

# EXERCISES IN UNREALITY

## THE DECLINE OF TEACHING WESTERN CIVILIZATION

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Anthony Esolen

There's a chilling image from my youth that I've never been able to scrub out of my mind. It might not seem at first glance to amount to much. It was a blue spiral spray-painted on our street, a sort of insect with enormous eyes, with a caption suggesting LSD. In those days, the newspapers were filled with war and rumors of worse than war—of the wholesale collapse of the social order. It was when the Students for a Democratic Society engaged in their violent demonstration against that inoffensive, old-fashioned liberal Hubert Humphrey at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. “Off the pigs,” cried the Black Panthers, whose tongues were not in their cheeks when they said it; rather their thumbs were ready to cock their pistols if any “pig” of a policeman were to get in their way.

I don't know that it was very heaven to be young in those days, wallowing naked and

hungry and snuffling in the rain and mud at Woodstock, but to be a child was like being perched at a high window of a riverside house, watching the waters rise and lap at a bridge beginning to tilt and crack. Perhaps those of my generation who were nine or ten years older than I can indulge themselves in rosy memories of it all, if they were not dragooned into the fever swamps of Indochina: of porn flicks suddenly advertised in the newspapers as cutting-edge, hip, hot from Sweden; of Christians chucking their prayer books into a bonfire of pieties; of the suddenly prominent evils of divorce and child murder; of music made by drug-addled geniuses, the music of loneliness, lust, rage, foolish hope, and wickedness. My family was strong and my backcountry coal town was not entirely insane. Still, my memories are not rosy.

I had no idea then that the college classroom was its own sewage spillway, over-

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flowing into the quads—or perhaps the sewage flowed in the other direction. It hardly matters. At age nine I could see through the stupidities of the New Math: set theory for children, rather like teaching toddlers how to talk by drawing blueprints of the oral cavity, or how to walk by naming the bones and muscles in their legs. Long before I read Orwell I could perceive that most new things were empty and that the higher the diction that people used to name them and describe them, the emptier or more sinister they were. Call it Esolen’s Law of the Distributive Property of Stultification over Tradition.

What I could not see was that the stupidity came from on high, and that college education lay in the balance. My parents graduated near the top of their classes in high school. Like most Americans, they considered college education as something of a dream—college was a place of intelligence, profound learning, some risible pride, and venerable tradition. *Gaudeamus igitur!* My mother could not have known that she was more likely to study Latin in her little town than were the college students at Berkeley.

None of us knew who John Dewey was. But there was a nice line to be drawn between that man and the people, both professors and students, who went down to the bridges in rafts to help the floodwaters do their work. Dewey was classically trained but would have none of it for the ordinary democratic masses. He had no use for the useless things—that is, the best and noblest things: no use for poetry, flights of imagination, beauty, religion, and tradition. He was a hidebound innovator. His children and grandchildren in the 1960s had been well trained in his democratic scorn. Out with the notion that the academy is *not* a place for political recruitment, precisely because it is to be devoted to the truth. “What is truth?” said the serious Dewey, and he could

not wait to give us all his answer: truth was only what could be ascertained by empirical observation and measurement. That meant that only the hard sciences could rest upon their foundations. Every other building could be commandeered by the politicians, or blown to bits.

And that is what the young politicians did. They began to turn arts and letters into instruments of politics, or to blow them to bits. Thus the demand that literature be “relevant.” Homer is relevant to me because Homer is relevant to man. But once you deny that there are stable truths to be learned about man by studying his history, his philosophy, and his art, what is left for Homer but to be adopted by a few curious souls who happen to like him, or to be drafted into the New Model Army? And there are nearer ways to go to burn down buildings than by struggling over Homeric verbs. So in a few short years, centuries of learning were merely tossed aside. The central pier cracked, the bridge buckled, and the waters came crashing through.

At Brown University, an ambitious student and political player named Ira Magaziner positioned himself as the only person who could negotiate between the black students, who were demanding change, and a feckless administration. That administration essentially allowed Mr. Magaziner to rewrite the whole curriculum. Since those who know little—and we are talking here about a very young man—are more adept at suggesting grand vagaries than delving into the specifics of a learning they have not mastered, the result was predictable. Brown University dumped its curriculum overboard. Forget the classics. There is nothing that the university considers necessary for an educated person to know. It is all a cafeteria. This, that, the other: what difference does

it make? Magaziner would go on to meddle in national politics, writing up the national health insurance plan with which Hillary Clinton, in her incarnation as copresident, crashed and burned.

