was elsewhere. So he left for Europe and especially England, where he made the acquaintance of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and befriended Thomas Carlyle. As the latter had just translated the works of Immanuel Kant into English, Emerson had a lot to learn from him.

Therefore what we call today *auto-didacticism* shaped Emerson's fertile mind for a work that took him a remarkably long life (for those times) to accomplish. *Self-teaching* is the basic condition of *self-discovery*, hence of *self-education*. And it has to be carried out for life.

Emerson believed that *social reform* had to start from *the reform of the individual*. This is his own definition of our theme here today: *lifelong education*. *Self-improvement* depends on *self-reliance*: the one spiritual resource to nurture any lucid mind.

The Concord Sage, inspiring by his writings the entire romantic American movement of Transcendentalism, remains to this day a gifted stylist. Reading his essays now is rather an intellectual pleasure than a sermonizing lesson of wisdom. And indeed who needs the latter? Have we not all had enough of moralizing lecturing? Emerson's rebellious mind contradicts itself shamelessly, since he knows that *lifelong education* is a *matter of change*: for the better (hopefully). Thus Emerson anticipates William James's notion of *Pragmatism*, which dwells on the concept of *truth in the making*.

Emerson had enthusiastic disciples among whom were the most creative mid-19th century American minds: Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), Walt Whitman (1819-1892). This is because he was himself rather *a poet in his essays*. Emerson never failed to win over his audience by his witty way with words. These essays can still provide us with some food for thought today, even if scholars may seem to have exhausted the possibilities of commenting upon Emerson's astute turns of phrase; they can still surprise us with the freshness of an exceptionally talented mind:

> *Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things*. The planter, who is Man sent out into the field to gather food, is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees his bushel and his cart and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, *instead of Man on the farm*.
> The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and *the soul is subject to dollars*. The priest *becomes a form*; the attorney a statute-book; *the mechanic a machine*; the sailor a rope for the ship.
> In this distribution of functions the scholar is the delegated intellect. In the right state he is *Man Thinking* [sic]. In the degenerate state, when thevictim of society, he tends to become *a mere thinker*, or still worse, the *parrot of other men's thinking*. (Emerson, p. 44; my emphasis)

This is a fragment from Emerson's earlier essay, "The American Scholar," originally a successful address delivered by him at Harvard in 1837. The nuances carefully marking distinctions here gather into a protest against reification of the human being in any one of its aleatory hypostases.

Emerson had renounced his Unitarian minister career lest he should "*become a form*," as the allegorical priest referred to in the text above quoted. Confinement to cliches was what he had rejected, for the sake of spiritual independence.

As for "*the tradesman*" whose "*soul is subject to dollars*" – is this image so safely far away from us in time? Is not our world, likewise, populated by such allegorical characters: "*the attorney a statute-book, the mechanic a machine*"?

Without our belief in lifelong education and self-teaching, what else could we be but "*mere thinkers, or still worse the parrots of other men's thinking*"? Is the

21st century so emancipated as to have established the Emersonian standards for the ideal "*Man Thinking*" for us all who work within the field of education? Or rather what he means here is that it still depends on ourselves exclusively to make sure that *freedom of mind* can only be accomplished by *lifelong learning*?

Yet this achievement of a mind enriched by continuous studying is a pleasure – not a must; a privilege – not a duty. Learning is fun: we do not submit to it as to some compulsory task. This is the spirit in which we should win over our disciples. Therefore 19th century Emerson can still speak our language of today:

> «Hence, *instead of Man Thinking, we have the bookworm*. Hence, the book-learned class, who value books, as such; not as related to nature and the human constitution, but as making a sort of Third Estate with the world and the soul. Hence the restorers of readings, the emendators, the bibliomaniacs of all degrees. *Books are the best things, well used; abused, among the worst*. What is the one end which all means go to effect? *They are for nothing but to inspire*. I had better never see a book than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my orbit, and *made a satellite instead of a system*. The one thing in the world, of value, is *the active soul*. This every man is entitled to; *this every man contains within him*, although in almost all men obstructed and yet unborn. *The soul active sees absolute truth and utters truth, or creates*.» (Emerson, p. 47; my emphasis)

Lifelong education can only make sense to *creative minds*: it is our privilege as teachers to discover and encourage these creative minds as early as possible. No matter how smart, computers and other devices cannot replace human teachers. A teacher is an older friend who has had some more time for reading. But such a dialog can only be of help if it leads to the younger mind's self-discovery and its own self-reliance:

