

## WISDOM AND LITERATURE: AN INTRODUCTION

by  
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*Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* is the title of a 2004 book by America's most famous literary critic, Harold Bloom. His chapter titles provide his answer: "The Hebrews: Job and Ecclesiastes," "The Greeks: Plato's Contest with Homer," "Cervantes and Shakespeare," "Montaigne and Francis Bacon," "Samuel Johnson and Goethe," "Emerson and Nietzsche," "Freud and Proust," "The Gospel of Thomas" (containing sayings attributed to Jesus), and "St. Augustine and Reading." Thus, Bloom is saying we can find wisdom in some religious writings, in works of philosophers like Plato and Nietzsche, and in the books of the great psychiatrist Freud, but he finds wisdom primarily in the literature of men who are considered preeminently writers: Homer, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Francis Bacon, Samuel Johnson, Goethe, Emerson, and Proust.

Bloom has many critics for many reasons, and one might ask if there are really no modern writers or thinkers—that is anyone after Freud's death in 1939—worthy of being included in his list. But his three criteria, "aesthetic splendor, intellectual power, wisdom," for selecting writings of the wise men above—note no women—are very personal ones. His quest for wisdom rises out of a desire to find "solace and clarify the traumas of aging," recover from serious illness, and deal with the death of friends. He also recognizes that "Christians who believe, Muslims who submit, Jews who trust—all in or to God's will—have their own criteria for wisdom, yet each needs to realize those norms individually if the words of God are to enlighten or comfort. Secularists take on a different kind of responsibility, and their turn to wisdom literature sometimes is considerably more wistful or anguished, depending on temperament."<sup>1</sup> One might add that one's age, gender, and numerous other differences can also affect the search for sagacity. Yet, Bloom is still correct that much wisdom can be found in the older writings he mentions, and this essay will concentrate on literature written prior to the most recent decades. Consideration of more recent writings reflecting wisdom is a topic for some future essay.

When we speak of wisdom we mean "the capacity for judging rightly in matters relating to life and conduct; soundness of judgment in the choice of means and ends" (*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., 1989). Various scholars, like those represented on [The Wisdom Page](#), tell us more about wisdom. Psychologist Robert Sternberg, for example, in his essay "[It's Not What You Know, but How You Use It: Teaching for Wisdom](#)," states that "people are wise to the extent that they use their intelligence to seek a common good. They do so by balancing, in their courses of action, their own interests with those of others and those of larger entities, like their school, their community, their country, even God." He, Copthorne Macdonald, and many other wisdom scholars emphasize that wise people share basic values such as love, compassion, empathy, humility, humor, and tolerance. As Macdonald has noted, wisdom is also about

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Bloom, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004), 1-2.

integrating into one's life "the three great value spheres" of "the Good, the True, and the Beautiful" or those of "morals, science, and art."<sup>2</sup>

Macdonald has also called attention to the insights of psychologist Abraham Maslow as they pertain to wisdom. Maslow studied wise people he referred to as self-actualizing and ego-transcending. He found that they "focused on concerns outside of themselves; they liked solitude and privacy more than the average person, and they tended to be more detached than ordinary from the dictates and expectations of their culture. They were inner-directed people. They were creative, too, and appreciated the world around them with a sense of awe and wonder. In love relationships they respected the other's individuality and felt joy at the other's successes. They gave more love than most people, and needed less. Central to their lives was a set of values [like] wholeness, perfection, completion, justice, aliveness, richness, simplicity, beauty, goodness, uniqueness, effortlessness, playfulness, truth, honesty, reality, self-sufficiency." Maslow also wrote about transcendence and the sense of unity it brought to wise people. Macdonald thought it akin to "the unity that the perennial philosophy would have us see, the unity dealt with in the mystical traditions of both East and West . . . . It is an intuition-based type of holistic seeing. Coming to see this unity requires an intuitive shift of vantage point—and ultimately, of identification. The world observed by these people is the same world that everyone else sees; nothing external has changed. But they suddenly see that reality in a new context; they see in the data of life a meaning that wasn't evident before."<sup>3</sup>

The mention above of "morals, science, and art" hints that not only religion, philosophy, psychology, and literature, but also other sciences and arts can help us achieve wisdom. And this includes fields like history and anthropology, sometimes considered "social sciences," and music and film that can be included in the arts. But here our concern is to provide, for [Wisdom Page](#) readers and others, an introduction as to how literature and reading it (or among illiterate peoples, hearing it) can make us humans wiser, i.e., how it can help us make better judgments about "life and conduct"; develop wisdom values like compassion, empathy, humility, and tolerance; use our "intelligence to seek a common good"; better integrate goodness, truth, and beauty into our lives; and achieve ego-transcendence and a realization of the oneness of being.<sup>4</sup>

We shall take up these questions in order beginning with making better judgments about our lives. In his chapter on "Montaigne and Bacon" (both born in the sixteenth century), Bloom insists that the former is the master of the personal essay, largely due to "the overwhelming directness of his wisdom."<sup>5</sup> And the advantage of essayists like Montaigne, Bacon, Johnson, and Emerson, who together wrote hundreds of essays, is that they can speak directly to us. Take, for example, the essay "Of Experience," which Bloom considers the best of Montaigne's numerous essays. In it the Frenchman wrote:

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<sup>2</sup> See Macdonald's "The Integral Vision: A Brief Introduction, at <http://www.wisdompage.com/integralintro.html> and "Values That Various People Have Associated with Wisdom," at <http://www.wisdompage.com/valueslists.html> (all web sites accessed in July 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Macdonald's Ch. 1 of *Toward Wisdom*, at <http://www.wisdompage.com/tw-ch01.html>. See also Abraham H. Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (Viking Press, 1971), Ch. 21, "Various Meanings of Transcendence."