It would be pleasant to learn that there was a lot of determined resistance to the new 'n' improved curricula, those that replaced "All Gaul is divided into three parts" with rap sessions and *The Prophet*. In particular, it would warm my Roman Catholic heart with gratitude to find that her prelates and principals and college presidents saw through the chaos and said, "We at least will preserve the humane learning that these self-professed humanists have discarded." But the pressure of the new proved too great, so that Catholic schools now find themselves in the odd position of having to recover their religious identity *by first recovering their human identity*. The old protesters knew who Tennyson was and were perfectly willing to pelt the old prude with mockery. My students now have never even heard the name of Tennyson. The old protesters knew who Milton was and were perfectly willing to enlist his Satan in the ranks of their heroes. My students have heard a little bit about Satan, and nothing about Milton.

**A**t least in one place, though, there was resistance. It requires a little bit of history to explain why it came about, because in a way that history is repeating itself now.

During the terrible potato famine in Ireland, many families pooled their shillings, which were few enough, to send one likely lad alone on a boat to America to find a better life, perhaps to make enough of a living so that eventually his brothers and sisters might join him. That is what a family named Harkins did, sending one Patrick Harkins alone on a ship to America with nothing in his pockets.

When the Irish arrived here, they found that they were no more welcome than if they had landed in Liverpool; but they did find work. Some of them hacked away at the mountains where I was born, digging up the glossy black diamonds, chunks of high-quality anthracite coal. Others went to the cities, where they slaved in foundries and mills by day and often got blind drunk by night. Patrick Harkins went to the factories of Boston. In 1845 he and his wife had a son, Matthew Harkins, whom they sent to the public Boston Latin School, which still exists, and which still teaches Latin, though not with quite the old passion and intensity. The young Harkins pursued his studies at the College of the Holy Cross and then went abroad to complete his doctorate in divinity, at the English college in Douai, France. He was ordained a priest at Saint-Sulpice. He had added French and Italian to his linguistic repertoire, so that when he returned to New England, he was in good position to minister to French-Canadian, Italian, and Portuguese immigrants.

In 1887 Pope Leo XIII appointed him bishop of Providence, where he exerted his considerable powers until his death in 1921. He tripled the number of parishes in the diocese, especially building churches for particular ethnic groups. The church my family attends now, Sacred Heart, in West Warwick, is an Italian church a hundred yards away from Saint Joseph's, the Irish church, and a mile away from Saint Jean-Baptiste, the French church, and Saint Anthony's, the Portuguese church. Harkins did not encourage separatism. That was not the point. He valued each ethnic group, and he understood that families speaking the same language would better be able to support one another in the faith. Meanwhile, he founded dozens of social and charitable institutions: schools, hospitals, homes for the care of poor women,

orphanages, and, in 1917, the school where I now teach, Providence College, run by the Dominican order.

In those days there was little chance that the son of an illiterate Italian stonemason or of an Irish longshoreman would ever be admitted to high-minded Brown University. From the first, Providence College was a school for every young man regardless of ethnicity or social class. The curriculum was heavily weighted with Thomist philosophy and theology, because those were the days when Catholic thinkers were engaged in the fight against the regnant reductions of philosophy to linguistic analysis, of natural science to positivist empiricism, of social life to economic exchanges, and of politics to class struggles and Machiavellian pursuit of power. As late as 1970, all the young men at Providence College were required to take six courses in philosophy and six courses in theology. When G.K. Chesterton toured America a few years before his death, he visited Providence College and spoke to the assembled students from a small balcony set over the facade of Harkins Hall, which in the beginning was the entirety of the college. The burly Chesterton got stuck while trying to squeeze through the narrow door behind his perch and had to be assisted to get back into the building.

