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The Trojan Horse: Grand Strategy and National Identity

Consider Rembrandt's "Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer." What is he contemplating? How to convey the matters of war and peace, of strategy and humanity found in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to Aristotle's pupil Alexander. Homer's face and sightless eyes give no clue. Aristotle's gaze is off into space. His right hand to Homer's head; his left hand fingers the chain that carries a pendant engraved with the head of Alexander the Great, whose expression we cannot make out. We can imagine the thoughts and words of Homer running like an electric current up to and through the mind of Aristotle, then down and on into the mind and actions of the conqueror of the world.

Sometime around the year 345 Aristotle moved to the island of Mytilene where he did biological observation. Then in 343 came the invitation for which he ever after was famed: to come to the court of King Philip II of Macedonia to tutor his son Alexander, who was then thirteen years of age. As one historian put it:

A rich romance came to surround that happy coupling of prince and philosopher, and we shall not hope to see through the fog of legend or determine how far Aristotle influenced his ambitious and unlovely charge

— the boy who would become Alexander the Great and rule the world from the Peloponnesus to Persia to the Punjab. So Aristotle was given the opportunity in actuality that Plato only longed for in theory — to educate a philosopher-king. It is an extraordinary fact that two of the most significant figures in world history should have come together in this way. Some of their letters to each other survive, and of these,

some may even be genuine. Other such letters have recently turned up in Muslim libraries in India. Aristotle gave Alexander his copy of the *Iliad*, which Alexander carried with him as far as India. Many teachers across history may have dreamed of seeing their influence shape world affairs, but Aristotle may have been unique in wondering whether this student, might go too far for the world's good.

Undeterred by the paucity of evidence, more than one modern writer has given us the story of young Alexander's tutelage in exquisite detail. Five Aristotelian themes have been put forward:

- First, train the mind not to look for answers, but to learn how to think. Fact-gathering and research may answer a specific question, but won't prepare you to deal with situations in which all the facts cannot be known at the time — and those are the situations leaders really must face and decide upon.

- Second, character-building. No matter how smart you are, or how well-trained you are to think, if your character is weak or unformed, you will fail. This means you need to know who you are.

- Third, recognize that everything counts. While you must set priorities and phase your actions intelligently, don't let that delude you into assuming that items farther down the priority list don't matter too much. Trivial matters can have monumental consequences.

- Fourth, be moderate and prudent in your personal life, but realize that success requires risk-taking. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

- Fifth, ask hard questions. Ask them not only of your subordinates but also of yourself.

Being aware of these precepts, and putting them into operation may enable a leader to understand what is going on in his world and to have a basic idea of what to do about it. Whether this is what Aristotle taught or not, a pretty good case can be made, by a process of retro-engineering, that Alexander the Great, as he conquered the world, demonstrated that he knew these things. So it's a fair bet that Aristotle taught them to him. These are matters of use in grand strategy. There is a common link to them in the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid*.

The story of the Trojan Horse is one of the most famous in all history. A few years ago, a Yale Law School professor who had volunteered to

teach one term in the freshman Great Books course, and so had to read the *Iliad* for the first time, asked when the Trojan Horse part would appear. He couldn't find it. It's not there, which does seem odd for the great epic of the Trojan War. The story does come up briefly in Homer's *Odyssey*, when the wandering Odysseus asks a bard to sing about it. There, the story is told in a very rudimentary way. The bard sings of the Greeks hiding in the wooden horse, of the Trojans dragging it inside their walls and then, after debating about it, deciding to let it stand there as an offering to the gods — until the Greeks at night streamed out of the hollow horse to destroy Troy.

The full tale only emerges in the great Roman epic, The *Aeneid* of Virgil when, in Book II, Aeneas tells Dido the story of Troy's fall when the final Greek assault succeeds. The Trojan Horse story is a break, a flash-back, from Aeneas's then-current narrative, so commentators have not probed very deeply into it, at least not from our angle of interest.

As told in the *Aeneid*, the story of the Trojan Horse is a case in grand strategy. As we go through it, I will insert from time to time some relevant lines from the *Aeneid* as translated by John Dryden in 1697, still the best of the many translations for its literary merit.

The Greeks grew weary of the tedious War:
And by Minerva's Aid a Fabrick rear'd,
Which like a Steed of monstrous height appear'd.

