

Collegiate Bread and Circuses

by William Murchison

AH, THE GOOD OL' DAYS! If only they were as frolicsome and fulfilling as they commonly seem in the rearview mirror! All that notwithstanding, the shaky balance that, in university settings, once seemed to prevail between academics and athletics gives the past a certain golden glow.

You know what I'm talking about if you recall the college scene of 40, even 30, years ago. Certainly, dumb athletes roamed about, majoring in P.E. and dating the campus cuties. Certainly, coaches made too much money, causing faculty senates to lament the gaps between authentic achievement—their kind—and the sham varieties on display in local stadiums. The proper order of things might be out of whack at institutions dedicated supposedly to the training of young intellects and the preservation of eternal truths. Yet at institutions of this sort, things are generally out of whack one way or another. At least the head football coach didn't make \$5.1 million a year, as does the head coach at the University of Texas, Mack Brown; his wages and assured community standing come to mind in the aftermath of the Almost-Debacle this summer involving the Big 12 Conference.

The Big 12 was national news for a few days in June. Key members, led by Almighty Texas (one of my two *alma maters*, I am bound to note), seemed intent on bailing out for some place where they could get more money. Goodness, what would happen if they did? Superconferences would appear, to the detriment of mellow October Saturdays at smaller, poorer institutions. The superconferences, with their lucrative TV contracts and regional, if not national, fan bases, would dominate college athletics, meaning, primarily, college football.

It didn't happen. Texas, wealthiest of the wealthy Big 12 powers, pulled back at the last minute. The Longhorns would stay where they had been since bolting from the old Southwest Conference a decade and a half ago (in the process, destroying a set of prized, never-to-be-reconstructed local rivalries). Other potential fugitives decided that, if the Big 12 was good enough for UT, it was good enough for them. Whew! A net loss of two schools—Nebraska and Colorado—to other leagues left the Big 12 with just ten teams. What's in a name anyway, when the pay is so good? Because that was in fact what this summer's secessionist movement was about: filthy lucre—the filthier and more plentiful, the better.

It probably wasn't what the founders of the universities of Paris or Padua had in mind when they went into business hundreds of years ago—squads of athletes and their admirers overshadowing, in the public eye, the works of the mind. But so it has fallen out. To tell the truth, the academic side of the academic enterprise isn't what it used to be, what with tenure, grade inflation, diversity requirements, and growing disdain for the civilization of the West. I'll get to that in a minute.

Meanwhile, from a practical standpoint, the universities' cave-in to the sporting side of things makes a certain kind of sense. Filthy lucre comes in handy. And who's got it these days? Television has. TV exposure, with corresponding rights to divvy up the fruits of that exposure, was at the heart of the aborted threat to the life of the Big 12. Not the wish to bring more students into Saturday-afternoon concord as they perch on metal benches; not sentimentality about historic rivalries; not the loyalties and attachments such rival-

ries can excite. The \$1.2 billion distributed by the conference to member schools over the past 14 years wasn't enough. It was like Wall Street (and Edward G. Robinson in *Key Largo*). The schools wanted more. And, beyond that, still more.

Poor things. The University of Texas in 2008, the last year for which figures are available, made a mere \$87.6 million in football revenues, for a profit of \$65 million. Two non-Big 12 teams—Ohio State and Georgia—pulled in \$68.2 million and \$65.2 million, respectively. At the six high-dollar conferences that same year—a wrenching year for the economy, let us recall—revenues rose five percent. Translated into cash, this meant average revenues of \$31 million for each of the six conferences' 66 schools. Just four of the schools actually lost money on football: Duke, Wake Forest, Syracuse, and Connecticut.

The coaches, too, did well. Though less gaudily compensated than Mack Brown, four fellow head coaches—Nick Saban of Alabama, Urban Meyer of Florida, Bob Stoops of Oklahoma, and Lane Kiffin of USC—pulled down more than four million dollars each. Even some assistant coaches have begun making out like, well, head coaches. According to *USA Today*, six assistants were in line this year for salaries of more than \$650,000. A sports economist, Andrew Zimbalist, reasonably submits that such salaries “are sending a ridiculous message to students at institutions where athletics are supposed to be complementary to academics.”