> The world, – this shadow of the soul, or *other me*,– lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me *acquainted with myself*. I run eagerly into this resounding tumult. I grasp the hands of those next to me, and take my place in the ring to suffer and to work, taught by an instinct that so shall the dumb abyss be vocal with speech. I pierce its order; *I dissipate its fear*; I dispose of it within the circuit of my expanding life. So much only of life as I know by experience, so much of the wilderness have I vanquished and planted, or *so far have I extended my being*, my dominion. I do not see how any man can afford, for the sake of his nerves and his nap, to spare any action in which he can partake. It is pearls and rubies to his discourse. *Drudgery, calamity, exasperation, want, are instructors in eloquence and wisdom*. The true scholar grudges *every opportunity of action* past by, as a loss of power. It is *the raw material out of which the intellect moulds her splendid products*. (Emerson, p. 49-50; my emphasis)

Emerson often contradicts himself – yet never in his plea for *an active intellectual life*. What he says in the above quoted fragment on "The American Scholar" resounds in his essay on "Self Reliance," when he states that "Life only avails, not the having lived." Human mind is sharpened by the challenges encountered at every step. The world as "*the other me*" is a romantic projection of *the creative self*. It is the intellect that benefits from this reflection and form any activity occasioned by it.

As an attentive reader of Emerson and also as a teacher of the early 21st century, I believe that *lifelong education is a deeply creative job* – whether performed on *one's own mind* or on *the minds of the others*. In tune with Emerson's line of thought, Wallace Stevens – a major American poet – put it much better: "*It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.*" (Stevens, 224)

2. Wallace Stevens: Poetry as Lifelong Education

Lifelong education is no orthodox pursuit. It is not confined to institutionalized activities. It cannot be carried out perfunctorily. *"It Must Be Abstract," "It Must Change," "It Must Give Pleasure"* – as the same great poet claimed in his "*Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*" (329) of his own lifelong poetic craft. Hence, like poetry itself, lifelong education is not just the whim/employment of teenagers. It is at once the task of professionals and amateurs. It is performed according to one's tastes and inclinations. It tells the (life)story of one's personality.

Like R. W. Emerson, Wallace Stevens also went to Harvard University, where, as a special three-year student[1], he took up courses in literature: English, French, German. There he met George Santayana, who was teaching philosophy. Stevens published some poems in Harvard literary magazines. He obviously went to Harvard for the sake of his love for literature. In choosing literature as his first domain of study, Wallace Stevens asserted his option for *his own lifelong line of self-education*: poetry meant that much to him. Self-teaching is completed by self-expression when the creative mind is exceptionally gifted.

As a second stage in his schooling, Stevens chose law. In the autumn of 1901 he entered New York Law School. This second professional orientation was a particularly wise one: it would bring the poet lifelong financial security. As a most capable lawyer, Wallace Stevens started working in 1916 for Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company in Connecticut. Here he became vice-president of Hartford Livestock Insurance Company. He would hold this privileged position for the rest of his life.

It is due to this pragmatic double choice of a career that Wallace Stevens could emit such paradoxes as "*Money is a kind of poetry*" – as if in an echo of Emerson's "*Money is as beautiful as roses*." Paradoxically, too, due to his lawyer's job, he could write a new poem every morning, just as he put on a fresh clean shirt to go to his office – as he remarks in a letter to a friend. For Stevens believed that "*we live in the mind*." And yet he was as modest as to asses himself in a letter to his wife, like this: "*I know I am far from being a genius – and must rely on hard and faithful work*."

This would help him carry on with writing his poems; likewise, with his passion for painting (especially French), that would materialize in a valuable personal collection. He was also in love with music for as long as he lived: both classical and jazz. These were the delightful provinces his imagination would take him to: he hardly cared for traveling.

Though a passionate connoisseur of European high culture – especially French, again – and though he did have the right money to afford the luxury of any journey, Wallace Stevens never crossed the Atlantic Ocean. His curiosity

1 Like Robert Frost (1874-1963), another canonical modern American poet.

found other means of exploring the world. Or perhaps he knew intuitively that Emerson (though no shy traveler himself) was right in his paradox:

> *Travelling is a fool's paradise*. Our first journeys discover to us the *indifference of places*. At home I dream at Naples, at Rome, I can be *intoxicated with beauty* and *lose my sadness*. I pack my trunk, embrace my friends, embark on the sea and at last wake up in Naples, and there *beside me is the stern fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical, that I fled from*. I seek the Vatican and the palaces. *I affect to be intoxicated* with sights and suggestions, *but I am not intoxicated. My giant goes with me wherever I go*. (Emerson, 150; my emphasis)

If Emerson still allowed for an exception from the home-truth of his paradoxical view against traveling gratuitously, this great exception (and "excuse," as it were) for wandering around the world is exactly *the traveling for studying purposes*. "The intellect is vagabond, and our system of education fosters restlessness. Our minds travel when our bodies are forced to stay at home" – says Emerson further. And yet he confesses:

> *I have no churlish objection to the circumnavigation of the globe for the purposes of art, of study, and benevolence, so that the man is first domesticated, or does not go abroad with the hope of finding somewhat greater than he knows*. He *who travels to be amused*, or to get somewhat which he does not carry, *travels away from himself*, and grows old even in youth among old things. In Thebes, in Palmyra, his will and mind havebecome old and dilapidated as they. He carries ruins to ruins. (149; my emphasis)

Wallace Stevens *never* "traveled away from himself" – and yet his poems are full of *fun* and the *joy of living*. This implies in the first place *living within one's mind*; finding there *the main source of vital energy and innermost freedom*. Stevens's poems may seem to plead for a solipsistic understanding of the world; yet there is so much more to discover in them. The essential *hope* his poetry stands for springs out of the lucid mind of a true *poet of reality*. And it is this *hope* that keeps us readers alive and curious in our search for more things to learn in our precious evanescent lives:

«*The Well Dressed Man with a Beard*

After the final no there comes a yes
And on that yes the future world depends.
No was the night. Yes is this present sun.
If the rejected things, the things denied,
Slid over the western cataract, yet one,
One only, one thing that was firm, even
No greater than a cricket's horn, no more
Than a thought to be rehearsed all day, a speech
Of the self that must sustain itself on speech,
One thing remaining, infallible, would be
Enough. Ah! douce campagna of that thing!
Ah! douce campagna, honey in the heart,
Green in the body, out of a petty phrase,
Out of a thing believed, a thing affirmed:

The form on the pillow humming while one sleeps,
The aureole above the humming house…

It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.»
(Stevens, p. 224; my emphasis)

The persona in the poem's title, "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard," looks funny and pedantic; yet all too human in this concise stream-of-consciousness monologue about (the need for) *hope*. This mask seems so full of self-esteem and at the same time, of self-consciousness: the nameless lyrical (silent) speaker reveals himself in the poem's trend of his thoughts, encouraging himself, presumably after some *crisis moment* (as in a possible echo to Emily Dickinson's poem 341 "After great pain a formal feeling comes," since even the musicality of rhythm and rhyme suggests this affinity).

Stevens's title persona may be a demanding *aesthete* himself: a knowledgeable critic of either *painting* or *poetry*. Or he may be *the poet* himself, "well dressed" to go to his work again, in his secret modern impersonation of the romantic Doppelgänger. It is presumably early in the morning when he is thinking of all that: "No was the night. Yes is *this* present sun."

Anyway, this speaker is lucid and hopeful, ready to make the most of the classic saying *carpe diem*. He is living in/for the present moment, since: "After the *final* no there comes a yes/ And on that yes the future world depends." No matter how "*final*," "no" can be still overcome by the immanent impulse of "this *present* sun," rising for "the *future* world."

"The western cataract" over which "the things denied" may slide somehow evokes some pre-Columbian mappemond representation of a flat world, whose terminus brink to the ultimate abyss could dishearten any traveler, no matter how audacious.

And yet, the bearded dreamer impeccably dressed (i.e. observing certain rules of social conformity; or rather putting on "his clean white shirt" for his daily poem?) can make us see the one exceptional thing, "even no greater than a cricket's horn," so exquisite that it defies the fatal fathomless chasm. This fragile yet enduring little thing "no more than a *thought* to be rehearsed all day" is proof "enough" of mortals' infallibility. "*Out of a thing believed a thing affirmed*" is *the creed of a poet* who knows he holds the key to *all human hope*.

And this *hope*, beyond all "*final noes,*" no less fragile and vulnerable than any one of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, is *the thought*, the awareness that: *"It can never be satisfied, the mind, never."* (Q. e. d.).

3. William Faulkner's Message to Young Writers (and to Us, His Universal Readers)

Unlike the American writers previously evoked here, William Faulkner is no New Englander. Of this he never tired to make a point: the virtuoso experimentalist in the most intricate stylistic challenges of *narrative modernism* also provides a specifically nuanced illustration of *local color fiction of the Old South*.

William Faulkner defies any didactic effort at categorization. He is definitely no good as a conventional "*cultural model*" – if we only consider his educational background. He obviously did not trust school as an institution. Faulkner is a *self-taught* writer in the most aristocratic sense of this compound word. His college days ended before they began. He only went to the University of Mississip-

pi for one year[2], since 1919 till 1920, as a special student, to study French, and rather mind his own writing. Apparently there is nothing of the "cultural model" here, let alone the righteous example of commendable bourgeois behavior.