On the divine level, the Trojan War was fought between *Venus*, the mother of Aeneas, (she had been chosen the most beautiful by the Judgment of Paris), and Neptune the sea-god — and their adversaries *Minerva* and *Juno* who were furious with the Trojans because Paris, a Trojan, had decided against them.

The Trojan Horse does not appear in the *Iliad* because that poem ends with Achilles killing Hector and then relenting by returning Hector's body to his father, king Priam of Troy. Now time has passed. Achilles is dead, killed by Paris's shot to his heel. There had been, apocryphally, a running dispute between Achilles and Odysseus (*Ulysses*) over whether to make force or guile the basis of the Greek strategy. With Achilles dead, *Ulysses* — the man of twists and turns, skilled in deception

— prevails. So the Greek strategy post-Achilles will be deception. The Trojans knew, or should have known, that with the great warrior Achilles dead, the Greek siege of Troy could never succeed by force of arms. So the Trojans should have been expecting the Greeks to turn to a strategy of guile, but were not. This was the first in a series of Trojan failures to understand what was going on. Why? We will try to find out. Was it a case like that before the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor when the Americans could not tell the difference between “signals” and “noise”?

We know from Homer that Athena (Minerva) and Odysseus (Ulysses) have a relationship of friendly rivalry, a contest about which one is the more clever. In this context it looks like Minerva came up with the idea of the wooden horse trick. Ulysses, typically, claimed credit for the stratagem, but actually only proceeded to design its implementation.

So the Greeks, as Dryden’s translation puts it, fabricate a huge wooden steed. Then, in accordance with the scheme, the Greeks take to their ships, as though giving up the war. But instead of sailing home to Greece, they go to the offshore island of *Tenedos* and hide their fleet there.

The Trojans, so long besieged, unbar their gates and come out to look at the now-deserted Greek camp. *Laocoön*, a priest, comes out as well and shouts to the Trojan crowd:

O wretched Country-men! What fury reigns?
What more than Madness has possess’d your Brains?
Think you the Grecians from your Coasts are gone,
And are Ulysses’ Arts no better known?
This hollow Fabrick either must inclose,
Within its blind Recess, our secret Foes;
Or ‘tis an Engine raised above the Town,
T’ o’erlook the walls, and then to batter down.
Somewhat is sure designed; by Fraud or Force;
Trust not their Presents, nor admit the Horse.

(In other words, beware of Greeks bearing gifts).

Laocoön is a priest of Apollo (the background, not explicit in the *Aeneid*, is that Laocoön had angered Apollo by marrying and fathering children despite his celibacy vow — and made matters worse by lying with his wife in the presence of a shrine of Apollo. Laocoön has just been selected by the Trojans to be their current priest of Neptune). As he runs out to warn the Trojans against the Horse he declares that *everybody* knows that Ulysses is a deceiver: either Greek soldiers are hidden inside the wooden horse or it was made so big in order to be used as a siege engine to overtop the walls of Troy. Then, to demonstrate the validity of his warning, Laocoön takes action:

Thus having said, against the Steed he threw
His forceful spear, which, hissing as it flew,
Piercéd through the yielding Plancks of jointed Wood,
And trembling in the hollow Belly stood.

Note that Laocoön is not acting in his role as priest or seer. He is saying directly to the Trojans that Ulysses has a record of trickery, so don't fall for this one. And he is acting directly by throwing his spear into the side of the horse which produces the sounds of rattling weapons and groans from the Greeks hidden within. So evidence from the past and a demonstration at that present moment support Laocoön's warning:

Enough was said and done, t'inspire a better Mind.

Why didn't the Trojans take the warning? Because the outcome was *fated*, says Aeneas to Dido. There are big issues here; we think of Tolstoy's philosophy of history as described by Isaiah Berlin in *The Hedgehog and the Fox*: the "great man" is nothing; history inexorably takes its own course. In the *Odyssey*, the hero made the Trojan Horse ploy a success. But in the *Aeneid*, when the Horse is at the Gate, where is Aeneas? The hero is Laocoön, and we will soon see what happens to him. If Laocoön's warning had been heeded, Troy would not have fallen. Here we have to think of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the realization of "the fortunate fall." If Troy had not fallen there would have been no

Rome and no Western Civilization as we have known it. The difference between Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid* is stark. The great Homeric hero is indispensable; Aeneas is the Virgilian un-hero who must align himself with the forces of history in order to serve his people and the larger cause of world order. But Aeneas does not seem able to grasp the meaning of the situation or what his mission should be.

