CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Case

This book is about my liberal education. It is also about the practice of liberal education in today's university. It is both a personal and a polemical book. Because my thinking about education is inseparable from my particular experience, this book is a meditation on how liberal education has shaped my own life. My arguments and observations draw on my career as a college professor and academic administrator, but the driving force behind this book is the way in which liberal education has altered and enriched the trajectory of my life.

That trajectory began in 1973 in Cambita Garabitos, a rural town in the Dominican Republic that was still immersed in the agrarian and pre-industrial rhythms of the nineteenth century. On May 26, 1985, I left Cambita for New York. The flight was only three and half hours long, but the distance I traveled on that day was in many ways incalculable. And it was again a long distance from learning English as a second language in the overcrowded classrooms of IS 61 in Corona, Queens, to enrolling as a freshman at Columbia University in 1991. I eventually earned a PhD from Columbia and have been teaching humanities there for twenty years. My liberal education has given me a way of making sense of this complicated trajectory.

The idea of liberal education goes back to the ancient democracy of Athens, where it was conceived as the education

appropriate for free citizens. Aristotle described it as an education "given not because it is useful or necessary but because it is noble and suitable for a free person."[1] All Athenian citizens, the sort of "free persons" Aristotle had in mind, participated in government by voting directly on the adoption of laws, holding political office, deliberating on juries, and serving in the army. The point of liberal education was to prepare citizens for these civic responsibilities. To this day, democracies depend on a citizenry capable of discharging the duties for which a liberal education prepared Athenian citizens. Indeed, the possibility of democracy hinges on the success or failure of liberal education.

But the term "liberal education," like its cousin "the liberal arts," is not well understood even among academics. Outside academia, it gets a cold reception, combining the political baggage of the word "liberal" with the reputed uselessness of studying art. One recent critic warned that "putting the words *liberal* and *arts* together is a branding disaster."[2] Common substitutes, in part because of their innocuousness, include "general education," "core competencies," "transferable skills," or even simply "the humanities." But these alternatives fail to convey the central feature of a liberal education: its concern with the condition of human freedom and self-determination.

In the slave democracy of Athens, liberal education was distinguished from the education of an enslaved person or of a "vulgar craftsman." Today, it is distinguished from professional,

1. Aristotle, *Politics*, C.D.C. Reeve, trans. (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), VIII, 1338a, 30–31, p. 230.

2. Brandon Busteed, "Higher Education: Drop the Term 'Liberal Arts,'" Gallup News, Opinion (Aug. 16, 2017), https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/216275/higher-education-drop-term-liberal-arts.aspx?g_source=Opinion&g_medium=lead&g_campaign=tiles.

technical, or vocational education. Liberal education looks to the meaning of a human life beyond the requirements of subsistence—instead of asking how to make a living, liberal education asks what living is for. "These studies," says Aristotle, "are undertaken for their own sake, whereas those relating to work are necessary and for the sake of things other than themselves."[3] Liberal education concerns the human yearning to go beyond questions of survival to questions of existence.

In American colleges and universities, liberal education is typically offered as required courses, often in the humanities and social sciences, that lie outside of the student's major. With some exceptions, especially in recent years,[4] colleges and universities elsewhere in the world don't offer this general foundation for higher learning but focus directly on specialized studies.[5]

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My liberal education began with my father's Marxist-inspired opposition to the Dominican strongman Joaquín Balaguer in the 1970s, and the political tradition through which he justified his activism. Some of his political activity took place in the open—debates and public denunciations, strikes and demonstrations,

3. *Politics*, 1338a, 10–12.

4. For a useful survey of recent efforts in Europe, see Marijk van der Wende, "The Emergence of the Liberal Arts and Sciences Education in Europe: A Comparative Perspective," in *Higher Education Policy* 24:2 (June 2011), pp. 233–253.