So what, if anything, does one do about it? Do not the aforementioned gazillions proceed from the uninterrupted workings of the free marketplace? DeLoss Dodds, athletic director of the University of Texas (2009-10 salary: \$627,109), when asked whether a coach is ever worth five million dollars per year, replied, “Probably not, but it's the marketplace.” It is for a fact. The Obama administration might handle this unfortunate reality by instructing

a team of economics professors to advise Coach how much he's worth; likewise, by constructing a mechanism of price controls for television sports packages. Then we could work up (or down) to the expedient of assigning bureaucrats to enforce nonmarketplace outcomes such as occur when one team wallops another. (Doesn't victory itself weaken our sense of cultural unity?) I'm kidding. Barely.

One proposal for redressing the balance involves persuading Congress to lift the antitrust exemption for college sports, thereby allowing schools to perpetrate what might be called, under the Sherman Act, a conspiracy in restraint of trade.

IN FACT, THE PROBLEM is cultural much more than economic. Americans have come to thrive on bread-and-circus games—*panem et circenses*. Why shouldn't universities sponsor such enterprises, with far greater intensity and at much greater expense than was the case 40 years ago, when sports was more or less just... sports. Modern universities, after all, have assigned themselves large public purposes, starting with the absorption of every high-school graduate not thoroughly convinced he—or she—wants to be an electrician rather than a literature professor dedicated to studying Transgendered Folk Poets of the Southern Caucasus, 1817-22. The universities perform their public tasks, what's more, with rigorous concern for distributive justice: so many women students (to the point that female undergrads now outnumber their male counterparts); so many women faculty members; so many members of racial and ethnic minorities, not to mention sexual, on the theory that a university is in the business of painting America's portrait rather than improving her mind. The imbalance of ideology that routinely occurs at every level of academia—save, perhaps, on the football team—is another instance of academia's quest for justice. Knowing precisely what must be done to change our society, and how to ef-

fect that change, liberals flock to faculties hospitable to change of a certain order. There they proceed to drown out countervailing theories and procedures.

The glance in that rearview mirror I mentioned at the outset suggests—persuades, in fact—that universities haven't changed just in terms of overpaid coaches and screaming fans. Turning themselves into instruments of entertainment and justice has made too many—possibly most—of them different places from those that dewy-eyed alums recall from decades past. If, at most campuses, serious students and serious teachers still seek and find one another, political babble can make it hard to hear. Take the University of Texas. Around the time of the Big 12 uproar, I heard that administrators at my onetime university are gravely weighing calls to rename a dormitory whose namesake—a long-dead law-school dean—was a member of the Reconstruction-era Ku Klux Klan (thus beating the late Sen. Robert Byrd to the punch by about 70 years). Boy, that'll teach those dead Confederates a lesson! The University of Texas (founded 20 years after the War) just might, to fulfill its sense of mission, up and whop 'em a

good one. A small instance, this, of what's wrong with modern academia. Add up a bunch of small instances, and no small problem comes into view.

There's one thing about the football team: Coaches and players hold to a very un-21st-century creed, the creed of winning; the creed of sending an opponent home in sorrow, disgrace, or, if possible, both. One might reasonably wish for less expensive, less rambunctious bread and circuses than the universities presently put before their constituents. At least the job gets done and, in the Big 12 Conference, gets done right. Accountability reigns. Orders is orders.

It could be—I have to admit the scandalous possibility—we should accept without murmur society's judgment that the University of Texas head football coach is entitled to eight times the pay the school president receives. The athletic side of the university enterprise actually works the way it's designed to work. How about a student-faculty committee to find out why and what we do next?