Now comes the implementation of the Greek strategy of guile. A Greek soldier is captured and brought to Troy. He has let himself be captured in order to tell the Trojans a false story. He says his name is Sinon and that the Greeks abandoned him (we know that the Greeks, as a free and unregimented people, had a reputation of producing traitors and defectors, so this evidence from the past the Trojans seem to take seriously). Sinon says that Ulysses, in one of his typical schemes, slandered Sinon's patron in the Greek command, and Sinon consequently fell from favor. Sinon threatened revenge which only led Ulysses to accuse him of treason and call for him to be executed. So, Sinon says, if you Trojans kill me, it will please Ulysses immensely.

This of course makes the Trojans, who already feel pity for Sinon ("Unknowing as we were in Grecian Arts"), only want to hear more. So, Sinon tells them, the Greeks, tired of their unsuccessful siege of Troy, had long ago resolved to give up the war and sail home, but were blocked by rough seas and unfavorable winds. So they sent an envoy to the oracle at Delphi. She pointed out that when the Greeks ten years before had decided to sail to Troy, they had been thwarted by bad weather, and that only a human sacrifice had caused the wind to shift in their favor. (This was Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia). So, said the oracle, they must do likewise in order to get home from Troy. Ulysses then got the Greek priest Calchas to choose Sinon as the victim. Sinon fled, he says, and

Hid in a weedy Lake all Night I Lay,
Secure of Safety when they sail'd away.

Here we begin to sense the appearance of serpent images and sounds: Laocoön's spear "hissing" through the air. Sinon's name in its snaky

sound. Sinon lurking in concealment on the edge of a lake. The Greek strategy is snake-like. Troy's King Priam asks Sinon directly:

But truly tell, was for Force or Guile,
Or some Religious End, you raised the Pile?

Sinon, the gifted liar, says it was religious. Because Ulysses had stolen Minerva's image from her temple (the Palladium), the Greeks had built this great wooden horse in tribute to her, to assuage her anger. This will please Minerva, Sinon says, and she will soon help the Greeks return to continue the war against Troy. If you Trojans violate the Horse, Minerva will turn even more harshly against you. But if you were to take the Horse inside your walls to protect it, then you Trojans would prevail over all Greece. That's why, Sinon explains, the Greeks built the Horse so large that it would not fit through your city gates.

This, it must be admitted, is guile indeed: a complicated and persuasive story. Sinon has presented a brilliant falsehood made plausible by being embedded in some facts known to the Trojans by their own experience or widely-accepted reports.

To ward off the threat, the Trojans have Laocoön, who they have chosen as *Neptune's* priest for that year, sacrifice a steer to propitiate the god.

When, dreadful to behold, from Sea we spy'd
Two Serpents rank'd abreast, the Seas divide,
And smoothly sweep along the swelling Tide.
Their flaming crests above the Waves they show,
Their Bellies seem to burn the seas below; ...
Their nimble Tongues they brandish'd as they came,
And lick'd their hissing Jaws, that sputtered Flame.

The serpents seize and begin to devour Laocoön's two children. Laocoön rushes to save them but the snakes attack him; he roars and bellows in agony. The serpents kill them all and slither off to the shrine of Minerva where they coil around the feet of the statue of the goddess.

In 1506, an astonishing sculpture was dug up on the Esquiline Hill: an heroic figure in a death struggle with huge, hideous serpents. Flanking the hero were two boys also in the coils of the snakes. It appeared to be that described by Pliny the Elder as done in the studio of the Greek artist Agesander. Although clearly depicting Laocoön, the priest who warned the Trojans against the “Trojan Horse”, a great controversy arose over its meaning. Scholars declared it a *Roman* work, perhaps a copy of the Greek original. Bought by Pope Julius II and installed in the Vatican, it would become one of the best-known works in all of art history.

In the 1500s the controversy concerned the *expression* on Laocoön’s face. The writhing body and agonized expression was in contrast to the serene Greek sculptured faces. It also seemed at odds with Roman *stoicism*. To Byron, in *Childe Harold*, it combined a “mortal’s agony/ with an immortal’s patience blending.” No, said Shelley, it is “an upraised countenance of despair, and appeals with a sense of injustice” — that is the predominant and overwhelming emotion — yet there is “a nobleness of expression, and a majesty that dignifies torture.”