5. For a provocative treatment of the peculiarly American tradition of liberal arts education, see Jose María Torralba, "Educación Liberal *Made in the USA*: De cómo se inventaron las humanidades," in *Falsos saberes: La suplantación del conocimiento en la cultura contemporánea*, Juan Arana, ed. (Madrid: Editorial Biblioteca Nueva, 2013), pp. 61–74.

fundraising and organizing. Some of it was clandestine—secret meetings, training in guerrilla tactics, sheltering individuals sought by the authorities, establishing relations with militant leftists throughout Latin America. Although he had only a sixth-grade education, his politics were steeped in an intellectual tradition of which he was only vaguely aware, but which I began to internalize along with my first intimations of who I was in the world.

But my formal liberal education began when I entered Columbia University as a freshman and came across its celebrated Core Curriculum. Sometimes described as a Great Books program, the Core Curriculum is a set of courses in literary and philosophical classics—as well as art, music, and science—in which all students study and discuss a prescribed list of works that begins in antiquity and moves chronologically to the present. The Core, as it is commonly known, constitutes the distinctive backbone of the education offered by Columbia College, Columbia University's residential liberal arts college. Legendary for its rigor, the Core is a kind of intellectual baptism that goes back more than a century and harkens to a time when an introduction to the Western tradition of learning was recognized as a self-evident good.

Today, Columbia's Core Curriculum stands as a kind of relic, with no other major university requiring a common course of study in what used to be called "the classics." Many schools do continue to offer liberal education through the common study of important books, but usually on an elective basis.[6] After

6. Among big research universities, the Core model survives in programs like Yale's Directed Studies, Stanford's Structured Liberal Education program, and the University of Chicago's Core Curriculum. St. John's College, in Annapolis and Santa Fe, has carried the logic of the Core to its maximum application, organizing its entire undergraduate program around the common reading and discussion of original texts.

earning a PhD in English, my first faculty job was as a Lecturer in the Columbia Core Curriculum, and I then served as its chief administrator from 2008 to 2018.

I had come to the United States from a mountain town in the Dominican Republic a few days before my twelfth birthday, not speaking English, and never before having been even close to an airplane. I came with my older brother, who was seventeen. My mother had arrived in the United States two years earlier. Immediately after finding a minimum-wage job in a garment factory, she made arrangements for my brother and me to join her. That had been the whole point of accepting life as a nobody in Nueba Yol, which is what we called all of the United States. We would live in a place called Queens.

The city that greeted us was the menacing New York of the 1980s, and like many other Dominican immigrants, we arrived poor, disoriented, and with little notion of what would happen next. Along with the greenness and wonder of a country boy, I landed at JFK International Airport with a head full of lice and a belly full of tropical parasites. In many respects, I was an unlikely candidate for the Ivy League.

After two years of bilingual education in the local public school and four years at the local public high school, I found myself beginning an unimaginably strange life as a freshman at Columbia College. There I began to make sense of the world and of my place in it through the social and intellectual initiation that is the Core Curriculum.

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Many schools and programs committed to a Core text approach to liberal education gather together annually under the auspices of the Association for Core Texts and Courses (https://www.coretexts.org).

Liberal education has always been a hard sell. People fortunate enough to have had it often describe it as a life-altering experience. But those who haven't had it don't usually feel that their lives are less rich or less fulfilling for lacking it. With higher education increasingly seen in transactional terms—with students paying exorbitant amounts of money to gain a leg up in a fiercely competitive job environment—it is easy to see how liberal education might be regarded as a waste of time. Politicians, the general public, and even university leaders often dismiss it as impractical and pointless—an antiquated affectation of privilege. But liberal education has always had formidable defenders. From Plato and Aristotle, to Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, to Erasmus and Galileo, to Virginia Woolf and W.E.B. Du Bois, to contemporary torchbearers like Andrew Delbanco, Martha Nussbaum, and Fareed Zakaria, eminent thinkers have insisted on the value and indispensability of liberal education.