In a way we could say that Chesterton was always present at Providence College. It was natural for the Dominican priests to welcome the author of *The Dumb Ox*, the brilliant biography of Saint Thomas Aquinas. But Chesterton was also a man of letters, and that affinity for poetry and for the beauties of Christendom also characterized the college. In the late 1950s a learned Episcopalian priest and English professor, the Reverend Paul van K. Thomson, organized a small Honors Program at Providence College for about fifteen young

men in each entering class. These students would spend two years—four courses, one course per semester, meeting five hours a week—studying the history, art, literature, theology, and philosophy of the West; that was how they satisfied some of their general requirements. Each course was taught by a team of two professors. It was a tremendous success.

So just when Brown University, across town, was shifting into formlessness and cultural amnesia, the priests and professors at Providence College made a courageous decision. They decided to do precisely the opposite of what Brown was doing. They would take the Honors curriculum in Western civilization, adapt it for the less brilliant students, and make it into a college-wide requirement. That was no easy task. All at once, instead of fifteen freshmen and fifteen sophomores, the program would have to serve all six hundred students from each class—and students of both sexes, since Providence College began to admit women in 1971. It involved a huge commitment from faculty in certain departments: English, history, theology, philosophy, and (sometimes) modern languages. The school was in no position to hire additional professors, so the new program made it necessary for plenty of people to teach an overload; and since the students could not have twenty credit hours of instruction simply added to their requirements, it meant that the departments that staffed the program would have to compromise and give up some of their curricular perks. The requirements for theology and philosophy, in particular, were reduced from six courses each to two.

Somehow or other, against doubts about the program's feasibility, and against long-entrenched interests, its sponsors prevailed. Professors learned how to teach in the program in the only way anyone can: by teach-

ing in the program. They taught in four-man teams, each professor attending the lectures of the others, so that it soon became apparent, as one of my dearest colleagues jests, that they didn't know what the students were learning, but they themselves sure learned a lot. Every single student at Providence College, since 1971, has been introduced to dozens of the greatest authors, artists, thinkers, and statesmen in the West, from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to Solzhenitsyn. That means that they all can at least begin to stutter in the same cultural language: I can allude to Saint Augustine when I am teaching *Paradise Lost*, and my students' eyes will not glaze over with incomprehension.

It must be noted here that the Development of Western Civilization (DWC) program was not supposed to be peculiar to the relevant departments, with the rest of the college left out. The original idea was that professors in the natural sciences would come up with a yearlong program, similarly taught, in the history of science, while professors in the social sciences would do likewise. But those attempts quickly failed. The natural scientists were not terribly interested in history, and the social scientists could not even agree upon what a social science was. The former had their research to worry about, and the latter were focused then, as they are now, on current political issues. So the college gave back to them their six required credits each. And that is pretty much how things have remained ever since.

I don't know whether any strong *odium Christi* played a part in the initial fight against DWC. I am sure, however, that by the time I arrived at Providence College as an assistant professor of English in 1990, that odium was broad and bitter. It was well known that if you happily admitted to a search committee in sociology or political science that you were a Roman Catholic, they would happily oblige

you by showing you the door. The odium set roots even in those departments that staffed the DWC program. When one of my colleagues in English, for many years now the head of the Honors Program, was applying for a job in our department, the chief of the opposition led a whispering campaign against him, advising another professor that this man was plainly unacceptable—"He's a Roman Catholic!" He did not know that the recipient of this dreadful information was himself a lector at his Catholic parish.

One might wonder why disdain for the Catholic Church, exercised by professors who considered this disdain to be the fit return to the Catholic institution that had hired them in the first place, would have as its particular object the DWC program. The answer is not far to seek. When my elder colleagues established the program, they aimed only to preserve, in a bad time, a time of destruction and willful oblivion, a precious heritage of humane learning. They had no idea that they were doing the work of soldiers for the Church. But just as grace perfects nature, and nature leads to the threshold of grace, so did the study of Dante and Shakespeare, and even Hume and Kant, preserve the Catholic character of Providence College during those lean decades when priests and nuns were doffing their religious habits in more senses than one, while the typical Catholic layman was too busy with his own confusions to notice. Great poetry and art and music were our natural allies. If students are encouraged to think persistently enough, they may think themselves right into a personal relationship with Truth Himself.