The Trojan witnesses to this horror declare that Laocoön was doomed to die because he had declared the wooden Horse to be a fraud and had struck it with his spear. The serpents thus were Minerva’s revenge. So the Trojans, following Sinon’s false advice, vote to bring the Horse inside their walls, believing that to do so would give them the upper hand against the Greeks. Because of the size of the Horse, the Trojans have to break open their own walls in order to make a hole big enough to get it through. This is somewhere around step 6 or 7 in the Greek scheme. The Trojans by this point had to have believed 7 levels — and about 4 sub-categories of Greek lies *before* the point of the Greeks construction of so large a horse comes into play. So the Trojans knock down their own walls, put wheels under the Horse’s feet and it slides snake-like into Troy.

The rest is history. The Greek fleet slides, also snake-like, toward the Trojan shore *tacitae per amica silentia lunae* (“secretly under the benign silence of the moon”). The Trojans sleep soundly. Sinon unlocks the trap door of the Horse and down a cable slide Ulysses and his Greek comrades.

...their Forces join
T'invade the Town, oppress'd with Sleep and Wine.

Aeneas then tells Dido at great length of the horrendous battle that raged as the Greeks stormed over Troy and set it aflame. Wandering among the flaming ruins Aeneas finds himself alone when suddenly

The graceless Helen in the Porch I spy'd

Helen, the cause of the war! She is hiding there, snake-like, in the temple of Vesta, a goddess of fire, fearing death whichever side finds her, Greek or Trojan. Aeneas is about to kill her when Venus his mother appears to him to say.

Not Helen's Face, nor Paris was in Fault,
But by the Gods was this destruction brought.

In other words, all this was fated to happen; nothing could have prevented it. So under Venus's guidance and protection Aeneas takes his household gods — the *lares et penates* — and, bearing his father and leading his son, Iulus, makes his way out of ruined, flaming Troy. His wife Creusa follows, but falls behind and is lost. Aeneas rages through the streets trying to find her until she appears, a ghost, and tells him that she too is fated to be left behind as he, with father and son wander until

Then, after many painful Years are past,
On Latium's happy Shore you shall be cast:
Where gentle Tiber from his Bed beholds
The flowry Meadows, and the Feeding Folds.
There end your Toils: And there your Fates provide
A quiet kingdom, and a Royal Bride.
There Fortune shall the Trojan line restore;
And you for lost Creusa weep no more.

The literary theme — ferocity, deceit, and fire — come in the repeated images of serpent and flame (the red flickering snake's tongue). Death

and rebirth come together in a single transforming event. The serpent, a symbol of guileful Satanic deceit, is also a symbol of rebirth, as a snake sheds its skin and emerges anew. So Troy will be reborn as Rome.

As a final symbol, after the serpentine Greek strategy of guile has set Troy ablaze,

Strange to relate, from young Iulus Head
A lambent Flame arose, which gently spread
Around his Brows, and on his Temples Fed.

The flame around the head of Iulus (that's Iulus as in Julius Caesar) will later appear around the head of Caesar Augustus and Oliver Cromwell (see Andrew Marvell's "Horatian Ode") and eventually even around the head of America's epic poet of democracy Walt Whitman (in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry").

This is the start of the *translatio imperii*, the movement of empire ever westward in the cause of universal peace: to a *Pax Romana*, *Pax Britannia*, *Pax Americana*. As Bishop Berkeley poetically would declare,

Westward the course of Empire takes its way.

So we confront the question of history: do things happen as they do by fate or free will? If God knows all that will happen, how can we have free will? But if free will choice by the individual is required for salvation, then how can it be fated? The answer always is: free will exists even when all is predestined. Even Tolstoy, who says we have no influence over history, portrays Marshall Kutuzov as making sound strategic decisions because he senses the course of history. Oswald Spengler explains this by comparing a great statesman to one who is "a judge of horseflesh." If you have that "sixth sense," you at one glance can size up the situation and decide accordingly how to incorporate it, or not, into your grand strategy. Clausewitz called it the *coup d'oeil*: an integration of experience, observation, and imagination that "constructs a whole of the fragments that the eye can see," imprinting it "like a picture, like a map, upon the brain." The approach is like a poet's, involving the

instant recognition of a truth that the mind would ordinarily miss, or would perceive only after long study and reflection.”