<sup>4</sup> For specific authors or topics dealing with wisdom and literature, see the links provided at <http://www.wisdompage.com/introwis07.html>. The present essay will merely summarize and elaborate upon the linked materials. The whole topic of wisdom and oral literature is merely mentioned; but as Malinowski and other anthropologists have pointed out, oral literature in such forms as sacred stories (or myths), folk tales, and folk poetry were important in pre-literate societies for conveying wisdom from one generation to another.

<sup>5</sup> Bloom, 119.

We must learn to suffer what we cannot evade; our life, like the harmony of the world, is composed of contrary things—of diverse tones, sweet and harsh, sharp and flat, sprightly and solemn: the musician who should only affect some of these, what would he be able to do? he must know how to make use of them all, and to mix them; and so we should mingle the goods and evils which are consubstantial with our life; our being cannot subsist without this mixture, and the one part is no less necessary to it than the other.

And later on in the essay,

We are great fools. "He has passed his life in idleness," say we: "I have done nothing to-day." What? have you not lived? that is not only the fundamental, but the most illustrious, of your occupations. "Had I been put to the management of great affairs, I should have made it seen what I could do." "Have you known how to meditate and manage your life? you have performed the greatest work of all."<sup>6</sup>

If we look at the titles of the essays of Bacon and Emerson, we see that we can get advice from them on a wide variety of subjects: Youth and Age, Marriage and Single Life, Parents and Children, Friendship, Love, Goodness, Wisdom, Death, Nature, Beauty, Culture, Religion, Riches, Envy, Fate, Power, Politics, Behavior, Self-Reliance, and Nature, to name just a fraction of their many topics. And these two men were notable figures. Despite being removed in disgrace in 1621 from being Lord Chancellor of England—those who write wisely do not always act so—Bacon was one of the intellectual giants of his day. The poet Shelley later wrote of his “almost superhuman wisdom.” And Bloom still believes Emerson to be “the dominant sage of the American imagination.”<sup>7</sup>

Bacon shared a talent with the Germany’s greatest writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832). Both were masters of aphorisms or maxims, which Goethe scattered about in his poems, essays, fiction, and letters. One collection of them (selected by Emil Ludwig) is appropriately entitled *The Wisdom of Goethe* (1955). The selections are divided into 24 chapters with headings such “Youth and Age,” “Life and Death,” “The Art of Life,” “Woman,” “Marriage and Children,” “Politics and Power,” and “War and Revolution.”

Like Goethe, the Russian Leo Tolstoy was one of the great writers of the past few centuries who wrote essays but was primarily known for his other works, including writings in which much wisdom can be found. The main difference between essays that dispense wisdom on such topics as war, marriage, family, and death and such novels as Tolstoy’s *Sevastopol Stories*, *War and Peace*, *Family Happiness*, *Anna Karenina*, and *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, which also reflect on these issues, is that the novels provide a more holistic engagement with these concerns. In reading these fictional works we *experience* what the characters undergo. And as Montaigne pointed out, experiences can help us develop wisdom, especially if we go through them with a writer like Tolstoy, who was always concerned with the question “How Should One Live?” In many of his works wisdom-seekers are clearly evident such as Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace* and Konstantin Levin in *Anna Karenina*, and as they seek for answers to life’s mysteries we may identify with their quests and gradually become wiser ourselves.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The essays of Montaigne, like many of those of other Bloom wise men, are available online in various formats; the quotes here are from <http://www.manybooks.net/titles/montaignetext02mn19v11.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Bloom, 141 (quoting Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry*), 191.

<sup>8</sup> For some of my writings on Tolstoy, as well as others on wisdom, see the links at <http://people.emich.edu/wmoss/pub.htm>. In addition, see my *An Age of Progress?: Clashing Twentieth-Century Global Forces* (London; New York: Anthem Press, 2008), 6-8, 249, where I mention his views on non-violence and progress.

Having such vicarious experiences and then reflecting upon them is one of the chief wisdom opportunities of literature, and not just in novels but in shorter fiction, drama, biography, and even some poetry. If we have never been in combat and therefore have had no experience with fighting in a war, we can still experience it vicariously in *Sevastopol Stories* or in a novel like *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Numerous English poets like Wilfred Owen, who was machine-gunned to death a week before World War I ended, help us experience what this war must have been like. In his "Dulce et Decorum Est," after reading a description of a poison gas attack, we understand why he ended his poem: "The old lie: *Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori*" (It is sweet and honorable to die for one's country).<sup>9</sup>

Of course, poems romanticizing or glorifying war had also long existed. Reading literature can not only help us become wiser, it can also influence us in becoming more foolish. Like any experience, what we gain from reading depends on the perspective and interpretation we apply to it. Whereas reading pro-war poetry before World War I influenced some idealistic young Englishmen to volunteer for WWI service, reading (or seeing the film) *All Quiet on the Western Front* and vicariously experiencing the horrors of trench warfare encouraged pacifism among some people prior to World War II. Whether it is wiser to volunteer for a particular war or take a pacifist stand is a question upon which wise people have disagreed.

An author like Shakespeare or Tolstoy, however, can help guide us, often indirectly, toward wiser interpretations of what we experience among their characters. After witnessing, through Tolstoy's eyes, realistic bloody scenes he personally experienced in the Crimean War's Sevastopol siege, he comments about a short truce the Russians and French declared to gather their dead.