But the case is persistently hard to make. Part of the difficulty stems from the nature of the good that a liberal education delivers. Communicating its value typically demands an artificial compression, a pointing to a bottom line that, like the plot summary of a great novel, can never convey the experience of reading the novel itself. In both cases, the value of the thing cannot be extracted and delivered apart from the experience of the thing. So arguments about the importance of liberal education always and necessarily fall short, and are typically most appreciated by those who least need it.

This book is a meditation on and an introduction to the experience of liberal education. Rather than offer a battery of arguments, I try to bring the reader closer to the experience of liberal education through encounters with some of the human questions that lie at its heart. I do this through discussions of four authors that have deeply influenced the way I think about

these questions: Saint Augustine, Plato, Sigmund Freud, and Mahatma Gandhi. My four companions come from worlds that are in many ways alien to our own, but they all speak with intimate familiarity about human experiences that we all share. This book is in part an invitation to that conversation.

Augustine, Plato, Freud, and Gandhi. Two ancients and two moderns. One African, two Europeans, and one Indian. A Christian saint, a pagan philosopher, a Jewish atheist, and a Hindu ascetic. A teacher of rhetoric who converted to Christianity and became its most influential theologian, an aristocrat whose young heart was conquered by philosophy and who went on to lay the foundations for Western learning, a researcher in neurophysiology who abandoned the lab and invented a new way of understanding the mind, and a timid Indian lawyer who became a Mahatma, a "Great Soul," and guided a nation to independence.

Each of these writers is, in his own way, a canonical figure who commands the attention of any serious student of the contemporary world. The Columbia Core Curriculum consists almost exclusively of such figures. Authors like Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Woolf are semi-permanent fixtures, while others like Sappho, Ovid, and Milton cycle in and out of the required reading list according to the shifting consensus of the faculty. But I write about Augustine, Plato, Freud, and Gandhi not because of their canonical status but because of the role they have played in my development as an individual and as a teacher. In one way or another, each of them experienced an inner transformation that made them into the figures we know today. In each case, the motive force was the relentless pursuit of self-understanding—the very kind of understanding that liberal education takes as its ultimate goal. This book is a reflection on how they have figured into my own search for

self-understanding and into my work as a liberal arts teacher and administrator.

In each of the four chapters that follow, I weave together three strands: a discussion of the work of each author, a meditation on how each has helped me make sense of my own life, and a critique of the practice of liberal education in the contemporary university. With the first strand, I try to make the texts accessible to a general audience. With the second, I reflect on how they can illuminate a person's lived experience. With the third, I show how liberal education is impaired and imperiled in higher education and argue for its revitalization. These various threads mix and flow into each other guided not by a grand argumentative design, but by the idiosyncrasies of how my particular life has unfolded.

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I first read Saint Augustine's spiritual autobiography, *Confessions*, as a freshman at Columbia. Among the fundamental renegotiations of identity I was undergoing that first year of college was a reassessment of the fervent Pentecostal Christianity I had embraced shortly after coming to the US. It was beginning to dawn on me that my conversion had been midwifed by loneliness, dislocation, and a desperate need for belonging.

Augustine's journey to Christianity was shaped by books. It was through his various encounters with texts that, as he says, "Lord, you turned my attention back to myself."[7] In the *Confessions*, he again and again reflects on people being inwardly and irrevocably transformed through the act of reading. He himself

7. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Henry Chadwick, trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 144.

was inwardly and irrevocably transformed through reading. In the winter of 1992, I was reading the *Confessions* and trying to find in that book, as in everything else in those days, a way to salvation. I, too, was being irrevocably transformed—in ways that were immediately evident to me and in ways that I am still trying to understand.

Though a work of considerable philosophical importance and theological complexity, what emerges most vividly in the *Confessions* is the portrait of an individual who was tenderly sensitive to the existential pain of the human condition. He disarms the reader with his impish curiosity and the kind of irreverent honesty that can ask God to "grant me chastity and continence, but not yet."[8] No writer from antiquity comes across to us as so fully human, so psychologically intricate and convincing, so like ourselves, as Augustine.