The Greek grand strategy at the outset was not impressive. Marriage and *xenia* (the duty of guest-friendship) had been violated when Paris took Helen away. But to launch an expeditionary force to lay siege to a far-off citadel was far from promising. You would be away from your base. Your long logistic line could not be maintained and you could not easily live off the invaded land for long. And, as Clausewitz would later teach, the defensive position would have the stronger hand. What were the Greek assets? Achilles the best fighter and Ulysses/Odysseus the best schemer. But Achilles was always a problem, and after ten years of war he was killed. That left three options: 1.) Continue the siege with no hope of success, 2.) Quit the war and go home, 3.) Try something else: a stratagem of deception.

Given the wily Ulysses as an asset, option 3.) was the clear choice. Surely the Trojans would anticipate something like this; they knew about Ulysses and his reputation for stratagems. So a plausible — indeed ingenious — context had to be concocted in order to throw the Trojans off the trail:

1.) The Greeks needed to invent a defector/traitor with an explanation for his turncoat decision; he had lost favor with the inner leadership circle. This would be believable because Greeks were always defecting (the nation always squabbling, lacking unity).

2.) A second layer of narrative which certainly was true: that the Greeks were weary after ten years of war and wanted to go home.

3.) A third level, perhaps most compelling of all to the culture of the time and place. Everyone knew that the Greeks at the start of the war had to sacrifice one of their own — Iphigenia — in order to get favorable winds to carry their fleet to Troy. So the false story that the Delphic oracle required them to carry out another human sacrifice in order to get favorable winds to carry their ships home from Troy instantly made sense to the Trojans. It made the war into a “Ring Composition.” (In fact, the whole tale Aeneas tells Dido is a contest, ring-composition-style, of sacrifices, six or seven in sequence, like a game of musical chairs, to see which side’s sacrifice wins at the end).

4.) Fourth, the Greeks would sacrifice the defector, because after all, he already was out of favor. So added credibility for his story and defection emerged.

5.) To all this was added another dimension, also based on a known fact: that Ulysses made off with the palladium of Minerva (the shrine-image in her temple). So it seemed to make some sense that, to ensure that Minerva would not in anger thwart the Greek plan of withdrawal, they had constructed a giant wooden Horse and dedicated it to her. And to make sure that the Trojans would not take the horse for their own and thereby shift Minerva's favor to themselves, the Greeks had built it so large that it could not be fit through the gates of Troy. (Here is something like Brer Rabbit's briar patch ploy in African-American folklore: fervently assert what you desperately do not want to happen in order to convince your enemy to make sure it *does* happen).

Here then is a new grand strategy designed by the Greeks:

- it replaces a problematic and unsuccessful earlier strategy;
- it takes full advantage of the Greeks' strongest remaining asset;
- it provides a comprehensive story line which their opponent would be eager to adopt;
- it is anchored in previously known facts about Greeks;
- it is in accord with previously accepted assumptions about Greeks.
- And it is shored up with appropriately related religious practices.

All points are covered: individual, societal, divine; historical, military, psychological, emotional and intellectual. And it is carefully phased to unfold over time. The enemy's suspicions and objections have been foreseen and preemptively neutralized.

So the Greek strategy is a grand strategy, beautifully conceived, fully worked out, and well-prepared to be put into execution. Will it work as planned, or will it once again be demonstrated, as the old adage goes, that "No plan survives contact with the enemy"?

Had there been a Trojan Investigative Board of Inquiry, the "After-Action Report" would have concluded that Trojan leaders "failed to connect the dots". This would not mean that the Greek plan worked to perfection. There would always be some unpredictable, unanticipated, intervening factor.

In this case, it is Laocoön. The more carefully you read Virgil's text, the more distinctive, indeed unusual, character Laocoön seems to be. He is a priest of Apollo, but a renegade priest, fathering a family and making love to his wife as his vows forbade him to do. In short, Laocoön seems like a rather outrageous but understandably admirable rebel.

Above all, Laocoön sees and thinks about things clearly. Rembrandt's Aristotle would regard him as a prize pupil and good example for Alexander to study. Laocoön in effect was saying, "Of course Ulysses is behind this Horse trick, don't you my fellow Trojans get it? And let me show you that this is no offering to a divinity. I'll thrust my spear right into it! Listen! Don't you hear men groaning and armor clanking inside it! How stupid can you be not to realize this?"

The Trojans don't act on Laocoön's warning, but neither do they reject him. At that very moment, a major distraction appears in the person of a "defector," brought into the Trojan city and the people all want to hear what he says.