Yet he illustrates best to my mind our theme today of *lifelong (self-)education* by his unflinching artistic perfectionism and voracious reading. As a mature writer, Faulkner was generous to his younger fellow-writers in disclosing his professional "secrets:"

> *Read, read, read. Read everything* – trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. *Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice* and *studies the master*. Read! *You'll absorb it*. Then write. If it is good, you'll find out. If it's not, throw it out of the window. (Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!;* back cover; my emphasis)

An ambitious writer's job of reading lasts for a lifetime: *learning one's trade takes one one's entire life-span*. Faulkner's *Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature*, delivered in Stockholm, on December 10th, in 1950, conveys a rather romantic message directed to whom it may concern – that is, to his younger colleagues, and ourselves, his anonymous readers:

> Our tragedy today is a general and universal *physical fear* so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. *There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up?* Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the *problems of the human heart in conflict with itself* which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat. He must learn them again. *He must teach himself that the basest thing of all things is to be afraid;* and teaching himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and *truths of the heart*, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed – love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice. Until he does so, he labors under a curse. *He writes not of love but of lust*, of defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, of victories without hope and, worst of all, without pity or compassion. His griefs grieve on no universal bones, leaving no scars. *He writes not of the heart but of the glands*. (Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize, 723-724; my emphasis)

Faulkner had vision: he anticipated as early as 1950 our present waste land, after September 11th 2001, when *"there are no longer problems of the spirit," "there is only the question: When will I be blown up?"*

His Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize is itself a plea for *lifelong education*: we must (all) learn *again* that "*the basest thing is to be afraid*."

Coming from a writer of the Old South, whose literary heritage contains some baroque imagery of extreme cruelty and violence, and wickedness, and

2 This is just one aspect of William Faulkner's striking resemblance to E. A. Poe (1809-1849) in terms of literary development. Poe himself went as a special student, likewise, to the University of Virginia in 1826, only for one term, whence he had to withdraw because of heavy (gambling) debts and drinking.

cynicism – how refreshing this message still reads, pleading for a (writer's) return to "*the truths of the heart*," such as: "*love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice*." This catalog reminds us readers of the chivalric code of virtues in lost romances. Recovering that heroic code is the mission of the young *writer and reader* – since one is nothing without the other.

The poet laureate speaking here borrows much of his solemn speech from the Faulknerian persona of Gavin Stevens, the idealist lawyer in *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), and formerly in *Light in August* (1932). It seems that such *times of crisis* – like Faulkner's, like ours – require the return of the idealist. Is *lifelong education* anything but *an idealistic goal*? Quite in tune with Faulkner's (Old South) code of honor, our aim today should spring from our *hope* that *fear* can be done away with.

Faulkner's 1950 conclusion echoes Gavin Stevens again – his own character, his own *wishful-thinking self-projection*, so much *unlike the writer himself*. Gavin Stevens had earned his BA at Harvard and his Ph D at Heidelberg (Hamlet's university in Shakespeare's most successful tragedy); and above all, he had returned to his Old Southern small town from a world war in Europe, both decadent and glorious, so much like *the hero* the writer himself had failed to become:

> *I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure. […] I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail*. He is immortal, not because he alone has an inexhaustible voice, but *because he has a soul, a spirit* capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. *The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart*, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. *The poet's voice* need not merely be the record of man, it *can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and p*revail. (724; my emphasis)

This is William Faulkner's *ars poetica*: in his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, the great novelist proves himself to be a true believer in *the poet's/writer's mission to help his readers out of (moral) crisis*. Thus Faulkner asserts his belonging to a traditional trend of thought: the American one, the same as R. W. Emerson's, Wallace Stevens's. This is perhaps the most remarkable and obvious discovery for us now, i.e. that, despite the (apparent) differences between them: of vision, of style – all these three writers share this *one belief in their privileged artistic mission*. This is the best evidence that aesthetic excellence may coincide with a profound ethic attitude – all the more convincing since it remains effaced in the shadow of the writers' works, instead of declaring itself in shrill tones of didactic propaganda.

As a teacher of literature, I have often wondered about this paradox: what we are doing here, with these writers' works, is use them for our educational purposes. When they have actually faced their destinies without the least intention of becoming anyone's *(cultural) models*. They took the risks (and their chances) of creating the "*Supreme Fiction*" we all depend on – and profit from. Is it fair of me to just play the *safe* role of the *intermediary* between the self-sacrificing creators and their ever younger readership, in need of *guidance*?

And yet, what is there left for us to do, teachers of literature, but to turn back gratefully to our world classics, and learn again their (slant) lesson of professional dignity and self-effacement? And then teach it to our students – the best of who in their turn will one day become great teachers.

Or even better than (ordinary) great teachers: the great writers (and actually the only true teachers) to follow all our acknowledged masters, after having thoroughly read them. First.

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