THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF EVA BRANN TO AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

Elizabeth C'de Baca Eastman

Prepared for delivery at the 2019 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association

Panel Sponsored by the Claremont Institute

Washington, D. C.

August 29, 2019

Abstract

Eva Brann has been a tutor at St. John's College for more than sixty years. She is noted for her contributions to St. John's and liberal arts education in general, to the study of and writing on authors and topics in but not limited to the Great Books curriculum, and has received public recognition for her efforts when she was awarded the National Humanities medal in 2005. Brann describes St. John's College as a school explicitly devoted to free inquiry, to radical inquiry. This approach informs her extensive writing and speaking on topics in Political Science, Philosophy, and Education and guides this inquiry into her contributions to American Political Thought.

The Contributions of Eva Brann to American Political Thought

> *Arché de toi hémisu pantós*
> The beginning is, in truth, half of the whole.
> Greek saying, Brann, "Why Read Books?"

"The Contributions of Eva Brann" is a more apt title for this paper because her teaching, writing, and translating cover such an expansive and extensive array of topics. Our starting point is Brann's contributions to American Political Thought. The choice of this topic is not only well suited to a meeting of the American Political Science Association, but it also highlights two of Brann's professed loves. In her book *Open Secrets/Inward Prospects*, she declares her love for what I call her two "homes." "The two communities that I love, the country [America] and the college [St. John's College], have both had a founding and a re-founding"[1] Brann's teaching and writing have afforded her an opportunity to study America and America has afforded her an opportunity to study this country and its history of unique events. The story is told in documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address and by their statesmen such as Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Abraham Lincoln. Education is also at the heart of Brann's intellectual pursuits.

This paper does not focus on a disinterested spectator of America, but rather on a naturalized American citizen whose professed love makes her study of America the more valuable. Her critical assessment is not clouded by her affection, but is more insightful because of her quest to understand and to pursue an inquiry that affirms that there is something unique about America that is worth preserving and perpetuating. Her studies that relate to the present topic of American Political Thought pursue questions about a country declaring independence and advancing ideas such as equality and liberty, instituting a government that is based upon

---

1. Eva Brann, *Open Secrets/Inward Prospects* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2004), 123.

consent and that secures rights, and then generations later responding to a rebellion after the secession of several states that again called the founding principles to the forefront of debate. The related question of how best to educate the citizens is a crucial one in a country that embraces a republican form of government and prizes self-governance.

Brann has no direct writing on American Political Thought, though she speaks of the American tradition as having two sources, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution:

> . . . our tradition becomes more *universal* by being regarded as having two sources, one of which, the Declaration, is on a much higher level of abstraction than the second. On the other hand, the tradition is made more *coherent* when it is shown that that second source, the Constitution, is not only compatible but even supremely consonant with the first. The most interesting work in American political theory seems to me to deal with these matters.[2]

Her corpus engages past and present debates in American Political Thought, but my effort is not a comprehensive study of Brann's work. Her books number more than a dozen and her entries in the St. John's College Annapolis and Santa Fe library catalogs number more than five hundred. She also translated (from the German) Jacob Klein's *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra* and with two colleagues has translated Platonic dialogues. I have studied a selection of her writings that relate to America and education, not to show an evolution or development in her thought, but to acknowledge and recognize someone who has devoted her career to posing questions and seeking answers to matters that speak to her students and her readers as citizens and as Americans.

In Brann's review of George Anastaplo's *Abraham Lincoln: A Constitutional Biography*, she praises him for what he includes in his book. "It is perhaps a permissible inference that the collection is not only a history of Lincoln's developing relation to the Constitution, but also a

---

2. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," The College XXVIII, no. 2 (1976): 6.

reflection of Anastaplo's own interests." It is neither "single-minded" nor "all over the map" she explains, "but Anastaplo seems to have shaped the course of his inquiries to the sequence of the country's great issues and documents."[3] A similar observation is relevant to Brann's works. Her writings reflect her interests in topics such as education and pivotal American documents such as the Declaration of Independence, Madison's "Memorial and Remonstrance," and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. They lead into discussions of some of the most serious and compelling issues, great issues, that have arisen since the nation declared independence from Great Britain. First, we begin with the question, Who is Eva Brann?

Brann is a tutor at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland. She came to America with her family at the age of twelve, fleeing Nazi Germany. She lived in New York and studied History at Brooklyn College and has a Ph.D. from Yale in Classics and Classical Archaeology. In a question and answer session after a talk, a student asked what she gained from her experience as an archaeologist.[4] She replied that an archaeologist learns to look at things: you line up the pottery that has been dug up, you notice the color of the clay and the brush strokes. The habit of noticing and seeing, not just looking, but really seeing belongs to the archaeologist, but it also means that questions about perceptions and the senses do not exist; that kind of inquiry, Brann explained, is called philosophy. She learned from this experience that some people have a natural bent that is anti-philosophical. She left her first "career" as an archaeologist when Seth Benardete, noted Professor of Classics, recommended that she consider teaching at St. John's. What she found lacking among her fellow anthropologists she found in

3. Eva Brann, review of *Abraham Lincoln: A Constitutional Biography*, by George Anastaplo, in South Dakota Law Review 46 (2001): 666.

4. Eva Brann, "On Compromise" Speech at Ashbrook Center, Ashland University, Ashland, OH (October 27, 2017).

her colleagues and students at Annapolis. More than sixty years later Brann is still a tutor at St. John's College. She is noted for her contributions to the college and liberal arts education in general, to the study of and writing on authors and topics in but not limited to the Great Books curriculum, and has received public recognition for her efforts when she was awarded the National Humanities medal in 2005.