Yes, white flags have been raised on the bastion and all along the trench, the flowering valley is filled with stinking corpses, the resplendent sun is descending towards the dark blue sea, and the sea's blue swell is gleaming in the sun's golden rays. Thousands of men are crowding together, studying one another, speaking to one another, smiling at one another. It might be supposed that when these men—Christians, recognizing the same great law of love—see what they have done, they will instantly fall to their knees in order to repent before Him who, when He gave them life, placed in the soul of each, together with the fear of death, a love of the good and beautiful, and that they will embrace one another with tears of joy and happiness, like brothers. Not a bit of it! The scraps of white cloth will be put away—and once again the engines of death and suffering will start their whistling; once again the blood of the innocent will flow and the air will be filled with their groans and cursing.<sup>10</sup>

Before we enlist to go to war, or make other decisions about our lives, prior relevant experience would be useful, and literature is one way to gain it, if only vicariously. In another [essay](#), I have provided a detailed look at how two pieces of literature, *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*, can help young people make wiser decisions about their future.

Literature can also help us develop wisdom values like empathy, love, compassion, humility, and tolerance. We all grow up limited by our age, gender, race, class, and nationality, by the cultures and subcultures that help to define us—Maslow's *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (pp. 270-71) contains some astute observations about how we need to transcend cultural limitations to become wiser. Empathy involves putting ourselves in the shoes of others, trying to see life as they do. To understand what it might have been like to be an African victim of

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<sup>9</sup> The poem can be found at <http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/owen1.html>, where links are also available to other war poetry into the twenty-first century.

<sup>10</sup> From Tolstoy's *Sevastopol Stories*, in *The Cossacks and Other Stories* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 254.

Western imperialism around 1900, the novel *Things Fall Apart* (1959), by Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, can be helpful. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) helped more affluent Americans empathize with poor migrants from Oklahoma. Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* (1952) aided whites to better understand what it was like to be black when segregation and widespread discrimination were still prevalent.

Being a white American male born three years before the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor means that I have to make a special effort to see things from younger, non-white, non-American, non-male perspectives, or from those born in earlier eras. Biographies and autobiographies are especially helpful in this regard.<sup>11</sup> Take, for example, those by and about Dorothy Day, whom President Obama has listed (in his *Audacity of Hope*) as one of five "great reformers in American history." For a man to read her autobiographical works like *From Union Square to Rome* or *The Long Loneliness*, as well as her autobiographical novel *The Eleventh Virgin*, her diaries, letters, and some of her hundreds of columns for her paper, *The Catholic Worker*, is a broadening experience indeed. Through these works and biographies about her we come to understand how a woman, now being considered for sainthood by the Catholic Church, could once have been so desperately in love with a man as to have an abortion rather than lose her lover, or later, when she finally did have a child, what childbirth was like for her.<sup>12</sup>

Reading her writings and about her is also pertinent here because she was such a great lover of literature, and the wisdom she saw reflected in it strengthened her own. Although I have dealt with her love of Russian writers in another [essay](#), just a few points made in it are appropriate here. She loved the humility displayed by such characters as Dostoevsky's "Idiot" (in a novel of the same name) and Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*. She wrote that "the very struggle for non-violence, and growth in love of brother, love of enemy, which goes on within us all, the very struggle to put off the old man and put on the new, was made easier by those words of Fr. Zossima, 'Love in practice [perhaps the greatest of the wisdom values] is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.'"<sup>13</sup> In 1953, when the Rosenbergs were awaiting their execution for espionage, Day's empathy for them was heightened by recalling the story in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* about the mental suffering of a man about to be put to death.

About another Russian writer she wrote that the "question which Chekhov brings out in all his stories is 'What is to be done?' What is life for? Chekhov's conclusion is that we are here to work, to serve our brother, and he was a doctor and wrote on the side in order to support himself through medical school and to support also his father, mother and brothers. . . . Not to be a parasite, not to live off of others, to earn our own living by a life of service, this answered the question for him. And we have too that sureness of an answer—We must try to make that kind of a society in which it is easier for man to be good."<sup>14</sup>

But Day's love of literature extended far beyond the Russians. In her works, including the hundreds of columns she wrote over many decades in *The Catholic Worker*, she often mentioned her favorites. An early influence was Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle*. While living in

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<sup>11</sup> For more on this point, see my "Portraits of Modern Wisdom: An Introduction," at <http://www.wisdompage.com/MossPortraitsIntro.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Her 1928 essay "Having a Baby—A Christmas Story," was later reprinted in *The Catholic Worker* (December 1977), available at <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=583>. From this site many of Day's writings, especially her columns, can be searched and then read.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=511>.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=788>; on the wisdom of Chekhov and that contained in many of his stories and plays, see my "The Wisdom of Anton Chekhov," at <http://www.wisdompage.com/ChekhovEssay.pdf>.



Chicago, she visited some of the streets where it was set and imagined how his characters might have interacted. She later recalled that like him she wanted to write books that would convince people of the injustices that existed and contribute toward creating a more just order. About the poor people like those depicted by Sinclair, this woman who later did so much to help the poor, wrote that “from that time on my life was to be linked to theirs, their interests would be mine: I had received a call, a vocation, a direction in life.” In a June 1944 column she noted, “One of the reasons I love [Charles] Dickens is that he writes so much of the poor.”<sup>15</sup> She also loved books that depicted people fighting to overcome injustice such as Victor Hugo’s classic *Les Miserables* and, later in her life, some of Albert Camus’s writings.