Perhaps *Confessions* was particularly compelling to me because in it I found a language for inner exploration. The urgency of Augustine's search for an intellectually and psychologically satisfying account of his own being resonated profoundly with my urgency to understand the life I was living and the world in which I found myself.

I encountered Saint Augustine's *Confessions* in Columbia's famous first-year requirement Literature Humanities. "Lit Hum" was first offered in 1937 with the aim of introducing an increasingly "philistine" student body to Masterpieces of European Literature and Philosophy, as the official name of the class unself-consciously declares. With this year-long tour of literary "masterpieces," I was introduced to a conversation that stretched deep into antiquity. Each week, I would encounter some strange and ancient writer who would provoke me with

8. *Confessions,* p. 145.

serious and unsettling questions, and who would feel at once remote and familiar. In this course, I was also thrust into a conversation with the entire first-year class at Columbia, who were, like me, required to sit around a table for four hours each week and talk to each other about the books we were reading. While neither the minds I was touching through the books nor the minds and bodies I was touching through the class were entirely decipherable to me, the triangulation that this arrangement made possible became, over weeks and months, my way of centering and locating myself.

Literature Humanities was invented by John Erskine, who first offered it at Columbia as an honors course simply called General Honors; it proposed the radical idea—radical even in the 1930s—of "reading, in translation, one classic each week." Today, the idea is not only radical but also impossible to execute in most universities. Columbia has bucked the intellectual and academic trend in maintaining the course, along with a handful of others similarly conceived, at the center of its undergraduate curriculum.

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In my sophomore year of high school, I came upon a remarkable book in a garbage pile next to the house where we rented an apartment in Queens. It was the second volume of the pretentiously bound Harvard Classics series, and it contained a set of dialogues by Plato that record the last days of Socrates's life. This first encounter with Socrates was as fortuitous as it was decisive. There is probably no better introduction to the life of the mind than Socrates's defense of his philosophic activity in these dialogues.

For over a decade, I have used these same dialogues every summer to introduce low-income high school students to a

world that, almost without exception, had been until then inaccessible and inconceivable to them. The series of short dialogues are set in the days leading up to Socrates's execution. He emerges in them vividly and heroically. Throughout his ordeal, he insists that "the good life, the beautiful life, and the just life are the same,"[9] and that no matter what the city of Athens might threaten to do to him, he cannot give up the practice of philosophy. The youth of Athens love him, but the authorities find him an unbearable nuisance and, as Jesus would come to seem to the Romans, a dangerous political liability.

Indeed, the citizens of Athens, finding seventy-year-old Socrates guilty of corrupting the youth and introducing new gods into the city, condemn him to death. Socrates accepts the verdict, rejects the plan his friends hatch to whisk him away from prison before the execution, and in obedience to the laws of the city he held dear, drinks the poison at the appointed hour, surrounded by the very friends he was accused of corrupting, and philosophizing to the very end.

Every year, I witness Socrates bringing students—my high school students as well as my Columbia students—to serious contemplation of the ultimately existential issues his philosophy demands we grapple with. My students from low-income households do not take this sort of thinking to be the exclusive privilege of a social elite. In fact, they find in it a vision of dignity and excellence that is not constrained by material limitations. Some of these students, as was the case with me, will go on to elite colleges and find themselves surrounded by peers far wealthier and far better educated than they. Socrates whispers

9. *Crito*, 48b, p. 48, in Plato, *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, trans. by G.M.A Grube, rev. by John M. Cooper, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000).

to them not to mistake these marks of privilege for true expressions of merit and to find in their own intellectual integrity a source of self-worth and self-respect that surpasses any material advantage their peers might have over them.