St. John's College

> I think of myself—as do my colleagues—neither as a professor nor a scholar, not even as a teacher, but as one of a company of curators of a community of learning.
>
> Brann, *Open Secrets/Inward Prospects*

> No one has given St. John's College a finer public voice than Eva Brann.
>
> Chris Nelson, St. John's College President, 1991-2017

Brann's teaching career of more than sixty years has been primarily at St. John's. In a recent interview she was asked, "Why do you think Plato's '*Meno'* is such a resonant text [at St. Johns]?" Brann replied:

> It is the one in which the question is posed which really dominates the program: How do we know things that are not simply facts? Where does it come from? What does it mean—which is the same thing as "What does it mean to think?" For instance, they [the St. John's students] all study geometry in the freshman year and they all have a geometry book—Euclid is a textbook. But if they're really doing what they ought to do, they're not learning the textbook, they're figuring it out. What does it mean to figure something out? The "*Meno*" is a great text on that question. That's why it's the central text.[5]

The program that Brann mentions is the New Program, started in 1937 at St. John's College by Scott Buchanan and Stringfellow Barr who implemented a curriculum that included many of the Great Books. Since then, Brann explains,

> it has been . . . a school explicitly devoted to free inquiry, to radical inquiry. We want our students not to 'question everything' in the shallow sense of raising thoughtless objections to anything that doesn't immediately feel comfortable, but to be in the position to frame

5. Eva Brann, "Tutor Eva Brann (H89) on the Enduring Power of St. John's College," Interview by Kimberly Uslin, (January 21, 2019), St. John's College News (February 1, 2019).

> real, incisive, deep questions. It is mainly for that purpose that we read with them the difficult and uncomfortable books that are at the center of our studies.[6]

The *Meno* and Euclid's *Elements* are but two of the books that serve as a St. John's freshman's entrée to such questioning and radical inquiry.

Brann explains that the original idea of the founding of the college was to resist the historicism present in the universities, which means the notion that everything is to be explained in terms of the social setting and the history that goes into them. Barr & Buchanan wanted a college that was not devoted to secondary literature and not historicist in the sense of trying to understand all things in terms of their history, but in terms of their nature. Brann believes that Jacob Klein, long time St. John's tutor and Dean, re-founded the college from Barr & Buchanan's original notion and implemented much of what is present today.[7] What also continues today are the battles against historicism and other efforts to diminish liberal education that many in the modern-day academy still advance. The traditions at St. John's provide a strong defense against these attacks. Three of Brann's twelve points from a presentation to the St. John's faculty give insight into the underlying principles of the college:

> (1) that human nature is everywhere one and that human beings . . . have undergone a common shaping;
> (2) that this shaping has been through a certain high wisdom and perfected art, which their authors and masters, considering that what they had thought or made was true and beautiful not only for a time but for ever, fixed for the future, most accessibly in books;
> (10) that in this study there is little help but real hindrance to be expected from having a 'historical background' supplied, because that preparation implies falsely the 1) the work to be studied is so closely woven into its own time as not, in Thucydides' phrase for his own book, to be 'an acquisition for ever,' 2) that the text is deficient because the author has failed to supply it with what it need to be intelligible, 3) that the author was with, rather

---

6. Eva Brann, "Moral Teaching and Free Inquiry," Talk for the Unitarian-Universalist Church (November 1993), 5.

7. Eva Brann, "Higher Gossip," produced by Awarehouse Productions, https://www.youtube.com.

> than at a certain critical distance from, his contemporaries, 4) that 'historical backgrounds' are in fact capable of being both revealingly and briefly conveyed.[8]

Barr and Buchanan's founding of St. John's was eighty-two years ago, Brann's essay on the beliefs of the college (quoted above) was written fifty-two years ago, and today in 2019, many in the discipline of political science are battling against the false assumptions that are rooted in historicism and which now include multiculturalism and identity politics. I recommend Brann's 1993 talk entitled "Does it Matter By Whom or When a Book Was Written?" in which she clearly distinguishes the St. John's program from the challenges of "a group of intellectuals who were an avant-garde a quarter century ago, but who have since become the academic establishment, at least in the better known colleges." She likens St. John's to a gadfly and like other small and obscure colleges, it is where "the most steadfast, serious, straightforward but deep study is often done."[9]

St. John's has tutors, described as "guardians of learning," and not professors, who present themselves as "authorities of knowledge" or "transmitters of doctrine."[10] Tutors teach all parts of the undergraduate curriculum and the collaboration between new tutors and those who have long taught in the program fosters a community of learning together. There are no departments and studying almost the entire program is required of students.[11] This includes four

---

8. Eva Brann, "What are the Beliefs and Teachings of St. John's College?" Paper presented to the Committee on the Liberal Arts, St. John's College, Santa Fe, NM (April 1975), 7.

9. Eva Brann, "Does It Matter By Whom or When a Book was Written?" The Collegian Vol V, no. 1 (1993): 2.

10. Eva Brann, "Talking, Reading, Writing, Listening," Parents' Weekend Lecture, St. John's College, Annapolis, MD, (November 2011), 2-3.

11. Eva Brann, "One American Curriculum: St. John's College," Danish Ministry of Education and Research, Winter (1992): 3.

years of seminar readings, language tutorials (two years of Greek and two years of French), a music tutorial and Chorus, and classes and laboratories in math and science. All books and study materials are drawn from the Great Books of the Western tradition, from the Greeks through the twentieth century. Socrates is the model for what Brann calls this "unteacherly mode of teaching."[12] The questioning, the "what is it" that begins many of the Platonic dialogues is central to the St. John's program. Asking a question conveys an acknowledgement that one does not know and has a willingness to ask others. Socrates' longing for knowledge, his love of wisdom, which is the translation of the Greek word *philosophia*, is also a model of the pursuit in which students and tutors alike engage.[13]

Socrates as a model is no surprise, but Brann makes an unexpected observation about St. John's that introduces Jefferson as a model: "that our present program, a very pure realization of the founding intention, has more Jeffersonian elements than any other well-known college plan."[14] There are a couple of possible explanations of this statement. In Brann's essay, "Was Jefferson a Philosopher?" where she argues that "Jefferson is a kind of incarnate compendium of the Enlightenment," she cites Hegel to advance her explanation.[15]

> Hegel regards the Enlightenment as the layman's movement in philosophy. We may say that Jefferson was the layman of the layman's movement, its deliberate dilettante. Much of what appears thoughtlessly shallow, obtusely idiosyncratic, willfully unreflective in his

12. Eva Brann, "Talking, Reading, Writing, Listening," 3.

13. Eva Brann, "Talking, Reading, Writing, Listening," 3-5.

14. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 1.

15. Eva Brann, "Was Jefferson a Philosopher?" in *Law and Philosophy*, ed. John A. Murley, Robert L. Stone, and William T. Braithwaite (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1992), 669.