As Sinon tells his concocted story, another chance happening is taking place. Laocoön had been chosen by lot; that is, randomly, to be a temporary priest of Neptune and to sacrifice a steer in accordance with that role.

So Laocoön happens to be front and center, with the Trojans all watching when, again by chance, demonic twin serpents race in from the sea to crush Laocoön and his sons in their coils and kill them with their fangs. Why might this be? Because Laocoön — entirely unrelated to the Trojan War — had on an earlier occasion violated his priestly duties to Apollo who had dispatched these serpents in retribution?

But the circumstances of the moment required another interpretation: Laocoön was being attacked by the snakes because he had thrown his spear at the wooden horse.

Thus a concatenation of happenstance made the Trojan people all the more certain that the invented Greek story must be true. Laocoön had railed against it and had died a hideous death as a result of his refusal to credit the fable.

Are the Trojans to be blamed for not seeing through the Greek plot? Perhaps not; the Greek strategy was ingenious and fully worked out. As with all plans, even brilliant ones, an unexpected event — the emergence

of Laocoön — threatened to wreck it. But then another unexpected and misunderstood event — the assault of the serpents — put the Greek plan back on track. The serpents with their tongues of flame so fittingly represented the Satanic Greek scheme that no one could be expected to see through it.

Or, maybe the Trojan assumption was correct: that Minerva sent the serpents to kill Laocoön because he violated her sacrificial Horse. No, wait a minute! The Horse was *not* a sacrifice to Minerva; it was a faked sacrifice.

Remember, all this is being told by Aeneas to Dido, and it is not the tale of a hero. Aeneas includes himself (“we”, he says) among the Trojans who foolishly credited Sinon’s deceived story. He also says that he joined in opening the walls and pulling the Horse inside Troy. But he had *not* participated when the crowd decided that Laocoön deserved to be killed by the serpents because he had denounced the Horse as a trick and speared it. Aeneas seems not convinced that all this was divinely ordained. Laocoön the priest had said that the Horse had nothing to do with religion. Sinon the infiltrator told the Trojans that the Horse *was* a religious offering. The Trojans fell for the religious explanation.

The reader of the *Aeneid* could conclude either that the gods are the enemies of decent, god-fearing people or that the fall of Troy was a matter of human decision-making within the course of history and its vicissitudes. The *Aeneid* seems to side with the latter. It was a matter of grand strategy: the Greeks shifted from force to guile and the gullible Trojans fell for it.

The Trojans usually seem dull-witted when it comes to matters of strategy. How many signals did the Trojans misread? Laocoön’s words of warning. Laocoön’s demonstrative act. The attack on Laocoön. The portent of the Horse getting stuck repeatedly in the breached wall and the sounds from within it. A warning from Cassandra (the truth-telling prophetess fated never to be believed). Some of these were warnings, some signs, some evidence; none were read accurately.

All through the *Aeneid*, Aeneas in his travels, in his encounter with Dido, in the underworld and after, is portrayed as rather a dull dog. It will take repeated prophesies and repeated occasions of learning-by-doing before Aeneas really begins to “get it”. Perhaps we are supposed

to conclude that the Greeks are the masters of grand strategy while the Trojans under the slow but steady, relentlessly responsible Aeneas become the masters of history. The Greek empire will end; the Roman Empire will come to seem eternal; which now is the winner?

Something in here centers on the matter of character as Aristotle taught Alexander: individual character and national character. This brings us back to the statue of Laocoön unearthed in 1506. The controversy has many aspects. Is it Greek? Roman? A Roman copy of a Greek original? A forgery produced by Michelangelo and his studio? But above all the controversy has come back again and again to the look, the expression on the face of Laocoön.

Obviously, this was not a classic Greek sculptured head with the face portrayed as some Platonic ideal of beauty. Nor was it in the Roman style which portrayed the real faces, ugly or not, and expressions of actual people. Clearly Laocoön's expression revealed the pain and agony of the moment. But beyond that, was there something of the Roman stoic in its gaze? Was it a defiance of fate, or recognition of destiny's ultimate power? Did it combine mortal anguish and immortal patience as Byron claimed? Or was it the cry of the revolutionary in resistance as Shelley saw it? The sculpture was said to be the first discovery of an artistic depiction of the anguished reaction of a body to painful defeat — with the face nonetheless expressing the moral dignity of the hero. When Nathaniel Hawthorne, in Rome, viewed it, he saw “a strange calmness diffused through the strife,” the triumph of a great soul in tragic conflict. The look of the individual who might have changed history's course but failed.