Like Tolstoy (another of her favorites), Day thought of herself as a pacifist and non-violent anarchist, and she grew up and matured in a period when there were many other writers besides Upton Sinclair who were critical of American capitalism. In 1950, Henry Steele Commager, one of America’s most prominent historians, wrote: “Who, in the half century from Cleveland to Franklin Roosevelt, celebrated business enterprise or the acquisitive society . . . ? Almost all the major writers were critical of those standards, or contemptuous of them. . . . Most authors portrayed an economic system disorderly and ruthless, wasteful and inhuman, unjust alike to workingmen, investors, and consumers, politically corrupt and morally corrupting.” These writers, especially the novelists, “exposed the inequities of business, romanticized labor, lamented the slums, and denounced corruption.” The literature of the 1920s, reflected “aversion to Mammon, . . . distaste for the standards of the market place and the country club,” and “hatred of vulgarity.” Writings of the 1930s, after the Depression had struck, “pulsed with anger and pity—anger against an economy that wasted the resources, paralyzed the energies, and corrupted the spirits of the people, pity for the victims of that economy.” Even in what remained of the first half century, even with victory in World War II, very few novelists revised “the judgment which had been passed on the acquisitive society. . . . The novelists remained irreconcilable.”<sup>16</sup>

What such literature provided for Day were alternate visions to the more dominant American capitalist way of life and to one of the main questions wisdom seekers ask themselves, “How should I live?” Her reading helped her be more like Maslow’s wise people already discussed—“more detached than ordinary from the dictates and expectations of their culture.” When she was still a high school student she later recalled that one of her brothers worked on *The Day Book*, a minor Chicago paper, where the then socialist Carl Sandburg, the “poet of the people” inspired her brother “to look on the people as he did, with love and hope of great accomplishment.”<sup>17</sup> In Sandburg’s many poems and other works many wisdom values were displayed.

She began her work of establishing hospitality houses, of feeding and helping the poor, in the midst of the Great Depression, manifesting wisdom by using her “intelligence to seek a common good,” to use Sternberg’s phrase. In those same years Sandburg wrote his epic poem *The People, Yes*, displaying a similar compassion.

Have you seen them with savings gone  
furniture and keepsakes pawned  
and the pawntickets blown away in cold winds?

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<sup>15</sup> Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 38; <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=401>.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character since the 1880s* (New Haven, 1950), 247.

<sup>17</sup> Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 37.

by one letdown and another ending  
in what you might call slums—  
To be named perhaps in case reports  
and tabulated and classified  
among those who have crossed over  
from the employables into the unemployables?

What is the saga of the employables?  
what are the breaks they get?  
What are the dramas of personal fate  
spilled over from industrial transitions?  
what punishments handed bottom people  
who have wronged no man's house  
or things or person? <sup>18</sup>

Although Day mentioned poetry less frequently than fiction as a source of inspiration, there were some poems and other poets she greatly admired. One poem was Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven." In the winter of 1917-1918, she was a close friend of dramatist Eugene O'Neill, and she later recalled (in her autobiographical *From Union Square to Rome*) him reciting that poem.

It was on one of these cold, bitter winter evenings that I first heard *The Hound of Heaven*, that magnificent poem of Francis Thompson. Gene [O'Neill] could recite all of it, and he used to sit there, looking dour and black, his head sunk on his chest, sighing, "And now my heart is as a broken fount wherein tear-drippings stagnate." It is one of those poems that awakens the soul, recalls to it the fact that God is its destiny. The idea of this pursuit fascinated me, the inevitableness of it, the recurrence of it, made me feel that inevitably I would have to pause in the mad rush of living to remember my first beginning and last end. <sup>19</sup>

She also thought highly of the poet W. H. Auden. When he died in 1973, she remembered him fondly in a column in *The Catholic Worker*. Like Sandburg, who had once sent her a check when he thought she might need it for bail—her strong pacifism and willingness to demonstrate sometimes landed her in jail—Auden had also once given her a check, this time to pay a fine. And like Sandburg's writings, those of Auden often displayed wisdom values like compassion, humility, and tolerance. Like Day and Sandburg, for example, he was critical of anti-Semitism. To take just one example, there was the haunting poem he wrote shortly after coming to New York in 1939 about a German Jewish couple unable to obtain the right to stay in America. It begins,

Say this city has ten million souls,  
Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:  
Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us.

And later on it includes the stanzas,

Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky;  
It was Hitler over Europe, saying: "They must die";

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<sup>18</sup> Carl Sandburg, *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg*, rev. and expanded ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003), 484-85. For more on Sandburg and other wisdom values he displayed, see my "The Wisdom of Carl and Paula Sandburg," at <http://www.wisdompage.com/SandburgEssay.pdf> and "Carl Sandburg's Wisdom through Humor," at <http://www.wisdompage.com/SandburgHumor.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=207>.

O we were in his mind, my dear, O we were in his mind.

Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened with a pin,  
Saw a door opened and a cat let in:  
But they weren't German Jews, my dear, but they weren't German Jews.<sup>20</sup>

Another poet Day valued was the monk Thomas Merton, and she published in *The Catholic Worker* some of his writings including the poem "Chant to Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces." Merton had Adolf Eichmann and his mass extermination of the Jews in mind when he wrote it. In January 1960, she wrote to Merton, "Your beautiful and profound essay on [Russian poet Boris] Pasternak kept me awake from midnight until four this morning." In October 1960, she thanked Merton for sending her his book *Disputed Questions*, which contained the earlier essay on Pasternak she had read, plus two others on him, all three combined in what Merton labeled "The Pasternak Affair."<sup>21</sup> Merton's writings on Pasternak manifest his belief that the Russian's poetic novel *Doctor Zhivago* reflects the mystical concept of "Holy Wisdom" (Sophia), which Merton had earlier discovered among Russian thinkers including the Russian poet-philosopher Vladimir Soloviev (1853-1900). Merton and Day cherished both *Doctor Zhivago* and Soloviev's essays in his *Meaning of Love*, whose ideas Merton saw mirrored in Pasternak's novel.