> writings is directly attributable to his resistance to making professions, to being a professional philosopher.[16]

Brann explains that with respect to St. John's tutors and the question "whether those who are not experts in their field can be good teachers, the answer is that only those who do not think of themselves as having completed products to impart can be tutors at all."[17] As for St. John's students, they are not taught to think, "they are only invited to do it."[18] Because tutors are not professors and students wrestle with fundamental ideas in subjects that range from Euclid's geometry to Lobachewski's non-Euclidean geometry or Homer's *Iliad* to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, there is no pretense at St. John's of beginning from a professional stance, nor is there any pretense of launching students onto a professional platform when they walk across the stage to accept their diploma. That they may choose to pursue such an undertaking happens after they walk off the stage. The aim of the St. John's is to engage in learning that is consistent with the principles of liberal learning and the means of doing so is accomplished by going to the root of everything and asking questions.

Another explanation of why St. John's is so Jeffersonian is a simpler one. In her essay on "The Founding and Higher Education" she observes of Jefferson

> that if his mode of learning was rationalistic rather than reflective and his public stance on education utilitarian in keeping with the times, his self-education was entirely in a liberal spirit. While in public life, he longed to retire to his books, and his studies were often for the mere pleasure of learning. In that we might well make him our own and our students' model.[19]

---

16. Eva Brann, "Was Jefferson a Philosopher?" 669.

17. Eva Brann, "What are the Beliefs and Teachings of St. John's College?" 11.

18. Eva Brann, "What are the Beliefs and Teachings of St. John's College?" 11.

19. Eva Brann, "The Founding and Higher Education," Lecture at the Summer Institute for Faculty and Administrators, St. Mary's College, Moraga, CA (June 1997), 12.

Thus the Jeffersonian elements present in the college plan may be those that retreat from a professionalism while turning toward a learning that asks questions such as "is this true, or beautiful, or genuine, and why?"[20] Either explanation highlights unique elements of a St. John's College education where the focus is on learning while at the college and throughout one's life.

In remarks to a group of Phi Beta Kappa initiates, Brann introduces another of Jefferson's ideas, a natural aristocracy. The best are not distinguished by birth or wealth, but by virtue and talents. In the same vein as virtue and talents are liberty and excellence. She challenges the idea that equality and mediocrity need to go together and suggests that a "political community of outstanding equals" is possible. Her experience at St. John's has made such a possibility real: "I can tell you that to live in such a community is heaven on earth—I think of my own college as being such a place—and I can think of nothing I wish for you more ardently than such a life."[21] That Brann has stayed at St. John's College for more than sixty years is testament enough to her belief in and devotion to the college's mission. It is not only her students and colleagues who benefit from her efforts, but she has moved from the confines of the college by talking to students and faculty at other schools, to groups and at conferences, and by writing extensively on American themes and many other subjects.

Her presentations, whether written or spoken, draw from the wide scope of the program readings and readily compare to the St. John's seminar, which begins with an opening question that is related to the assigned reading. Of the three towering figures in America whom she admires and studies, Jefferson, Madison, and Lincoln, she discerns their views as a St. John's tutor would. For example, there are ten questions posed in the essay, "Jeffersonian

---

20. Eva Brann, "One American Curriculum," 10.

21. Eva Brann, "Democratic Distinction," The Key Reporter 58, no. 4 (1993): 2-4.

Ambivalences." She begins with "Was Jefferson an Egalitarian or an Elitist?" and ends with "Does Jefferson Offer Lessons to the Present?"[22] Another essay has a question for a title: "Was Jefferson a Philosopher?" She includes Madison's questions in the "Memorial and Remonstrance": "Are religious establishments necessary for religion?" "Is an Ecclesiastical Establishment absolutely necessary to support civil society in a supream Government?" She adds some of her own: "But what would Madison have said in the face of an observable decline of 'religious commitment'?" "How does a just government protect religious rights?" "How is the rhetoric of the Remonstrance to be characterized and how is it to be accounted for, reticent and rousing, calculated to persuade and designed for truth-telling, concisely compendious and artfully structured, as it is?"[23] Her essay on Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is informed by references to Euclid, (Lincoln himself noted that he had studied and nearly mastered the six books of Euclid), Plato's dialogues *Menexenus* and *Republic*, Aeschylus's *Eumenides*, Pericles in Thucydides' *History*, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*, Rousseau's *Social Contract*, Locke's *Second Treatise*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, and the Bible. The breadth of her learning is on display, but more importantly the reader is drawn in by reflecting on the questions independently of what she writes and desires to read the quotations and the books that she cites to spur further reflection. Proceeding in this manner reinvigorates the

22. Eva Brann, "Jeffersonian Ambivalences," in *Philosophers on Education: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (New York: Routledge, 1998), 274, 282.

23. Eva Brann, "Madison's 'Memorial and Remonstrance,' A Model of American Eloquence," in *Rhetoric and American Statesmanship*, ed. Glen Thurow and Jeffrey D. Wallin (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1984), 29, 31, 30, 32, 39. In the 2013 reprint of Brann's article, she adds to the question: "But what would Madison have said in the face of an observable decline of "religious commitment" and the increasing legal expulsion of religion from communal life?" Eva Brann, "Madison's 'Memorial and Remonstrance,' A Jewel of Republican Rhetoric," The Imaginative Conservative, June 7, 2013. https://theimaginativeconservative.org.

study of politics by engaging students, teachers, and citizens because it initiates an intellectual exercise. It is also a reminder that to confine the study of political topics to political writings is limiting; politics is about human things and as such it is best studied and informed by the widest variety possible of literature as Brann does.