The two most famous interpreters of the sculpture seem to agree on one point: that the sculpted face of Laocoön is not crying aloud, that the stricken hero “raises no frightful cries” even though his face represents agony and distress in extremis. For one — Winckelmann — this is suffering with dignity. For the other — Lessing — the sculpted face is not crying aloud because to do so would reveal an ignoble soul, but because it artistically would distort the expression “in a loathsome manner.”

We each will have our own interpretation. For me it is a look that can be seen across the ages and cultures. It is a look, whether the face is contorted in pain or steady in calm contemplation, of one who can

discern the underlying reality of a situation, one who can see clearly into the essence of things when other eyes and hearts and minds only see through a glass darkly, fail to feel the beat of their own true feelings, think with minds distracted and crowded by the cloudy thoughts of others.

How is this strategic? As Ralph Waldo Emerson stated it, “The act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object are one.”

What does Aeneas look like? Rembrandt could depict, imaginatively, Homer, Aristotle, and Alexander, but we have no sense of what Aeneas looks like. Virgil makes him faceless and indistinct. Gianlorenzo Bernini could not avoid the challenge when he sculpted the scene of Aeneas carrying his father and leading his son out of burning Troy. It is a great work of art, to be seen in the Villa Borghese, Rome. But it’s a non-face. Is it meaningless though? No.

This is all about ways of knowing. Rembrandt’s Aristotle is about how we apprehend the world. Aristotle’s eyes are not fixed on anything in the world. Yet like blind Homer, Aristotle is a visionary. He has “the vision thing”. The sixth sense. Laocoön also is about ways of knowing. His hands and eyes and body are all at work. What they tell him is transferred to his mind, processed, and then verbally expressed in the most powerful terms he can muster to try to overcome the imagined assumptions and deceptive self-satisfying desires of his people.

George Orwell said that “to see what is in front of one’s nose is a constant struggle.” That requires not only sight, but insight. Both Laocoön and Aristotle have it, in different ways. One gets it from attention to practical detail; the other from contemplation of high policy purpose. It is that sixth sense — or set of senses that makes one able to get grand strategy. Aeneas never got it — at least until the very last page of the *Aeneid*.

In a larger dimension, this is also about “national character” a subject that the intellectual temper of recent times has ruled impermissible to discuss because it supposedly is invidious, tendentious, and beyond the methodologies of political science. Nonetheless, national character is vividly important in the great texts of the ancient world — think of the radically different national characters of Athens and Sparta as depicted in Thucydides’ *Peloponnesian War* — and vibrantly significant in literary studies of the modern age as revealed in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*.

When Aeneas tells Dido about the Trojan War, his narrative is suffused with matters of national character. In the course of the war Troy lost its national character (or its national character caused the loss of Troy) and the motley collection of Hellenic forces who won the war laid the foundations for a Greek national character in the course of forging a new and victorious grand strategy. As Aeneas is speaking to Dido about the fall of Troy he still does not fully comprehend that his mission is to found a new polity in Italy and in doing so, create a new national character that will be both Latin and Trojan. Dido, in contrast, has already founded her new nation — Carthage — and shaped there a luxurious “Eastern” character. She invites Aeneas and his companions to join her culture and civilization — why go to all the trouble and danger of fighting for and constructing a new society when Carthage is here, ready-made for your purpose? Aeneas is close to succumbing to this temptation when Mercury, the messenger of the gods, arrives to order him to resume his quest. Aeneas will nonetheless remain uncomprehending about what he needs to do until he goes to the Underworld to have his mission, and the essence of the “Roman” — a new name — national character explained to him by the shade of his father. A visit to the Underworld will remain a crucial experience across all of Western literature for informing the hero and leader of a people about their character and purpose in history.

National character and identity today has reemerged as an essential but largely unacknowledged issue in one country after another around the globe.

Europe at the end of the Cold War consolidated its effort to create a new identity, one that would leave in the past all the stains of wars, colonialism, racism, and oppressive ideologies to seek a union to transcend even the Westphalian international state system which had become the basis for a world-spanning international community. The European Union’s constitution would leave unacknowledged Europe’s Christian identity, even as its twelve-star flag took inspiration from the Biblical Book of Revelation. Symbols matter. In the opening of the twenty-first century European identity and national character are in question. If the past has been discarded, the present and future is not clearly discernable. Can the twelve-star flag replace Portugal’s astrolabe symbol?