The concept of "Holy Wisdom" or Sophia has an interesting history, beginning with its depiction of her—note in feminine form—in the Bible's wisdom books such as *Proverbs* and *Wisdom*. The great medieval poet Dante was influenced by this depiction, and in his poetic masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*, the beautiful Beatrice partakes of some of her characteristics. Many centuries later both Soloviev and Merton wrote poems expressing mystical appreciation of such divine wisdom (or Sophia).<sup>22</sup>

When Merton was in college at Columbia he took a course that he later called "the best course I ever had in college." It was taught by poet and critic Mark Van Doren, who was a great appreciator of Carl Sandburg's poetry and of the importance of humor for wisdom. He later wrote: "Carl Sandburg . . . brought something back to poetry that had been sadly missing in the early years of this century. It was humor, the indispensable ingredient of art as it is of life. Just as we cannot take a man seriously who lacks the sense of humor, so we cannot take the poet. Humor is the final sign and seal of seriousness, for it is proof that reality is held in honor and in love." Van Doren thought that "the sense of humor in him [Sandburg] is more than anything else the sense of the absurd, or, as he might say, the cockeyed, the loony, the goofy." And he added, "Thomas Carlyle once remarked that the presence of humor in a poet—he meant Shakespeare chiefly—enables him to see what is beneath him and about him as well as what is above him. . . . The real poet studies the world as it is: lovely, terrible, sensible, grotesque; and would ask for no

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<sup>20</sup> W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, Inc., 2007), 263. For more on Auden and the wisdom values he displayed, see my "W. H. Auden's Wisdom, Faith, and Humor," at <http://www.wisdompage.com/WHAudensWisdomFaithandHumor.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Anne Klejment and Nancy L. Roberts, eds. *American Catholic Pacifism: The Influence of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1996), 102, 103. Day's letters to Merton are found in this collection's Ch. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Olivia Holmes "Antonio Rossini. Il Dante sapienziale: Dionigi e la bellezza di Beatrice," *Italica* (Winter 2009), at [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_hb1432/is\\_4\\_86/ai\\_n54561789/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb1432/is_4_86/ai_n54561789/). See also "Dante Alighieri," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dante/>. For more on Holy Wisdom, Pasternak, Soloviev, Day, and Merton, see my "Wisdom from Russia: The Perspectives of Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton," at <http://www.wisdompage.com/WisdomFromRussia.pdf>.



other one in its place. In this sense, Sandburg is a real poet, so that it is no wonder people trust him and adore him.”<sup>23</sup>

But the course that Merton took from Van Doren was not on Sandburg, but on Shakespeare, whom Bloom later called the “the wisest of teachers.” Merton thought that his course on Shakespeare “did me the most good, in many different ways. It was the only place where I ever heard anything really sensible said about any of the things that were really fundamental— life, death, time, love, sorrow, fear, wisdom, suffering, eternity.”<sup>24</sup>

Despite the greatness and wisdom of other writers, it is, at least for readers of English, Shakespeare’s works that best demonstrate how literature can contribute to wisdom. Fortunately for readers of The Wisdom Page, Alan Nordstrom’s [“Shakespeare’s Take on Human Wisdom”](#) tells us how.<sup>25</sup> Many others mentioned in this essay, besides Merton and Bloom, have greatly valued Shakespeare’s wisdom. Emerson wrote that he was “**inconceivably wise.**”<sup>26</sup> Sandburg was another great admirer, and in his Pulitzer-Prize-winning six-volumes on Abraham Lincoln he indicated that Lincoln was too. In 1946-1947 Auden gave a series of lectures on his plays at New York’s New School for Social Research, and he later wrote that “of all dramatists Shakespeare is, perhaps, the most ‘lifelike.’”<sup>27</sup>

Early in the present essay we asked how literature can make us wise, i.e., help us 1) make better judgments about life, 2) develop wisdom values, 3) use our intelligence to seek a common good, 4) better integrate goodness, truth, and beauty into our lives, and 5) achieve ego-transcendence and a realization of the oneness of being. Now using Nordstrom as our chief guide, we can examine what Shakespeare can contribute to such wisdom.

To make wiser judgments about life we first need to understand ourselves and others. Macdonald [has written](#) that “wisdom, maturity, and happiness seem to go hand in hand with figuring out how life and the world work—with discovering the nature of the rules, laws, and programming that dictate what will happen under what conditions. Wise people know that the more deeply and accurately they come to understand key processes within and without, the better able they are to live their personal lives in harmony with what is happening moment-to-moment.” Nordstrom tells us that “Shakespeare gives us life. He shows us what we are, yet also what we may be, at our best: honest and honorable, faithful and true, loyal and trustworthy, constant in love.” Emerson had earlier written that the great Englishman dealt with “questions which knock for answer at every heart,—on life and death, on love, on wealth and poverty, on the prizes of life and the ways whereby we come at them; on the characters of men, and the influences, occult and open, which affect their fortunes.” A glance at Shakespeare’s quotes arranged by subject reminds us off all the topics dealt with by the essayists mentioned earlier in this essay.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas Merton, “Mark Van Doren,” in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1974), 235; Van Doren quotes are from his “Introduction” in Carl Sandburg, *Harvest Poems, 1910-1960* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1960), 9-10.

<sup>24</sup> Merton, “Mark Van Doren,” 235.

<sup>25</sup> All Nordstrom quotes are taken from this essay at <http://www.wisdompage.com/ShakespeareOnWisdom.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> This and all subsequent quotes from Emerson are from his “Shakespeare or, The Poet,” available at <http://www.xmission.com/~seldom74/emerson/shakespe.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted by Arthur Kirsch in his “Introduction” to W. H. Auden, *Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Kirsch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), xiv.

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., the “Quotations by Theme,” at <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/quotes/>.