Liberal Education – Civic Education

> Education is both the release from and a recovery of one's own times; it uncovers roots while it imparts traditions.
>
> Brann, *Open Secrets/Inward Prospects*

> Liberal education then, seems to be precisely the seed-bed of civic education.
>
> Brann, "Civic Education"

The education at St. John's is more broadly known as liberal education. Liberal means to free oneself "from the shackles of conventional views which pass for the truth of things."[24] Klein describes liberal education as follows:

> We take a deep look at things, at people, at words, with eyes blind to the familiar. We reflect. Plato has a word for it: *metastrophé* or *periagogé*, a turnabout, a conversion. We detach ourselves from all that is familiar to us; we change the direction of our inquiry; we do not explore the unknown any more; on the contrary, we convert the known into an unknown. We wonder. And we burst out with that inexorable question: Why is that so? . . . It does not lead to any discovery or recovery. It calls myself in question with all my questioning. It compels me to detach myself from myself, to transcend the limits of my horizon; that is, it educates me. It gives me the freedom to go to the roots of all my questioning.[25]

That this informs the education at St. John's is without doubt; taking this education beyond the boundaries of the college is one that Brann also embraces. In a talk entitled "Far Pavilions and Pigpens Nearby: Reading Great Books Together," Brann reminds her listeners that they read to

---

24. Jacob Klein, *Lectures and Essays* (Annapolis, MD: St. John's College Press, 1985), 261. Jacob Klein (1899-1978) taught at St. John's College from 1939-1978 and was Dean of the College from 1949-1958.

25. Jacob Klein, *Lectures and Essays*, 162.

enter a world of significance, they read books to be absorbed into a world, they read great books because they are good for the soul, and they read great books together to form lasting friendships, which is part of a good life.[26] These ideas speak to members of any community who have as a starting point the solitary activity of reading, but can have as an end point a better community. Speaking to citizens of a nation such as America invites a different discussion about education and the communities that they form. The discussion begins broadly with a look at how to shape democracy through literacy and continues to the more specific topic of civic education.

In the essay "Literacy, Culture, and the Shaping of Democracy," as in many of her writings, Brann begins with the most basic feature, literacy, that in its simplest meaning is "having read a lot." Reading results in making the actual world interesting and significant because of the interconnected meaning of all that one reads. The culture present in America is one that is based on a literary tradition, characterized by Brann as "an enormous written tradition" which is ambivalently labeled as "classics."[27] In contrast to an oral tradition which "is more pious and preserving than the written text," the possibility exists that if one knows that it is written down, there need not be a concern with it or if one does read, the reading may be solitary.[28] There is thus a necessity to cultivate a cultural literacy, which is expressed in terms of "necessary to our living." It is a living that Brann argues is in a modern world characterized as "the estrangement, conscious or unconscious, induced by the man-made, well-managed

---

26. Eva Brann, "Far Pavilions and Pig Pens Nearby: Reading Great Books Together," Keynote Address at the Knight Foundation Program, Eckerd College, St. Petersburg, FL (November 11, 1991), 7, 8, 10, 15.

27. Eva Brann, "Literacy, Culture, and the Shaping of Democracy," The Nebraska English Journal 33, no. 3 (1988): 5.

28. Eva Brann, "Literacy, Culture, and the Shaping of Democracy," 4.

wilderness into which we are born."[29] The American world has a political community and a culture that is based on writing found in two sources. The most influential work, the Bible, is cherished by some and not recognized by others, Brann explains. The other writings are the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. She calls for the "study of the central writings which are the origin and implicitly still pervade our way of life" from elementary school through college.[30] They should be treated with reverence and appreciation, with the younger students learning a certain amount by heart and the older students engaging in discussion. Classics of the Western tradition serve as the body of literature from which to draw the readings for the following reason: "American democracy is its most powerful political consequence—one might even say its culmination."[31] To achieve the end of shaping or preserving democracy, she calls for good schooling, literacy in the Western tradition, and a reaffirmation of cultural literacy. This formation of students throughout their schooling lays a foundation for democratic institutions through literacy that is renewed through both habit and intellectual understanding. This formation also has the advantage of reaching a broad base of the citizenry who are part of the American democratic republic. Jefferson asked "Can one generation bind another, and all others, in succession forever?"[32] Brann explains that Lincoln also recognized the generational problem of a country founded by a revolution and addresses it in his Lyceum Address. "We toiled not in the acquirement or establishment of them—they are a legacy bequeathed us, but a *once* hardy,

29. Eva Brann, "Literacy, Culture, and the Shaping of Democracy," 6.

30. Eva Brann, "Literacy, Culture, and the Shaping of Democracy," 6.

31. Eva Brann, "Literacy, Culture, and the Shaping of Democracy," 7.

32. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 39, quoting from Letter to J. Cartwright, June 5, 1824.

brave, and patriotic, but *now* lamented and departed race of ancestors."[33] While Jefferson and Lincoln propose different solutions to the problem, Brann's call for cultural literacy is another means of addressing it.

The complement to the broad strokes of engaging the citizenry in shaping American democracy is found in Brann's essay entitled "Civic Education." She distinguishes between several types of communities: tribes, peoples, nations, totalitarian regimes, and republics. The republic, *respublica*, she explains is from the Latin phrase meaning the public matter, the people's affair as distinguished from private business. Though the public realm is distinguished from the private world in a republic, our daily lives intermingle the two. Brann also points out that we live in a modern state and that time, persons, and nature are altered in modernity. The notion of progress influences our concept of time and "demand[s] that the new should be the better"; the recognition that all men are created equal from "our founding document" speaks to the "infinite value of each individual"; and the influence of math and science in the modern world makes for a new relation to nature, one that is to be mastered. In the circumstances of a modern representative republic, the question is "What is the right education for citizens of this country?"[34] The first kind of education that Brann recognizes is real life or the school of hard knocks; acquiring native wit and great enterprise meets the practical requirements of one's life. This is may be adequate, but is it enough to be a good citizen?

---

33. Abraham Lincoln, "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions," Address before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois (January 27, 1838). Brann discusses this further her essay "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 38-39.

34. Eva Brann, "Civic Education," Lecture at St. Catherine's College, St. Paul, MN (1982), 6, 9-10.

Brann proposes a civic education that achieves respect, rationality, and reverence. The distinction between the public realm and private world that exists requires behavior—virtues—that contribute to navigating successfully the two stances that Americans assume. Respect for the opinions of others, regardless of their worthiness, calls upon us to understand them. The example she offers is compelling:

> . . . people who are full of what seem to us terrible prejudices sometimes have had bitter experiences that account for them. Having looked hard need not make us agree, but it does make us see the human roots and sometimes the pathos of people's views. Then we are in a position to make a distinction, namely between the intellectual content, which we may feel obliged to oppose, and the human context with which we may sympathize.[35]

In the essay "Learning to Deliberate" Brann makes a similar point: "One element necessary to preserving the forms [of civility] is that the participants should do *justice to each other's arguments*."[36] Adopting such practices makes a mutual exchange more likely, and one that may lead to better understanding, further engagement, and the possibility of persuading the other to modify his opinion.