By 1990, too, we were hiring people who had graduated from the Browns of the world, which had abandoned their classical curricula. My own *aspera mater*, Princeton, had followed Brown in dismantling her core curriculum. That I ended up at Providence

College with a broad knowledge of English, Italian, and Latin literature at least, and no small proficiency in languages and in philosophy, was partly due to my graduate school, the University of North Carolina, whose English department had preserved a markedly conservative curriculum, since demolished; partly due to my own preferences; and partly due to sheer accident. There was much I had still to learn. What I did not know at that time, and what took me a year or two to understand, was that my training was well out of the ordinary. Most young professors then and since cannot have a decent conversation about whether Calvin had misread Augustine, because they do not really know anything about those men. Not only would they have nothing to say about Aeschylus; they might not even recognize the name.

Now, it should seem a matter of course to say that if you do not know who Michael Faraday and William Harvey are you have no business setting yourself up as a judge of a course in the history of science. It is fascinating that that same ignorance does not prevent people from judging, with loud effusions of righteousness, a course in the development of Western civilization. The reason is not that they believe our course is wrongly taught. They believe it is wrong to teach it at all.

They would not say anything comparable about a course in the development of Chinese civilization or Indian civilization. Far from it; they would hail such a thing as the next Great Leap Forward in the history of our school, despite the plain fact that they would know even less about Chinese dynasties than they know about the Tudors and Stuarts, and that, forget being acquainted with Latin and Greek, most could probably not even name the holy language of ancient India, Sanskrit. That is because they conceive

of education almost wholly in terms of their own current political aims. Their horizons end in the backyard. It is not heaven over their heads, open and vast, but a political drop ceiling, the same everywhere, pocked with ephemeral headlines and reductive polls. Had they been present at the raising of Lazarus from the dead, their first question would be whether he was a Pharisee or a Sadducee.

Once in a while they would admit as much, but more often they couched their opposition in pedagogical terms. One time they enlisted a young professor, who with me had arrived in 1990, to engage in a “scientific” study to see whether the DWC program might be producing “passive” students, because the program relied heavily upon lectures. Why professors themselves spend much time and effort and other people’s money attending conferences to hear lectures, and claim to come away from them much edified, they did not stop to consider; nor whether it is “passive” when you attend a riveting performance of Beethoven’s *Eroica*, despite the fact that the musicians do not even pause in their performance to take questions from the audience. Nor did they entertain the possibility that if students did not speak up in their courses, it might be that the professors themselves were politically tendentious, disorganized, or dull. Nothing came of that professor’s study, but we in the program responded to the criticism by trying to devote two hours a week to small seminars, rather than the usual one hour.

Sometimes we were criticized for hurrying through the subject matter and for touching upon too many topics, which required us to rely upon excerpts. When we turned toward using complete works instead, we were criticized for being too narrow in our focus. Our handling of classes was critiqued by people who never troubled themselves to sit in on

a class to see how we handled it. Our critics were like people who say they detest the music of Wagner because they read about it in a review.

Meanwhile, graduate schools have been sending forth young people of narrower and narrower training, and that, coupled with perverse incentives to publish articles that no one will read, long before you have anything sensible to say, has stocked us with professors even in the DWC departments who do not want to teach in the program. If they were trained in nondramatic English poetry of the sixteenth century, they resent being asked to devote two-thirds of their teaching schedule to Plato or Homer or even French drama of the seventeenth century. “Please do not oppress me with the Sistine ceiling,” says the harried young scholar, fighting for tenure. “I am too busy with pen-and-ink drawings by expatriate Welsh women in the fields of Patagonia.”

And how do things stand now? In the fall of 2015, a group of students took over the president’s office and met him with a long list of demands. Some of the demands were expensive, others utterly at odds with academic freedom—requiring, for example, that all departments submit their prospective hires to evaluation by a “diversity” committee. What concerns me here is that, no surprise, they went after the DWC program. We experience these periodic attacks rather as people afflicted with malaria do. It never really goes away, but sometimes you feel almost normal, and sometimes you break into fever and chills and the sweats. The students want *diversity*. That is the watchword, just as *relevance* was at Brown.

There is a Manichean mania about such political movements. If not relevance, oppression! If not diversity, *institutional racism*, as one of my colleagues in politics

put it, or *genocidal racism*, according to a sociology professor who arrived at Providence College when I did, who immediately began to attack the DWC program, and who has learned nothing about it ever since.