When making the case for liberal education to low-income students and families, I often point out that there is a long tradition of steering working-class students toward an education in servitude, an education in obedience and docility, an education in not asking questions. The idea that liberal education is only for the already privileged, for the pampered elite, is a way of carrying on this odious tradition. It is a way of putting liberal education out of the reach of the people who would most benefit from it—precisely the people who have historically been denied the tools of political agency. I ask them to take a look at who sends their children to liberal arts colleges and at what liberal arts college graduates go on to do with their "useless" education. Far from a pointless indulgence for the elite, liberal education is, in fact, the most powerful tool we have to subvert the hierarchies of social privilege that keep those who are down, down.

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The aura of frivolous self-indulgence that surrounds liberal education also attaches to Freudian psychoanalysis and its contemporary offspring, psychotherapy. The similarity is not accidental. Both practices demand a certain distance from the pressing business of everyday life. But the parallels don't stop there. The psychotherapeutic hour and the liberal arts seminar both bring into focus the deepest questions that concern us as human beings. In both cases, participants—therapists and patients on the one hand, and teachers and students on the

other—engage in a kind of inquiry that, when successful, produces insights with the power to transform one's entire life.

Sigmund Freud was among the first thinkers I encountered at Columbia—in a summer program for incoming students who, like me, were economically and academically "disadvantaged." Though I did not read Freud himself that summer, the professor who taught the class made frequent references to his ideas. That first introduction was enough to drive home Freud's central insight: the pervasiveness of unconscious mental processes in what we think, what we do, and who we take ourselves to be. Freud alerted me to the fact that my own mind was not the transparent self I had always taken it to be, but rather a kind of *terra incognita*, a place full of mysteries and shadowy arrangements that, despite their invisibility, conditioned my personality. As that perception matured and deepened, my own mind became the overriding subject of study in and outside of the classroom.

Like a schismatic religion, Freud's legacy has splintered into many sects, and it has been vigorously disputed, reinterpreted, expanded, and sometimes discredited. But his signature approach to the investigation of the mind, most commonly known today as "talk therapy," continues to thrive, even among Freud's detractors. A few practitioners carry on Freud's classic modality: psychoanalysis—an intensive form of talk therapy that requires four or five sessions a week. In psychoanalysis, many of Freud's key concepts—the unconscious, the significance of dreams, transference, infantile sexuality, etc.—are taken seriously as guideposts for self-exploration.

By the time I read Freud in the Core curriculum as a sophomore, I had become accustomed to the fact that nearly everyone I had met at Columbia was either in therapy or had been in therapy. In time, I myself underwent a six-year psychoanalysis

that spanned most of my time in graduate school and through which I began to unwind some of the psychic tangles my life had accumulated.

In his work, which was as much philosophical and literary as it was clinical, Freud set out to uncover the underlying mechanisms that govern the functioning of the human mind. As a clinician, he is largely dismissed, with, one has to admit, some good reasons. But his significance as a thinker who complicated our notions of personal agency, consciousness, sexuality, and self-understanding remains formidable. His ideas have implications for how one understands one's own life, but also for how one reads a book, how one looks at a painting, and how one hears the words of others. His efforts left us a set of oddly shaped but effective tools for the task of self-exploration.

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I started teaching Mohandas Gandhi in my section of Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West a few years before it was incorporated into the required reading list for all sophomores. I did so using the small amount of discretion each instructor has to introduce material that supplements the common syllabus. Eventually, Gandhi was added to the common reading list and has remained there since 2012.

I started reading Gandhi with my students in part because I wanted them to grapple with a thinker who, while deeply influenced by the "Western" tradition we had spent a year studying, was rooted in a different, ancient, at times alien way of understanding the world. Gandhi challenges notions that are taken for granted in the European political tradition—notions like the paramount value of a human life, the legitimacy of violence when used in self-defense, the primacy of individual rights, and

the desirability of technological mastery over nature. In his writing, political activity, and manner of living, Gandhi cast a harsh and startling light on some of the premises underlying what we call Western civilization.