Rationality consists of four components—inventiveness, objectivity, compromise, and principle—each of which reflects a different stance linked to reason. Seeking solutions and managing one's life are necessities in modern America that Brann also links to the "fundamental truth that all our fellow citizens are equal in certain basic respects." Objectivity is necessary for "carrying on the public business well." In addition to impartial public judgment and seeing the other side of the question, Brann includes "seeing the common truth." It is necessary because it serves to check the "fine frenzy of impassioned advocacy of a cause" that may be present among

---

35. Eva Brann, "Civic Education," 11, 12.

36. Eva Brann, "Learning to Deliberate," in *Deliberation in Education and Society*, ed. J. T. Dillon (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing 1994), 257.

citizens. Compromise serves the end of seeking a resolution that navigates between total victory of one side and defeat of the other. It maintains "the sense of shared civic belonging" though there must be a common recognition of limits.[37] Principles, Brann explains, are "first or fundamental propositions on which one's reasoning is built." There is a profundity that exists with principles and as such they are long to acquire and require both "information and reflection." Because they are "unbudgeable," they are for rare use.[38]

Reverence is the last of the three and perhaps the most profound. Brann describes it as a "public virtue taken very seriously by Madison and Lincoln, the deepest of our public thinkers."[39] She invokes Lincoln's reference to political religion from the Lyceum Address as an example of reverence: "Let reverence for the laws . . . become the *political religion* of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars."[40] Reverence holds the republic together and stems from "a certain awe that the institutions of this country work . . . [and have been] adopted by a rational process of choice." The sense of awe is especially important because it should give citizen and legislator pause before introducing far-reaching change and it serves as a check on "hasty tinkering and radical day-dreaming." Brann also adds that it makes the people imaginative: ". . . Before they leap to innovations, they try to envision

37. Brann develops the theme of compromise in a talk at Ashland University. She gives a fuller explanation of the word, its meanings, and its uses. Examples include Lincoln's Peoria Speech and the Missouri Compromise. Eva Brann, "On Compromise."

38. Eva Brann, "Civic Education," all quotations in this paragraph from pages 13-15.

39. Eva Brann, "Civic Education," 15.

40. Abraham Lincoln, "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions," Address before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois (January 27, 1838).

what the unexpected consequences of a sudden change in an old institution might be." Finally, reverence supports the stable political life that comes from the desire to preserve the "remarkable structure of law under which we live." Lincoln balanced his belief in political religion with religion in America: "Religion in America takes no direct part in government of society, but it must be regarded as the first of their political institutions."[41]

Lincoln's statement prompts questions with respect to religion. What happens when religion no longer has such a place? Is political religion sufficient? Is reverence harder to inculcate without religion?

These behaviors of respect, rationality, and reverence can be exercised in a conversation around a seminar table as well as in the public and private settings in a democratic republic. They make civil debate possible and they contribute to the formation of a citizenry that can successfully engage in self-governance. The education necessary to achieve these behaviors, Brann argues, is a book education, usually acquired at an institution of learning (though she points out the exception of Abraham Lincoln who was largely self-taught through his reading). Similar to the argument in the "Shaping of Democracy" essay, she calls for the study of the founding documents and adds that the practical experience of visiting councils and legislatures supplements the learning. In her essay "Concerning the Declaration of Independence" she recommends that "the Declaration should not so much be taught as talked of at every American college."[42] "Every student and every teacher should join in the discussion as if their lives

---

41. Eva Brann, "A Reading of the Gettysburg Address," in *Abraham Lincoln: The Gettysburg Address and American Constitutionalism*, ed. Leo Paul S. de Alvarez (Dallas: University of Dallas Press, 1976), 49. All quotations in this paragraph are from Eva Brann, "Civic Education," pages 15-16 unless otherwise noted.

42. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 1.

depended on it – as they do."[43] These exercises of study and practical experience instill the respect and reverence of which she spoke. Brann identifies liberal education as the means to achieve civic education. "Liberal education is, from its ancient beginnings, that wide base which underlies the specific civic education of republics."[44] Liberal education can inspire and instill virtues that contribute to the American democratic republic and provide the means to foster and perpetuate the institutions that date from the founding.

The contrast to liberal education is one that has utilitarian ends. In Brann's essay "The Founding and Higher Education," she points to the prevalence of the latter: "the republican character education must assume in the new republic, and the necessity of preparing pupils and students for contributing to the wealth of the community. In other words: Education is to be civic and utilitarian."[45] She adds further that "quite a few of these early republican writers were quite unfriendly to that sort of education [liberal], at least as they knew it. In fact, Noah Webster comes right out with it: 'Indeed it appears to me,' he says, 'that what is now called liberal education disqualifies a man for business.'"[46] The emphasis on utilitarianism is present in Jefferson's thought as well. In "Jeffersonian Ambivalences" Brann's second section is entitled "Did Jefferson take a utilitarian or a liberal view of education?" Though Jefferson expressed pleasure at his own study and reading and in the "Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge" he refers to the education that is intended "to guard the sacred deposit of the rights

43. Eva Brann, "Civic Education," 18.

44. Eva Brann, "Civic Education," 18.

45. Eva Brann, "The Founding and Higher Education," 2.

46. Eva Brann, "The Founding and Higher Education," 2.

and liberties of their fellow citizens" as liberal, Brann calls his views "unabashedly utilitarian."[47] Drawing on letters and statements from the Rockfish Gap Report (1818), she explains the goals of the lower and upper schools in Jefferson's plan such as giving a citizen "the information necessary to transact his own business and the ability to calculate his accounts and express his ideas" and "to shape the public officials . . . to expound to them the principles, structures and limits of government . . . to teach them political economy . . . mathematics and science . . . ." She concludes that the utilitarian features are clearly present in Jefferson's views and those of others: "Education is primarily for effective action in the economic and public realm, and the pursuit of truth is for the eradication or confining of error."[48]

Another topic in "The Founding and Higher Education" essay addresses the National University as proposed by the first six U.S. Presidents. Though no mention was made of education in the Federal Constitution, the university was seen as a means to make "republican citizens" to achieve the goals of a permanent union. Brann quotes George Washington: "Among the motives to such an institution, the assimilation of the principles, opinions, and manners of our countrymen, by the common education of a portion of our youth from every quarter, well deserves attention."[49] Washington envisioned a plan "for communicating it [the science of government] to those who are to be the future guardians of the liberties of the country."[50] Jefferson, too, recognized the need to form and inform republican citizens as Brann explains.