Nordstrom also alludes to Shakespeare's wisdom values and suggests how they contribute to the good. "Shakespeare demonstrates the primacy of love, kindness, and generosity over the fallacy of egotistical machination and monstrous malice. He reveals absolutely the dignity of selfless compassion and the wretchedness of sin. Though sinners often defeat the virtuous and sometimes go unpunished, and while even the saintly can suffer horribly, Shakespeare leaves us clear about what evil is and how it works, and likewise about goodness. We can go to Shakespeare for moral, if not cosmological, values and convictions." Auden thought that "in *King Lear*, Shakespeare attempts to show absolute love and goodness, in the person of Cordelia."<sup>29</sup>

In Shakespeare we can also witness a spirit of tolerance and humility. Nordstrom writes that "he's never didactic," and Bloom sees him as one more intent on depicting reality than making dogmatic judgments and one "whose grandest achievements cannot be reconciled . . . with any creed or ideology whatever." Emerson states that "he has no discoverable egotism."<sup>30</sup>

Nordstrom also reflects on the Englishman's humor, another important wisdom trait. He writes that "examples of folly and error predominate in his plays"—in the tragedies as well as the comedies—and since he "is not an essayist but a playwright, he does not tell but show, thus we must learn not by precept but by instance and example." By viewing folly through Shakespeare's eyes, "ironically we may infer something of what wisdom is and why it is so rare." Further, "if we cannot fully grasp the wisdom he possesses, we can better recognize our own folly by his fools and learn to laugh at it or mourn the miseries it brings." His characters "constitute a full catalogue of fools, a motley menagerie of lunatics and dunces of all colors and degrees. Among them we'll find images of family and friends, acquaintances and strangers and, most strangely, us, if we look truly enough into our own blinking idiocy."<sup>31</sup>

Delving into Shakespeare can also heighten our appreciation of goodness, truth, and beauty and their interrelationship. Nordstrom observes that "wisdom for Shakespeare has far more to do with the heart than the head. . . . [with] a true and faithful heart, radiant with love, care, and devotion, brimming with compassion and forgiveness." Emerson speaks to the beauty and truth in Shakespeare when he writes, "Though the speeches in the plays, and single lines, have a beauty which tempts the ear to pause on them for their euphuism, yet the sentence is so loaded with meaning and so linked with its foregoers and followers, that the logician is satisfied."

Emerson's allusion to the aural beauty of Shakespeare's writing is a reminder of the many types of beauty to be found in literature, especially poetry, which can simultaneously delight the ear (akin to music), the imaginative eye, and the mind, while also appealing to our sense of mystery and awe.

Shakespeare himself often wrote of goodness, truth, and beauty and his appreciation for their interconnection, especially in his sonnets. In [Sonnet 54](#) he wrote "O, how much more doth beauty beauteous seem / By that sweet ornament which truth doth give." But perhaps [Sonnet 105](#), where "fair, kind, and true" are synonymous with "beauty, goodness, and truth," is the best example.

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<sup>29</sup> Auden, "The Prince's Dog," in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 201.

<sup>30</sup> Bloom, 107; see also B. J. Sokol, *Shakespeare and Tolerance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>31</sup> I have borrowed this paragraph and some other quotes from Nordstrom from my essay "Wisdom, Humor, and Faith: A Historical View," at <http://www.wisdompage.com/WisdomHumorFaith.pdf>, where I also deal with the humor of others such as Chekhov and Soloviev.

Let not my love be call'd idolatry,  
 Nor my beloved as an idol show,  
 Since all alike my songs and praises be  
 To one, of one, still such, and ever so.  
 Kind is my love to-day, to-morrow kind,  
 Still constant in a wondrous excellence;  
 Therefore my verse to constancy confined,  
 One thing expressing, leaves out difference.  
 'Fair, kind and true' is all my argument,  
 'Fair, kind, and true' varying to other words;  
 And in this change is my invention spent,  
 Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords.  
 'Fair, kind, and true,' have often lived alone,  
 Which three till now never kept seat in one.<sup>32</sup>

The last aspect of Shakespeare's wisdom we need to examine is how it helps us achieve the type of ego-transcendence and sense of oneness with all being about which Maslow wrote so insightfully. Nordstrom commented that "Shakespeare was one who could not only write like an angel but see like one. His perspective is one of higher awareness, expanded consciousness, the viewpoint of seers and sages illumined by a transcendental gnosis that visionary mystics share." And he possessed "an apprehension that transcends or underlies any particular religious or secular perspective and may be called Divine."

The mystical monk-poet Merton, who was enthusiastic not only about Christian mysticism but also about Zen, thought that "contemplation is related to art [including poetry], to worship, to charity: all these reach out by intuition and self-dedication into the realms that transcend the material conduct of everyday life. Or rather, in the midst of ordinary life itself they seek and find a new and transcendent meaning." Contemplation "is not only compatible with poetic creation, but is stimulated by it, and in its turn inspires poetry." Merton also believed that "the poetic and contemplative awareness is sapiential [*sapient* being Latin for wisdom]. . . . Sapiential thinking has, as another of its characteristics, the capacity to bridge the cognitive gap between our minds and the realm of the transcendent and the unknown, so that without 'understanding' what lies beyond the limit of human vision, we nevertheless enter into an intuitive affinity with it."<sup>33</sup>

Like such awareness, many good poems (including many of Shakespeare) take us beyond scientific or systematic knowledge and even beyond intuitive understanding. Their words "are not merely the signs of concepts: they are also rich in affective and spiritual associations . . . . They exercise a mysterious and vital reactivity among themselves, and so release their secret content of associations to produce in the reader an experience that enriches the depths of his spirit in a manner quite unique. . . . What the poem actually 'means' can only be summed up in the whole content of poetic experience which it is capable of producing in the reader."<sup>34</sup>

Of the many types of transcendence that Maslow wrote about—thirty five in a chapter on "the Various Meanings of Transcendence"—two that have not yet been mentioned are

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<sup>32</sup> See also his poem "the Phoenix and the Turtle," at <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/turtle.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Merton, "Baptism in the Forest: Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner," in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1985), 99-101; "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, 402, 403.