Gandhi understood the civilization that emerged from the Industrial Revolution as a materialist worldview that placed wealth, comfort, and longevity as the highest human goods. For him, the inescapable consequence of this value system was the violence, rapacity, and disregard for human and non-human life that he saw in European colonial endeavors around the world. As an antidote, Gandhi proposed an approach to individual and collective flourishing focused on the inner capacity for *swaraj*—that is, for self-rule, independence or, to use the banner word of the Western political enlightenment, freedom. In my experience, students find their encounter with Gandhi to be personally and politically eye-opening.

Unlike the other writers I discuss in this book, I only came to Gandhi after completing my formal education. Ever since college, I had been curious about his *Autobiography*, which a friend who was an avowed atheist told me had nearly brought her to believe in God. I finally got around to reading Gandhi's *Autobiography* not long after graduate school. A year earlier, I had adopted a daily practice of meditation and was trying to understand the way in which this habit was slowly transforming my mind. Gandhi's rootedness in the same matrix of spiritual practices that brought meditation to the West heightened my interest. By then, I had also spent several years teaching major Western texts in Columbia's Core Curriculum. I wanted to branch out of this tradition and get a taste of what else there was. Gandhi was a perfect way to start this. He had meaning for me as an intellectual project and also as a model for probing and experimenting with some of the deepest forces in my psyche.

Gandhi subtitled his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Perhaps more than anything else, Gandhi saw himself as a researcher investigating the nature of human existence. The governing passion of his life was his quest for "Truth." More than once, he brought himself to the verge of death in the course of his "experiments." "What I have been trying and pining to achieve these thirty years," he wrote in the *Autobiography* "is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain *Moksha* [ultimate liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth]. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all of my ventures in the political field are directed to this same end."[10]

Gandhi's primary field of experimentation was himself. His experiments involved his physical self through diet, celibacy, and renunciations of every sort, as well as his spiritual self through prayer, meditation, and devotional study. But if his own person was the arena of experimentation, his laboratory was the broad society in which he lived. In working out the tensions between his quest for personal liberation and the societal commitments it required, Gandhi developed a way of merging radical spirituality with the worldly turmoil of national politics.

It was Gandhi's unique fusion of religion and politics that led me to start teaching him in Introduction to Contemporary Civilization. Reflecting on this relationship as he closed the *Autobiography*, he noted that "those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means."[11] For Gandhi, the personal was political, but not in the

10. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Mahadev Desai, trans. (New York: Dover Publications), 1983, p. viii.

11. *Autobiography*, p. 454.

way that contemporary activists conceive of that link. Writing to his nephew, he advised him to "not carry unnecessarily on your head the burden of emancipating India. Apply everything to yourself. Nobility of soul consists in realizing that you are yourself India. In your emancipation is the emancipation of India."[12]

Gandhi's idea of religion boiled down to two basic principles: truth and non-violence. These were the same principles behind satyagraha—the mass movement of non-violent resistance that forced both South African and Indian authorities to release their iron grip on the lives of ordinary Indians.

For many students, as was the case for me, Gandhi comes as a revelation. Appearing toward the end of the Contemporary Civilization course, a year in which many students find their most basic assumptions about who they are and what the world is challenged and de-stabilized, Gandhi offers a view of a morally coherent universe, where concepts like truth, love, self-sacrifice, and even salvation can still hold meaning.

Gandhi's practical and seemingly non-theoretical conception of truth and non-violence also offers a powerful counterpoint to the postmodern current in Western learning. This current emerged in the late nineteenth century with Friedrich Nietzsche and has become a dominant framework in the social sciences and the academic humanities. Its fundamental challenge to the notions of truth, virtue, and reason strike at the heart of liberal education and help explain the inhospitable intellectual climate in which liberal education finds itself in the university. Today, the defense of liberal education demands a response to this

12. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (henceforth *CWMG*) (New Delhi: Government of India, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1956–1984), 100 vols., Vol. 10, pp. 206–207.

postmodern challenge. Gandhi's life and work provide the grounds for such a response.