---

47. Eva Brann, "Jeffersonian Ambivalences," 276.

48. Eva Brann, "Jeffersonian Ambivalences," 277.

49. Eva Brann, "The Founding and Higher Education," 5, quoting from George Washington to United States Congress, 7 December 1796.

50. Eva Brann, "The Founding and Higher Education," 6, quoting from George Washington to United States Congress, 7 December 1796.

> There can be no question about Jefferson's faith in free thought . . .
>
> There is, however, an area in which Jefferson was candidly doctrinaire: the inculcation of republicanism, and republicanism of the right stripe. In a university in which the professors were, contrary to custom, allowed to choose their own textbooks, "heresies" in politics were to be prevented by prescribing the texts to be used.[51]

Quoting the minutes of the March 5 meeting of the board of Visitors of the University, Jefferson is explicit: "that no principles incompatible with the Federal and State constitutions be taught. Besides works by Locke, Sidney, the Declaration, *The Federalist*, and Washington's Valedictory Address, it lists Madison's 1799 Resolutions of the Virginia Assembly on the Alien and Sedition Laws . . . ."[52]

Brann has returned often to the themes of education at the founding and the role of liberal education. The above referenced essays are a few of her contributions to the debate though her book *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic* is among her most substantial contributions. The *Republic* is the American polity and she draws on the founders (Jefferson, Adams, and Madison) to describe it as a democratic, constitutional, and a representative republic.[53] She identifies three paradoxes—utility, tradition, and rationality—and explains the unique features of each and concludes with an "attempted resolution" of each paradox. Consistent with how Brann initiates many of her inquiries, she includes two questions in the Introduction. First, "What is teaching?" She quotes Aristotle to provide guidance with the identification of four kinds of intelligent pursuit: "knowledge or truth beheld, (*theoria*); practical wisdom or discernment in action

---

51. Eva Brann, "Jeffersonian Ambivalences," 277.

52. Eva Brann, "Jeffersonian Ambivalences," 278.

53. Eva Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 11-12.

(prudence), know-how or rationally accountable making (*techne*); and experience, or a knack learned by trial and error (*empeiria*)."[54] Second, "What is an education?"[55] The world of knowledge encompasses or reflects both the world of nature and the world of art, Brann explains, and it is in this reflective sphere where human beings begin to learn. These two questions along with others begin the discussion in the book from a broad foundation that provides a context in which the paradoxes can be understood. Brann gives a brief overview of her resolutions to the three paradoxes in the Introduction: seeing useful and liberal learning as complements with respect to utility; the reading of original texts as a means to recover the origins and the tradition; and the question-asking mode to allow "receptive intellect . . . contemplative theory . . . [and] expectant openness to balance rationality."[56] The depth of her work can only be appreciated through a careful study of and reflection upon her explanations.

Understanding America through Written and Spoken Words

> Most Americans have an interest, and the country has an interest, in cherishing and preserving their particular ethnic or religious tradition. But cultivating the common tradition ought to be the chief business of required formal education, and there ought to be no compromise with that purpose. This is the point on which I feel most conviction, and which is, I realize, most controversial.
>
> Brann, "Literacy, Culture, and the Shaping of Democracy"

Jefferson, Lincoln, and Madison were primarily responsible for the three significant documents that have a unique place in America. From Jefferson's birth in 1743 until Lincoln's death in 1865, America witnessed some of its most tumultuous times during the 122 year span.

---

54. Eva Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*, 14-15.

55. Eva Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*, 16.

56. Eva Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*, 20-22.

Brann notes of this era two significant events, a founding and a re-founding, which had an impact on the nation and its citizens in the deepest and most profound way.

> The two communities that I love, the country and the college, have both had a founding and a re-founding, and I suspect it's always so. The first founding is bright, the documents are fluently enlightened, the negotiations are lustily assertive, the institutions are confidently devised. The second founding is a work of nostalgia for bright beginnings, sadness for tainting tragedies; there's experience, sophistication, deeper delving into the philosophical and providential roots: from Jefferson to Lincoln.[57]

We have spoken of the college above and now we speak of America.

The distinction that Brann makes between the founding and the re-founding is captured in three significant documents. Her writings on the Declaration of Independence, Madison's "Memorial and Remonstrance," and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address focus on major themes in American Political Thought. She understands the Declaration as announcing the founding of the United States of America and is primarily a work of justification and explanation.[58] Madison's "Memorial and Remonstrance," addressed to the Virginia State Legislature, argued against "A Bill establishing a provision for Teachers of the Christian Religion." She calls it a jewel of republican rhetoric that raises fundamental questions about religion and the role of government. She understands the Gettysburg Address to be "a distillation of Lincoln's political philosophy."[59] Lincoln began the Address with recognition of the founding of the nation and ended with a call for a new birth of freedom, a re-founding. The three documents are among the most significant in the study of America and can provide a foundation for cultivating a common tradition.

---

57. Eva Brann, *Open Secrets/Inward Prospects*, 123.

58. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 3.

59. Eva Brann, "A Reading of the Gettysburg Address," 20.

The Declaration of Independence and Thomas Jefferson

Brann delivered her talk "Concerning the Declaration of Independence" as a Friday Night Lecture at St. John's College in 1976 to celebrate the 200th anniversary of declaring independence. Speaking to her students, she told them "this text must be to you, as students and as human beings in the world, a near and dear, a most personal concern."[60] She refers to personal concern again in the discussion of equality and acknowledges a demand for a private interpretation. She asks "Is the principle of equality really in Lincoln's sense a moral source for me?"[61] She replies in the affirmative and shares her motives: from ignorance, from the experience of suffering, from a sense of scale, from incommensurability, and from a feeling of fellowship. The principle of equality influences her conduct and thus is a source of morality. The invitation to the students to make it a personal concern is made explicit with this explanation.