The Soviet Union was an ideological construction designed to recognize and replace the “false consciousness” of nationalism with the class consciousness of proletarian internationalism. Stalinism could be described as an institutionalized tension between this utopian vision and a Russian national culture under unquestioned autocratic rule. When the USSR collapsed, the communist hammer and sickle flag was hauled down and the Tsarist tricolor flown in its place. Since then, Russia has dabbled with democracy, lurched into oligarchical criminality, and more recently come under one-man, one-party rule clothed in the unconvincing trappings of parliamentary governance. A Russian national identity is being reinvented by bringing together the “best practices” of tsars and commissars with the apparent blessing of the Orthodox Church. Russia has lost an empire but not as yet found a plausible Russian identity.

The upheavals across the Middle East that began with “The Arab Spring” in early 2011 are the latest expressions of a continuing bitter struggle to define an identity for the Arab nation that can accommodate respect for faith and tradition yet permit successful engagement with the international community in the twenty-first century.

A single, consistent theme characterizes and explains the story of the Middle East from the post-World War I collapse of the Ottoman Empire and Caliphate to the present moment: Can the region be brought into the established — Westphalian — international state system or not? — the alternatives across most of this time being a reimagined form of earliest Islam, or heavy-handed military, monarchical, or falsely parliamentary regimes. The latter have been in power throughout the decades, all with bad records of governance.

The Arab Spring, however, was launched by a new population, young, connected in technology and aspiration to the outside world and apparently unshackled from the old agendas of the region. The regimes fought back and the Islamists moved to seize opportunities so that the question of identity remains unanswered.

China faces the most profound national identity crisis of all major nations today. China seems always to have been fully formed: serene, sophisticated, self-assumed. This is the image promoted by the People’s Republic of China today. But China’s history from remotest antiquity

to the twentieth century has been violently unpredictable, with the question of Chinese identity contested since the arrival of Buddhism to the Mongol conquest to the Manchu-ruled Qing Dynasty from 1644 to 1911. The conventional interpretation is that Confucian China culturally, intellectually, and politically absorbs each and every foreign presence or influence. The reality of the late nineteenth century, twentieth century, and into this new century is that China has been forced to accept, or has voluntarily adopted, four of the most powerful non-Chinese movements of the world and is at present feeling the pressure of a fifth; each has produced war or harsh social change and continues to threaten more of the same.

Christianity, distorted in its transmission, produced the huge Taiping Rebellion with 20-30 million killed in the mid-nineteenth century. The international system was forcibly imposed on China by British troops, a blow that hastened the fall of the Manchus and the coming of the Nationalist Revolution which led in turn to the Chinese Civil War and Maoist communism. This challenge to national identity was summed up by one observer's astonishment at seeing Chinese workers put in place above Tiananmen Square a giant portrait of a bearded German Jew. Now in the twenty-first century the foreign forces of capitalism have engulfed China. The Beijing regime's message to the people is that communism is capitalism and capitalism is communism, with Confucianism as contested territory between the two. In Hegelian terms, China's thesis of traditional Confucianism has struggled with the antithesis of communism-capitalism. The synthesis of a plausible Chinese identity has not yet been found, as disputed cultural-intellectual handling of traditional symbols of China — dragon, panda, the Yangtse and Yellow Rivers, the Great Wall, the status of Confucius — have in recent decades revealed.

Aeneas' Trojan Horse experiences, and his telling the story to Dido in Carthage, contains all the elements that must be considered in the contemporary cases outlined above:

- Without a clear sense of national identity, there cannot be a successful polity or state. National identity can be lost and must be reconfirmed or redefined in a way convincing to the nation's people.

- Such identity can only emerge through engagement and understanding of a nation's past. History — the story a people tell about themselves to explain themselves — is all-important.

- At certain times, specific episodes, some dramatic, others difficult to recognize, will be turning points in a nation's story and self-understanding. The Trojan Horse event was one of these turning points for both Greeks and Trojans; the Greeks understood it at the time, while Aeneas and the Trojans did not grasp its significance.

- And all this must be seen in the largest context of a nation's purpose in the world and in history. The greatest challenge to any nation is to maintain clarity and conviction about its mission. Almost all will falter or fail in this effort, but some can summon the resilience required for a renaissance in national identity and character.

Each of the civilizations reviewed above possesses a great national literature. Rereading and reinterpreting those works is the place to start.