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I was admitted to Columbia University through its Opportunity Programs—an admissions category created to meet the requirements of the New York State Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP), which provides generous financial and academic support to low-income students. It had been six years since I had arrived from the Dominican Republic. Everyone in the know at Columbia understood that a HEOP student belonged to a cohort of poor, mainly black and brown students with SAT scores below the mean of other admitted students. We stuck out on campus to veteran faculty, experienced administrators, savvy students, and each other. Waiting for me and my group of about twenty HEOP students was Literature Humanities, that mammoth and daring course that has greeted every new Columbia student since 1937.

I was still learning a lot of new English vocabulary that first year of college and laboriously piecing together things that were common knowledge to just about everyone around me. Lit Hum was my first full immersion into American culture, or at least the particular slice of American culture that was the Columbia College entering class of 1991. So my freshman year was an education not only in the works of the Lit Hum syllabus, but in that which for everyone else went without saying—the givens of the social world in which I was beginning to live. And those two forms of education mingled together, illuminating each other, and etching particularity on each other. That mingling happened in conversations in the classroom and in the Dean's Office of the School of General Studies, where I secured a

twenty-hour-a-week work-study job. I did not contribute much to the conversations in the classroom; I did not feel familiar enough to allow myself public opinions. I mainly observed my peers. I was studying them as well as the books. Two hours on Monday and two hours on Wednesday. Weekends spent sitting in my room and in the lounges of my dorm, reading.

By the end of that first year, my education included a bank of information about how people behaved around those old books and the big questions they raised: a first and tentative sense of the norms of expression, affect, and sensibility of the peculiar world where I had landed. I was observing and absorbing styles of expression, accents, quirks, tones, turns of phrases, ways of being a person. Yet the insights of that first year were more often about myself than about the books I was reading or the peers I was watching. I didn't know then that this is precisely where the greatest value of a liberal education lies: in turning students' eyes inward, into an exploration of their own humanity under the provocation of works that have proven their power to inspire just such self-reflection.

I had come into Lit Hum expecting to learn about texts and authors, and little suspecting that these concrete aspects of what I'd learn would prove to be mere vehicles for a far deeper and transformative kind of education. That inward education came slowly, almost unconsciously. It was not like the flipping of a switch, but like the dawning of a day. Many of the conversations we had in the classroom about the books and ideas that were rushing upon us went over my head, but like a recurring tide that leaves behind a thin layer of sediment each time it comes, eventually forming recognizable structures, the intensive reading and twice-weekly discussions were coalescing into an altogether new sense of who I was and of the possibilities of my life.

My Lit Hum professor was an old veteran by the time I showed up in his classroom with unkempt hair and clothes that adhered to no known style. He passed away while I was in graduate school. He was one of those figures one almost never finds in research universities any more: an undergraduate teacher with tenure. When Columbia College and the University's graduate programs merged their faculties in the late 1980s, Wallace Gray continued to teach undergraduates only, becoming the longest-serving Literature Humanities instructor on the faculty. I remember him saying to my class that he hoped to die with a piece of chalk in his hand, which he very nearly did. I remember him shedding tears while reading to the class from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov.* I remember his attentiveness to me.

He liked to write plays, but not scholarly books. His one book, *Homer to Joyce*, is a collection of eighteen sparkling essays on the books in the Lit Hum syllabus. On the last day of class, he inscribed my copy of the book. I didn't take full note of what he had written there until many years later, when I was placing his book on my shelves in the new office I was to occupy as Director of the Center for the Core Curriculum. The printed dedication of the book reads, in capital letters, "FOR MY STUDENTS"; underneath that, dated May 1, 1992, he wrote: "And especially for Roosevelt Montás—we need young men of your intelligence and sensitivity to carry on the humanist tradition in teaching." I am still humbled that Wallace Gray would say that of me. When he wrote it, he could not know that he would die of a heart attack nine years later, at age seventy-four, and I could not know that what he was writing on my book was a prophecy.

INDEX