

October 15, 1990 (Vol. 6, no. 4)

Dear Colleague:

The bias of American society toward farmers and their way of life is well known. "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God," wrote Thomas Jefferson, "whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit of substantial and genuine virtue." Almost equally beloved is the small town--"a main street flanked by solid buildings of brick, block after block of freestanding frame houses, each with a lawn, a cluster of elegant white grain elevators near the railroad tracks, and a stretch of highway bordered by drive-ins." Classical, J. B. Jackson, calls it. One town is much like another. But "rhythmic repetition (not to say occasional monotony) is a Classical trait, the consequence of a devotion to clarity and order." Society is presumed to be homogeneous, whether one thinks of the Midwest farm or the small town.

If you want to know the real America, live in Iowa or in a small town. So the folk wisdom goes. The other side of the message is: New York is not America. Well, folk wisdom is wrong so far as America in the eighties and nineties is concerned. Increasingly, we have come to see that New York is the real America; Iowa, by comparison, is a stray piece of Disney World. If there is one thing distinctive about New York, it is cultural pluralism or diversity. And the whole of America is going that way--is becoming New York.

New York has an African-American Mayor. Soon the country (New York writ large) will have an African-American President. And soon after, perhaps a Hmong President. One thing, however, will probably stay unchanged. The President of the United States, whoever she is, will deliver her inaugural address in English with an American accent. If so, in American society and in school curricula, Shakespeare will continue to enjoy an advantage over Cervantes, and Toni Morison will continue to enjoy an advantage over Lu Xun.

On the the vexing question of a core curriculum centered on "key works of literature," how wonderful it would be if the innovators were to insist that the list include not only the Muqqadimah but that it be read in Arabic? To read the "great works" in English, even though some were written originally in other languages, is, surely, to remain an Anglo-American chauvinist. Conclusion: I suspect that the innovators are more interested in making a political point than advocate seriously multiculturalism.

Best wishes,

