

## PREFACE

Though we have no very good way of talking about it, one of the deepest needs of human beings—perhaps of all our needs the one that is most distinctively human—is for what we in English call “meaning” in our experience. It is meaning that we seek to create through our cultures, those complex symbolic and expressive practices ranging from music to politics, football to religion, that occupy us so much of the time; and meaning, perhaps in a somewhat different sense, that each individual seeks as he or she works through the choices and possibilities of existence, trying to make them add up to something whole and coherent.

To say this will I hope make a kind of intuitive sense, but it is also plain that we are collectively not very clear about exactly what it is we point to in such uses of the word *meaning*. One way of putting it—which I know can be only the slightest of sketches, and which it is the aim of the rest of the book to complete—is to say that each of us constantly seeks to imagine the world, and the self and others within it, in such a way as to enable us to engage in coherent and intelligible speech, valuable and effective action. We want, that is, a way of imagining life as a whole, on which our own action and thought and speech, our own relations with others, can sensibly and effectively be based. How is this desire to be addressed, put to work, and connected with other desires and realities?

This book emerges from an interest in this question, which it explores by examining a series of texts and artefacts in which the author faces with particular intensity and richness the difficulties involved in this activity of the imagination. The works chosen range widely, from Thoreau’s *Walden* to the paintings of Vermeer, from the *Odyssey* and Plato’s *Phaedrus* to a modern law case. One of the points of this diversity is to make it easier for us to see, and begin to analyze, the process at work in all of them; another is to begin to show how different people, located in different cultural contexts and working in different genres, address in significantly different ways the possibilities and difficulties inherent in the process in which we are all engaged.

Let me now attempt a slightly fuller description of that process. I think that in each of us there is a part of our being that is the source of mental life and imagination; that, without our being wholly aware of

it, in this part of the self we are constantly asking a set of questions about the world, of which the deepest is the question of meaning as I have defined it above, namely, whether we can find or make an adequate way of imagining the world, and the self and others within it; that to ask this question is to involve us in trying to respond to it, which in turn brings us to face the adequacies and inadequacies of the languages we are given to speak, of the cultures we inhabit, and the constraints imposed on us by nature as well; that our engagement with these questions is for the most part unconscious, but can be made the object of attention and thought, particularly through the careful reading and study of certain works of literature and other forms of art, including the art of law; indeed that to make us aware of this process and our own participation in it, and to teach us how to think about and criticize our own performances of it, is one of the central functions of art; and, finally, that we pursue these questions not alone but in relation to others, with whom we make real whatever we manage to learn. The process to which I am drawing attention is thus one in which we all engage, all the time, but do so for the most part outside the field of conscious awareness—it is a piece of that rich and complex life that takes place in the ocean of the mind, beneath the surface on which we consciously live. But it does manifest itself constantly in what we say and do; not explicitly, but in our performances with language and each other.

As my brief account suggests this process consists of a series of phases that fall into a kind of natural sequence; but they also overlap, one continuing or recurring in what we might think of as the domain of the other. One way to think about it would be to say that the stages I have identified mark a story of human life: we begin full of a youthful need and hope for coherence and understanding; we must soon confront the stubborn facts of culture and nature and language, including the ways in which these constitute forces that act on us, changing our ways of imagining the world; in the end we must find a way to live as expressive beings in a world full of constraint and limit, including on our own minds and imaginations; and the question is thus presented: How, by what art or arts, we can do so? How, that is, can we respond to the inevitable discovery that the coherence and unity that a side of us most deeply desires cannot in any simple way be attained?

This sequence of stages is in fact mirrored in the structure of this book. I begin with Thoreau's claim to have found a way to reimagine the world and himself, his language and his mind, in such a way as

to make life an act of perpetual and joyful creation; then I turn to Huckleberry Finn, who is equally insistent on making sense of the world and himself, but is in the end incapable of comprehending the externally determined, inwardly validated, fact of race, which makes the most important event of his life, his friendship with Jim, unsayable; then I consider Odysseus, who must deal, not only once but twice, with fundamental changes in his culture, which require different ways of thinking and being, which he is, for the most part, remarkably able to achieve.

At this point I begin a new sequence, meant to bring the problem home to you as reader, me as writer: I look first at a piece of the ancient Greek language, for all of us foreign, trying to get some sense of the peculiar ways it works as a source of meaning in the world, at once enabling and restraining its user; then I examine some of the ways in which the possibilities and problems of meaning are present in what we call the sentence, the smallest unit of normal speech, with the idea of deepening our sense of the pervasiveness of the questions we are pursuing, including in Greek; then I turn to Plato's *Phaedrus*, perhaps as rich and challenging a treatment of the issues that concern us as any in Western literature, and do so with attention both to its Greek and to the kind of experience offered by its sentences.

Finally, in the last three chapters, I address some specific ways in which the questions I am pursuing, particularly as redefined by our reading of the *Phaedrus*, are addressed by minds working in three distinct genres and cultural contexts: in the religious or metaphysical poetry of Frost and Herbert; in the way a particular law case is put together, as a set of questions and responses; and in the paintings of Vermeer. The *Phaedrus* is the center of the book: everything before builds up to it, everything after builds upon it.

The readings that make up this book are, like any work of criticism, a piece of an intellectual autobiography. Certainly the works I have chosen are among those that have been of the deepest importance to my own life. They also happen to be drawn from what is often called the Canon, or the Western tradition of high culture. This presents a complex problem, for such texts are often invoked as though they represented universal human experience, sometimes as though they in some way supported a particular view of society and politics—patriarchal, imperialist, and inegalitarian. But I agree with neither of these positions. For me the interest of these works lies not in their universality but in their particularity, in the unique and revealing ways in

which Thoreau, say, or Plato, or Herbert, engage in the larger process that is my subject. And, though this is not my major concern here, I certainly do not think that these works, separately or together, define a reactionary politics.

Yet the fact that they are all from what is perceived as the Western Canon does have its significance. Not because their authors are all “white,” since that term in my view cannot sensibly be applied to Homer or Plato, nor even “European,” and for much the same reason: Greece did not know “race” as we do and Europe did not then exist. And these writers are “dead” only if we fail to give them life. But they are all written by men, and I am a man, and this fact may lead some readers to think that I am working on the assumption, familiar enough in our world, that all experience is male experience, all thought male thought.

I can only say that this is not what I believe. I have chosen these works because of their importance in shaping my own mind and because of their value in illuminating the process that is my subject, and they naturally reflect the nature of my own education, both its limits and its virtues. Of course that education is not the only possible one but itself is partly shaped by my own social and cultural context, as a boy growing up to adulthood under privileged circumstances in New England in the forties and fifties, as a man living in and around universities ever since, in the West and Midwest, and as what we in America call a “white” person—though I should also add that it has been shaped as well by the nature of my own mind and personality. Other people speak from different positions, out of different experiences—this is true of those whose works are discussed here, true of those who share my formal education and social characteristics, and true also of each of the readers of this book—and it is ultimately in these differences that we live. My hope is that the reader will find it valuable to compare his or her experience with my own, on the understanding that whatever value this book may have will lie as much in the reader’s sense of difference as in any perceived similarities, in felt dissonance as much as resonance.