It isn’t easy to out-yell the true believers at a political rally. Nor does it serve any purpose. I learned that way back in 1992, during one of our waves of political malaria. In an article I wrote for the student newspaper, I made an offer to students who said they were eager to learn about civilizations other than the Western ones. They and I would read, together, the medieval mystical and devotional tract *The Cloud of Unknowing* along with the *Tao Te Ching* of Lao-Tzu. That offer fell into the bottomless pit of irrelevance. For my pains I was ridiculed by a couple of scurrilous (and anonymous) letters to the editor.

This time around I wrote an article for *Crisis*, taking note of the wild array of cultures to which we introduce our students. For this is, of course, the very fat and very weak underbelly of our critics. As a matter of plain fact, the sociology professor who complains about my lack of diversity is himself the most culturally monochromatic of scholars. He teaches about cities that he can visit by riding on a train. He teaches about people whom he can call up on the telephone. He assigns books and articles written in English, about people who speak English, who watch the same television we watch, listen to the same bad music, play the same sports, and so on. I cannot take a train to ancient Athens. I cannot call Thomas Aquinas on the telephone. There are no YouTube videos of Shakespeare directing his actors.

The material I teach in the first year of DWC spans four millennia, from ancient Babylon to the end of the Renaissance. This year’s entries were originally written in Babylonian, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Anglo-Saxon, old French, Italian, German, Spanish, and

English. We are in Jerusalem with David, on the coast of half-Christian England with the poet of *Beowulf*, in Rome with Cicero, in Madrid with Calderón, in exile with the Florentine Dante, and in London with Shakespeare. We have studied the Parthenon and Saint Peter's, Giotto and the stained glass windows of Chartres, Arthurian romance and the poetic philosophizing of Lucretius. It is utterly preposterous to say that we are anything *but* multicultural. We study cultures, and there are a lot of them, and they diverge far from ours and from one another. A Viking chieftain is not a Roman senator or a Christian friar. Xerxes is not Francis Xavier.

But I know that none of that really counts. One of the student protesters, abashed, has written in our newspaper that even though a Viking is admittedly "diverse" from anybody we may meet on the street now, studying the Vikings does not serve "the larger purpose" of diversity. And thus has he unwittingly given up the ballgame.

He and the students are not really interested in studying cultures other than ours. What counts for them as "diversity" is governed entirely by a monotonous and predictable list of current political concerns. If you read a short story written in English by a Latina author living up the road in Worcester, that counts as "diverse," but if you read a romance written in Spanish by a Spanish author living in Spain four hundred years ago, that does not count as "diverse." It probably does not even count as Hispanic. If you pore over the verb system of Old Icelandic so that you can stumble around in the sagas of Snorri Sturluson, that does not count, despite the fact that the sagas are utterly different from any form of literature now written. But if you collect a few editorials written by Toni Morrison, that does count, despite the fact that they are written in English and that you have read hundreds of such.

That already is unreality aplenty. But there is more, and this is hard to talk about. I have said that it is absurd to pretend that you can have anything of substance to say about a curriculum in the history of science when you don't know anything about the history of science. But what if you know hardly anything about anything at all? That is an exaggeration, but it does capture much of what I must confront as a professor of English right now, even at our school, which accepts only a small fraction of students who apply for admission. Nor, I'm afraid, does it apply only to freshmen. It applies also to professors.

I now regularly meet students who have never heard the names of most English authors who lived before 1900. That includes Milton, Chaucer, Pope, Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, Tennyson, and Yeats. Poetry has been largely abandoned. Their knowledge of English grammar is spotty at best and often nonexistent. That is because grammar, as its own subject worthy of systematic study, has been abandoned. Those of my students who know some grammar took Latin in high school or were taught at home. The writing of most students is irreparable in the way that aphasia is. You cannot point to a sentence and say, simply, "Your verb here does not agree with your subject." That is not only because they do not understand the terms of the comment. It is also because many of their sentences will have no clear subject or verb to begin with. The students make grammatical errors for which there are no names. Their experience of the written language has been formed by junk fiction in school, text messages, blog posts, blather on the airwaves, and the bureaucratic sludge that they are taught for "formal" writing, and that George Orwell identified and skewered seventy years ago. The best of them are bad writers of English; the others write no language known to man.