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On the Sullivan Translation of David

by Timothy Murphy

This is the first part of a speech Timothy Murphy has delivered to Catholic and Protestant congregations on the High Plains. The second part will appear in a subsequent issue. Alan Sullivan, a frequent contributor to Chronicles, died on July 9, right after finishing his last work of translating David into meter, and we shall miss his contributions of prose and verse.

THE SUMERIAN EPIC *Gilgamesh* predates King David by 2,000 years, so we know that poetry was an ancient art in the time of the king. But David is the first poet in human history whom we know by name, and we regard him as the father of lyric poetry. I also regard him as the most influential of all poets, because his poems are revered as divine writ by 3.2 billion people—Jewish, Christian, and Islamic. David is an exceptionally gifted formal poet, whose works are exactly structured in strophes and stiches that predate our lineation and stanzas. He employs assonance (like vowel sounds), alliteration (like consonant sounds), internal rhyme, exotic forms of parallelism, paranomasia (think of that as a spiritually serious pun!), acrostics—in short, a dazzling array of formal devices. His rhetorical devices are equally sophisticated. But he has been singularly unfortunate in his translations into English.

We Catholics hear a reading from the Psalms about 355 days each year—about half those readings from David, the other half from his followers, such as Asaph, a major poet in his own right. Yet the congregations to whom I read don't even think of David as a poet, because they hear him only in prose, lineated in versions such as the Revised Standard (RSV), glorious in the case of the King James, but nevertheless prose. My friend and mentor

Richard Wilbur, the great verse translator of our age and a church lector so devoted that he once read 40 days straight in Lent, has lamented with me for many years our lack of an adequate formal translation. The famous Scottish hymnodist Isaac Watts devoted much of his life to producing rhyming translations that could be put to music and sung, but his versions depart so far from David's intent that the Catholic Church would never countenance their use in the Mass.

Alan Sullivan was a fine poet and formidable verse translator who was my literary partner for nearly four decades. I collaborated with Alan on his translation of the *Beowulf*, now widely studied in the Longman Anthologies of English and World Literature. For five years he battled leukemia and lymphoma. When he was first diagnosed, he had me read him the Psalms. I did so twice, in their entirety. An unbeliever, he experienced an epiphany on December 12, 2008, and within weeks he received the Sacraments and was admitted to full communion in the Roman Catholic Church. At Easter 2009 he undertook a metrical translation of the 78 poems the Jews attribute to David as a thank-offering to God for granting him the gift of faith at the end of his life.

Early on in the project Alan enlisted the assistance of Serec Cohen Zohar, a scholar of Classical Hebrew and scion of the ancient priestly tribe. Lacking Hebrew, Alan relied on Serec to straighten out the mistranslations that occur in every English version from the King James forward. It was Alan's objective to produce powerful metrical translations that a trained lector could read forcefully yet, within the confines of meter, achieve a level of accuracy that surpasses any predecessor ver-

sion and fully takes advantage of modern scholarship. What follows are some of David's masterpieces in Sullivan's new translations. Here is a look at three versions of a little jewel, Psalm 133. (Although the Bible does not ascribe it to David, there is general agreement among scholars that it is his.) Here is the King James:

Behold, how good and how
pleasant *it is* for brethren to
dwell together in unity!
It is like the precious ointment
upon the head, that ran down
upon the beard, *even* Aaron's
beard: that went down to the
skirts of his garments;
As the dew of Hermon, *and as*
the dew that descended upon
the mountains of Zion: for
there the LORD command-
ed the blessing, *even* life for
evermore.

Here is the Revised Standard Version:

Behold, how good and pleas-
ant it is
when brothers dwell in unity!
It is like the precious oil upon
the head,
running down upon the beard,
upon the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of
his robes!
It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of
Zion!
For there the LORD has com-
manded the blessing,
life for evermore.

And here is Sullivan, with stresses capitalized to guide you in saying the poem aloud:

BeHOLD, it is GOOD and
PLEASant
when BREThren DWELL