<sup>34</sup> Merton, "Poetry, Symbolism, and Typology," in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, 388.

transcendence over time and death.<sup>35</sup> And Shakespeare reflects on both with great frequency in both his dramas and poems. He indicates that living on in one's children is one way of transcending death, so too is living on in art, including in his own poetry, as we see in [Sonnet 18](#).

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;  
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:  
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.<sup>36</sup>

A few hundred years later, John Keats would say something similar in his "[Ode to a Grecian Urn](#)." After commenting on an old urn upon which a pastoral scene depicts "a flowery tale," he ends his poem with these lines addressed to the picturesque urn:

When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

As Keats indicates, appreciating beauty whether in nature, humans, or the arts (including literature) is another form of transcendence. In his essay on Shakespeare, Nordstrom mentions that other writers such as Emerson (poet as well as essayist), William Wordsworth, and Walt Whitman sometimes helped produce in him a more direct "transcendental vision" of the "wonder in the heart of things." We glimpse such a vision in the following words of Wordsworth.

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth, and every common sight,  
To me did seem  
Apparell'd in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream.<sup>37</sup>

Later in the nineteenth century, Gerald Manley Hopkins captured a similar sentiment in the last two lines below.

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

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<sup>35</sup> Maslow, Ch. 21. For an annotated bibliography of older literature dealing with aging and death, see my *Humanistic Perspectives on Aging: An Annotated Bibliography and Essay* (Ann Arbor: Institute of Gerontology, University of Michigan-Wayne State University, 1976).

<sup>36</sup> See <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/quotes/shakespeareonoldage.html> for Shakespeare quotes on old age.

<sup>37</sup> "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," at <http://www.bartleby.com/101/536.html>.

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;<sup>38</sup>

What both poems have in common is the realization that there is a beauty in this world which is there for the appreciating, but that caught up in our everyday world we too often ignore it. As Wordsworth says in [another poem](#):

THE world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

In the poetry and essays of Emerson and the poems of Whitman we often see expressed the transcendental vision. In his essay "[Nature](#)" Emerson wrote, "In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity . . . which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, —my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God." Whitman expresses much of this same spirit in such poems as "[Song of Myself](#)." There he writes, "For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you"; identifies himself with almost everything and everyone he encounters; and says, "I will not have a single person slighted or left away." We also see this transcendent spirit in Sandburg, who greatly admired Whitman's poetry. In one of his late poems, "Timesweep," he sees himself as part of a great chain of being that has evolved through time:

For I am one and all of them:  
they swarm in me with song, cry and murmur;  
they fill my room with scurrying fish,  
with apes and kangaroos, with swine and birds . . .

And he looks at death from a transcendental viewpoint:

Since death is there in the light of the sun, in the song of the wind,  
Since death is there in the marvel of the sun coming up to travel  
its arc and go down saying, "I am time and you are time,"  
Since death is there in the slow creep of every dawn and in all the  
steps of shadow moving into evening and dusk of stars,  
Since death is there in almost inaudible chimes of every slow  
clocktick beginning at the birth hour there must be a tremor  
of music in the last little gong, the pling of the final  
announcement from the Black Void.

.....  
Where I go from here and now, or if I go at all  
again, the Maker of sea and land, of sky and  
air, can tell.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> "God's Grandeur," at <http://www.bartleby.com/122/7.html>.



In his “A Defence of Poetry” Shelley wrote that “a great poem is a fountain forever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight,” and that a poet “is the author to others of the highest wisdom, pleasure, virtue, and glory.” More than a century later the American poet Robert Frost sounded like Shelley when he stated that a poem “begins in delight and ends in wisdom.”<sup>40</sup> But the poetry and other literature we have examined here is not contemporary. And one could argue that to achieve a high degree of wisdom in this century individuals have to know what is going on at present, for example, in regard to the environment, the global economy, or politics. I would not disagree. Otherwise, well-intentioned people, especially in a democracy, might do more harm than good in (to use Sternberg’s words) “their school, their community, their country.”

Yet, reading literature written in earlier decades or centuries can still be relevant in our day because it deals with many timeless topics like youth, marriage, parenthood and children, friendship, love, death, politics, virtues and vices, and our relationship to nature. And even though the environment we live in may be constantly changing, human nature remains much the same. To conclude let me cite two examples of how literature from earlier times manages to remain relevant: the first relating to Robert Kennedy and the second concerning Chekhov, who died in 1904, but is still a man for our times.

The 1960s were a time of tragic assassinations, for example that of President John Kennedy in 1963 and Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy in 1968. The killing of his brother led Robert Kennedy to seek wisdom that would console and enlighten him amidst his grief. His Catholic religion gave him some comfort, but he sought more. At the Democratic National Convention in 1964, he said:

I realize that as an individual that we can't just look back, that we must look forward. When I think of President Kennedy, I think of what Shakespeare said in *Romeo and Juliet*:

*When he shall die take him and cut him out into the stars and he shall make the face of heaven so fine that all the world will be in love with night and pay no worship to the garish sun.*

And I realize as an individual and really—I realize that as an individual even more importantly, for our political Party and for the country, that we can't just look to the past, but we must look to the future.<sup>41</sup>

But Robert Kennedy increasingly reached further back than Shakespeare, or even Jesus, to access an older wisdom—that of the classical Greek dramatists. He was especially fond of lines from Aeschylus’s tragedy *Agamemnon*, which he quoted (with slight modifications) to a crowd in Indianapolis in April 1968 after hearing of the assassination of Martin Luther King. Here are Kennedy’s words:

For those of you who are black and are tempted to fill with—be filled with hatred and mistrust of the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I would only say that I can also feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man.

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<sup>39</sup> Sandburg, *Complete Poems*, 767, 769, 770.