Back in 1893, a writer for *The Century* cheered the invention of the “phonogram,” the wax cylinder that could play classical music on Mr. Edison’s machine. The writer foresaw a day when ordinary people could purchase for a few pennies several realizations of Wagner’s *Tristan* and compare their merits. Most of my students will not have heard of Wagner or Verdi or Puccini. The world’s heritage of art is at their fingertips, but most people use the Internet to look at smut instead.

How different are their professors in this regard? Can they write English, badly? I think so; I think it is still very difficult for someone to attain a doctorate in America without writing English, badly. But how likely is it that the professor of politics, or even English, who writes English, badly, will be able to express an informed opinion about English poetry, or Italian painting, or Lutheran theology?

My students a couple of weeks ago were unable to tell me what the word *timorous* meant, in a passage from Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, where Queen Anne is expressing regrets for having married Richard: never since she married him has she enjoyed a quiet hour of sleep, but still was wakened by his *timorous dreams*. Later, Richard is trying to persuade the stubborn and suspicious widow of Edward IV to let him marry her daughter. She won’t believe that he really is sorry for his many wrongdoings, and in exasperation he levels this curse upon his own head:

*As I intend to prosper and repent,  
So thrive I in my dangerous affairs  
Of hostile arms! Myself myself confound!*

None of my students understood what those words meant. I wonder how many of my professorial colleagues would understand them. Most would. But not all.

In other words, attempts by undergraduates to dictate educational terms to their professors are exercises in unreality upon unreality. They do not know what they do not know. They do not know what they cannot do: they have no idea how hard it would be for them to read the articles from that issue of *The Century* I have mentioned, let alone to write anything like them.

Meanwhile their professors are in no position either to diagnose their troubles or to recognize that they suffer any. Here is another passage from the same bound volume of *The Century*, near the conclusion of an appreciation of the poetry of Christina Rossetti: “As a religious poet of our time she has no rival but Cardinal Newman, and it could only be schismatic prejudice or absence of critical faculty which should deny her a place, as a poet, higher than that of our exquisite master of prose. To find her exact parallel it is at once her strength and her snare that we must go back to the middle of the seventeenth century. She is the sister of George Herbert; she is of the family of Crashaw, of Vaughan, of Wither.” Not one professor of English in a hundred could write those sentences now. Indeed, the subtlety of taste and judgment that the sentences exhibit, and the rhetorical balance, mark them out as foreign to our age. But the trouble goes far beyond style. It is simply not the kind of claim that English professors would now care to make, or know how to begin to make. That is because English professors no longer have a clear sense that art has to do with beauty and truth. They much prefer to discuss anything *but* the poetry: sexuality, Victorian politics, whatever else is easy to declaim about, requires no exercise of taste and judgment, and can be made to appear sophisticated and courageous, as they raise the banner in the vanguard of progress and

march on toward tenure and political rectitude and an easy life.

And what about professors outside the English department? Is it fair to ask them to make sense of what an intelligent critic of the prose and poetry of his contemporaries had to say to a general readership of several millions, a majority of whom had not attended college? The question answers itself. I freely admit that I suffer my own gaps in knowledge, whereof I am painfully aware. But reading, not waving banners, is the cure for those.

When you have no case, the lawyers say, you had better shout. When you have no culture, you shout political slogans. It is the easiest thing in the world to do. We

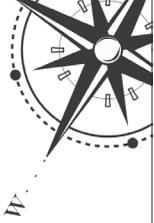
should expect more such political hollering in the future, not less, in proportion as our students *and their teachers at all levels* grow more ignorant, more narrowly trained, less proficient in classical and modern languages, harder of hearing the music of poetry, less able to weigh moral claims against the evidence of history and the distilled experience of human nature that the great artists give us, less chastened by the wise men of the past and by the ideals of religious faith, more apt to huddle in a timorous and insecure individualism, set upon a hair trigger of intolerance, sensitive to any perceived threat to themselves, but all too ready to threaten their opponents with destruction. You heard it here first. †



Eleventh Annual

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DINNER FOR  
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CIVILIZATION



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