The comprehensive analysis of the entire document is pursued from many angles, including asking questions. Who is "we"? What is the extent of "all men" who are said to be created equal? Is the United States and are the Free and Independent States an entity or a collection? Does the Declaration entail a particular kind of government? Among the most intriguing questions is, What is the formal significance of the mathematical mode in which the Declaration is cast? Her response draws on Euclid and Plato and results in a statement about the Declaration that few expect.

> Mathematical reasoning goes downward, it *deduces* propositions from axioms, but it is not in its competence to go upward to find their sources. This middle mode, this betwixt-and-between of thought, is treated with special interest by Plato, since it is where most of our reasonable activity takes place. You will remember that it is aligned with the upper middle part of his "Divided Line" in the sixth book of the *Republic*. This is the realm of

60. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 1.

61. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 8.

> ungrounded but reasonable hypotheses, of convincing assumptions yet awaiting the philosopher's deep-laid justification. It is the realm of the Declaration of Independence.[62]

This account leads to what some may call Brann's unusual assessment: "To put it in a stark way: our Declaration of Independence is a shallow text, *deeply* shallow. In that lies its virtue."[63]

Her explanation of such a pronouncement draws on the contrast of two figures: Hegel, who has a "philosopher's depth," and Jefferson, whom Brann has characterized in the following manner. "What a blessing Jefferson's crystalline shallowness was for this country! Who else could have declared politically usable and intellectually dubious truths with such passionately rational certitude?"[64]

Brann's choice of Hegel as a contrast is not a surprise because she subsequently wrote further on the two men. In the essay "Was Jefferson a Philosopher?" she gives examples of how Jefferson is representative of the Enlightenment. She also looks at him through the lens of a *philosophe*, defined as "a participant in the Enlightenment, a person of fearless and inexhaustible worldly curiosity, engaged in scientific projects, devoted to an all-pervasive rationality, particularly in religious matters, and in everything a passionate critic of authority."[65] She draws upon three works by Hegel to explain the Enlightenment and includes Jefferson's opinions "bearing on the Hegelian characterizations and connecting the complex with the dialectical transitions that Hegel supplies."[66] The discussion in the essay turns toward Hegel's

---

62. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 14.

63. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 14.

64. Eva Brann, *Open Secrets/Inward Prospects*, 189.

65. Eva Brann, "Was Jefferson a Philosopher?" 656.

66. Eva Brann, "Was Jefferson a Philosopher?" 658.

understanding of the Enlightenment as the prelude to the Revolutionary Terror in France and the contrast with Jefferson who praised America's bloodless revolution with the adoption of the Constitution and republican government that represents particular wills. Jefferson, Brann argues, worked to stem centralized government and prevent it from encroaching on the rights of private persons.

With respect to the Declaration, Brann explains that Jefferson's training as a lawyer, early involvement in affairs, early reading of English rather than French writers, and the nature of his intellect took him in a different direction from those political theorists whose writings led to the Terror in France. Brann describes his intellect as having a "peculiar power of levitation, a power of making energetic and convincing formulations without deep delving . . . ." As a result, this "curtailment of reasoning saves our text [the Declaration] from the harsh extremes of reason, and then from the petrification which overtakes expressions of general opinion when the world in which they were all too securely rooted passes."[67]

To return to the discussion of the shallowness of the Declaration, Brann refers to the classical philosophers who had a useful term to explain its shallow mode. "They called it *opinion*, the sum of propositions held *as* true but without a full account of their roots in the nature of things."[68] If they were truths, they called it right opinion, which are "unthought-out thought."[69] Axioms are an example of right opinion. The Declaration, Brann explains, "contains a public roster of fervent axioms from which our society is deduced" and so can also be called

67. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 15.

68. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 16.

69. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 16.

"the very exemplification of *right opinion*.[70] In other words, "*in the realm of thought*, the Declaration focuses the reason without determining it."[71] This last idea points to the depth of the Declaration. Brann offers an example from poetry: "Much in the manner of a work of poetry—which indeed it [the Declaration] literally is, since the great paragraph of 'abstract truths' can be read in near-perfect lines of iambic pentameter—it offers the greatest definition of view with the least restriction of thought."[72] She concludes:

> *In our best tradition, things are thought of as having a true nature, their being, which is reachable through a directed questing activity. The Declaration promotes the pre-figuring of that activity in ordinary life.* Through the memorable reasonableness of its tone, from the clear immediacy of its peculiar vision and by the many-rootedness of its truths, it establishes access from our realm of opinion, however corrupted, to the realm of being and its truth. This worldly text has a peculiarly felicitous relation to the depths from which its opinions spring—therein lies the warrant for its claim to universality.[73]

We quoted Brann's description of the founding above (p. 22, bright, the documents enlightened, the institutions confidently devised) and her exposition of the Declaration of Independence reflects this portrayal. The other two documents that she studies in the same penetrating manner are from Madison and Lincoln.

"Memorial and Remonstrance" and James Madison

The Declaration of Independence speaks of rights. In *The Federalist Papers* Madison wrote, "in a free government the security for civil rights must be the same as that for religious

---

70. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 13, 16.

71. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 16.

72. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 16.

73. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 16.

rights."[74] Madison's "Memorial and Remonstrance," written some years prior to *The Federalist Papers,* addresses a specific question with respect to religious rights. Brann describes it as follows:

> The fundamental American statement on religious freedom is Madison's *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments* (1785), which makes precisely the point that *because* homage to the Creator is a private duty, before and beyond civil society, "Religion is wholly exempt from its cognizance." The *Remonstrance* is cited over and over by the Supreme Court, but particularly in the dissent to *Everson* v. *Board of Education* (1947).[75]

Brann divides her essay into the following parts: The Circumstances Surrounding the Remonstrance, the Arguments of the Memorial, Rhetorical Analysis of the Text, Madison's Rhetoric, and an Appendix that is a discussion of the Remonstrance in Supreme Court Decisions. She explains the two words in the title: "This petition is presented in the form of a *remonstrance*, that is, a protest—a protest, suggestively, of the "faithful"—but it is not a mere protest, as are most present-day petitions. It is also a *memorial*, a declaration of reasons—every paragraph begins with a "because"—in the tradition of the Declaration of Independence."[76] Though she refers to it as both a model of American eloquence and a jewel of republican rhetoric, she explains why it is lesser known than other great documents.