<sup>40</sup> Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry,” at <http://www.bartleby.com/27/23.html>; Frost, “The Figure a Poem Makes,” at <http://www.mrbauld.com/frostfig.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Audio and text at <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rfk1964dnc.htm>.

But we have to make an effort in the United States. We have to make an effort to understand, to get beyond, or go beyond these rather difficult times.  
My favorite poem, my—my favorite poet was Aeschylus. And he once wrote:

*Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget  
falls drop by drop upon the heart,  
until, in our own despair,  
against our will,  
comes wisdom  
through the awful grace of God.*

What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black.<sup>42</sup>

Like Aeschylus, he believed that out of pain and suffering wisdom could arise.

In the last several years of his life, Robert Kennedy (elected senator from New York in 1964) also quoted other writers like the Frenchman Camus, whom he often read in these years, and the English poet Tennyson. He began his 1967 book *To Seek a Newer World* with quotes from both. The Camus quote was from a 1948 talk Camus gave to Catholic Dominican Monks, “Perhaps we cannot prevent this world from being a world in which children are tortured. But we can reduce the number of tortured children. And if you don’t help us, who else in the world can help us do this?”<sup>43</sup> The other quote was from Kennedy’s favorite Tennyson poem, [“Ulysses.”](#)

The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:  
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep  
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,  
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.  
Push off, and sitting well in order smite  
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds  
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
Of all the western stars, until I die.

The “newer world” Kennedy sought in 1968 was one he hoped to make possible by running for president that year, only to be assassinated after winning the Democratic primary in California. At a funeral mass in New York in June 1968, his brother Sen. Edward Kennedy closed his eulogy noting words—adapted from the dramatist George Bernard Shaw—that his

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<sup>42</sup> For Kennedy’s speech, see a youtube version and transcript of it at <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rfkonmlkdeath.html>. Comparing it to the quote from *Agamemnon* in Edith Hamilton’s *The Greek Way* (New York: Norton Library, 1964), 156—a favorite book of Kennedy’s—we see that the phrase “in our own despair” was actually “in our own despite.” On the importance of the Greek dramatists, as well as Albert Camus, to Kennedy after his brother’s death, see Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), 617-20. Schlesinger also mentions that Kennedy once pulled out of his briefcase an obviously frequently-read copy of *Three Greek Plays* (which included *Agamemnon*) and pointed out to him a few passages from Euripides’s *Trojan Women* that “clearly had great meaning for him.”

<sup>43</sup> The quote can be found in Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 73.

brother often used: "Some men see things as they are and say why. I dream things that never were and say why not."<sup>44</sup>

After the funeral mass, a train slowly carried his body to Washington, D. C., as thousands upon thousands lined the tracks along the route. For many of those of us who witnessed (mainly on television) the events surrounding the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King, many images, including that soulful, prolonged train ride, are seared into our brains. Family friend and advisor to the Kennedys, historian Arthur Schlesinger, remembered: "In Baltimore a great silent mass of people, mostly black, had waited for hours. When the train pulled in, they joined hands and sang 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic.' So, 103 years before, a crowd had sung in Baltimore as another funeral train [Lincoln's] had passed."<sup>45</sup> And just as Walt Whitman by writing his "[When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd](#)" and the shorter "[Oh Captain! My Captain!](#)" had turned to poetry to express his grief over the assassination of Lincoln, so perhaps not a few people turned to reading Whitman poems or others for consolation, maybe even wisdom, after the assassinations of the 1960s.

Our final example of the continuing relevance of older literature's wisdom for the present relates to Chekhov. In a 1973 diary entry Dorothy Day wrote, "Chekhov's stories and letters are a never-failing inspiration now."<sup>46</sup> In a year 2000 publication, *The Cornell West Reader*, we could read a similar sentiment from a man once called the "pre-eminent African American intellectual of his generation." Here is what he wrote:

I find the incomparable works of Anton Chekhov — the best singular body by a modern artist — to be the wisest and deepest interpretations of what human beings confront in their daily struggles. ... I find inspiration in his refusal to escape from the pain and misery of life by indulging in dogmas, doctrines or dreams as well as abstract systems, philosophic theodicies or political utopias.

In short, Chekhov provides exemplary tragicomic dramas, subject to multiple interpretations, for serious thinking and wise living. ... Yet his acute sense of the incongruity in our lives is grounded in a magnificent compassion for each of us. Chekhov understands what drives the cynic without himself succumbing to cynicism. ... Chekhov leads us through our contemporary inferno with love and sorrow, but no cheap pity or promise of ultimate happiness.<sup>47</sup>

A decade later, after having just finished the 2010 congressional campaigns, we here in the United States had experienced more than our share of hype, self-promotion, partisan know-it-alls, denial of scientific truths regarding evolution and global warming, and dogmatic pronouncements. At such a time, it was still refreshing and instructive to listen to the wise, tolerant, pragmatic, and empathetic voice of the modest Chekhov, who loved beauty, truth, goodness, and nature, and disliked self-promotion, intolerance, and dogmatism.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Edward Kennedy's eulogy, in both spoken and textual formats, is available at <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ekennedytributetork.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Schlesinger, 2. For a description of the train and the people who stood along tracks and stations that it passed, see Thurston Clarke, "Robert F. Kennedy and the 82 Days That Inspired America," at <http://hnn.us/articles/51186.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Dorothy Day, *The Duty of Delight: The Diaries of Dorothy Day*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Milwaukee: Marquette Univ Pr, 2008), 534.

<sup>47</sup> Cornel West, *The Cornell West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2000), xv-xvi.

<sup>48</sup> For more on Chekhov's relevance for the present, see my "Anton Chekhov: A Man for Our Times," on the History News Network web site, at <http://www.hnn.us/articles/133185.html>.