> . . . Madison's work has been kept off the roster of canonized public prose because it lacks Jefferson's heady generalities and Lincoln's humane grandeur. But I know this: To study it is to come away with a sense of having discovered, under the veil of Madison's modesty, the great rhetorician of the Founding, whom John Marshall called 'the most eloquent man I ever heard.'[77]

---

74. "*The Federalist Papers,*" The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed01.asp, #51.

75. Eva Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*, 166, n. 25.

76. Eva Brann, "Madison's 'Memorial and Remonstrance,'" 16.

77. Eva Brann, "Madison's 'Memorial and Remonstrance,'" 10.

The origin of Madison's effort was to respond to Patrick Henry's presentation of a bill to the Virginia State Assembly "establishing a provision for Teachers of Religion." Madison opposed the Bill through debate and subsequently through writing the "Memorial and Remonstrance." Brann notes that the thirteen circulated copies collected 1,552 signatures. Madison's was but one of the Petitions, but may well have contributed to the ultimate outcome of the bill dying in committee in the fall of 1785.[78]

The Remonstrance has fifteen counts that address topics including the relationship of religion to civil societies and legislative bodies, the ill effects of governmental aid to religion, and the assertion that religious liberty is coequal with other natural rights. Brann's analysis begins with looking at the overall structure of the fifteen points and subsequently explains each. She carefully scrutinizes Madison's words. For example, "the recurrent phrase 'every man,' rather than 'all men' as in the Declaration of Independence, carries a subtle emphasis: as Madison's logic notes from college point out, when one turns 'all' into 'every,' the predicate is logically distributed so that it 'belongs to every individual.'"[79] She also draws comparisons and contrasts to other writings (e.g. Locke, Milton, Spinoza, and Roger Williams) and political documents such as the Virginia Declaration of Rights. Her careful presentation informs the reader about one of the fundamental principles that was at the forefront of the American founding, religious liberty. Her explanations also invite her readers to participate in thinking

78. Eva Brann, "Madison's 'Memorial and Remonstrance,'" 10-13. Brann also credits Madison in his capacity as statesman for successfully postponing final action on the bill for a year by withdrawing his opposition to a companion bill, commenting:" "Here as ever, the two facets of Madison's statesmanship—practical maneuvering and principled rhetoric—complemented each other. He had gained a year." Brann, "Madison's 'Memorial and Remonstrance,'" 12.

79. Eva Brann, "Madison's 'Memorial and Remonstrance,'" 16.

through Madison's arguments and reflect on questions such as, "How does a just government protect religious rights?"[80]

Brann offers a personal observation at end of the essay. She admits to unease at the thought of "the total secularization of public life," but the respect, reasonableness, and even reverence set forth in the Remonstrance, she explains, puts her at ease. "My scruples are dissolved in a certain enthusiasm for Madison's principles and in the gratitude that a Jew and a refugee must feel for the safe haven he made."[81] She concludes by calling Madison's piece among the finest of those works of republican rhetoric, and holds it out as not only a possible, but the best possible, model.[82]

The Gettysburg Address and Abraham Lincoln

Jefferson and Lincoln serve as representatives of the founding and the re-founding. Brann's description of the latter: "a work of nostalgia for bright beginnings, sadness for tainting tragedies; there's experience, sophistication, deeper delving into the philosophical and providential roots" is a sharp contrast to the first founding (quoted above, p. 22). Her essay, entitled "A Reading of the Gettysburg Address," captures much of this. The word shallow is not used in this essay, but rather there is a profundity that is apparent in the ten sentences of the Address. They tell the story of America, the reason for assembling at the battle-field, the origin of the nation, and the future hope of a new birth of freedom. She draws upon Lincoln's writings and speeches to interpret the Address.

---

80. Eva Brann, "Madison's 'Memorial and Remonstrance,'" 32.

81. Eva Brann, "Madison's 'Memorial and Remonstrance,'" 42.

82. Eva Brann, "Madison's 'Memorial and Remonstrance,'" 43.

Brann points out contrasts between Edward Everett, the first speaker, and Lincoln, such as the length of the former's speech (two hours) to Lincoln's brief delivery, Everett's classical and Latinate prose to Lincoln's thirty-two words of Latin origin, Everett's reference to Pericles ("the dead must rely on him for their life in the city's memory and for honor") to Lincoln's assertion that "the dead are best honored by their own deeds." Brann calls Lincoln a political teacher and the Gettysburg Address "a distillation of Lincoln's political philosophy." The brevity of the Address makes it a "permanent possession" for later absorption, that it can be learned by heart it can thus be "lodged in the heart."[83]

The beginning of the Address, "Four score and seven years ago" looks to 1776 and is consistent with Lincoln understanding the Declaration of Independence as both an inspiration and a teaching as evidenced by his words: regarding "all men," "this they said and this they meant"; with respect to "equal," "equal in 'certain inalienable rights'"; on "political axioms," "the principles of Jefferson are the definitions and axioms of free society"; and finally on the Declaration, "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence."[84] These excerpts are drawn not from Brann's essay on the Gettysburg Address, but from her essay on the Declaration of Independence. She explains why she appeals to Lincoln when writing on the Declaration, "First of all it is because he is that interpreter of the Declaration who has both the most stature and most passion"; second,

---

83. Eva Brann, "A Reading of the Gettysburg Address," all quotations in this paragraph from pages 19-20.

84. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 6, 8, 13, 2. The last quotation is from Lincoln's Address in Independence Hall, Philadelphia, PA, February 22, 1861.

"Lincoln and his war, that haunting tragedy in which the sins of omission of the Revolution were expiated, form the backdrop against which Jefferson's secular comedy gains its brightness."[85]

The dialogue between the two documents and the two men becomes apparent as Lincoln calls for the re-adoption of the Declaration of Independence, but adds a call for a new birth of freedom in the Address. Brann explains, "as the nation was conceived in liberty and dedicated to equality, so it is to be reborn in freedom."[86] The war was to serve as a purification.

The Constitution is also invoked in the Address in the reference to government. "That government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Brann quotes from the Lyceum Address: "As the patriots of seventy-six did to support the Declaration of Independence, so to the support of the Constitution and Laws, let every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor; . . ."[87] She explains further,

> Thus for him the Declaration, based on final principles, stands permanent, while the Constitution, as a means, is amendable; the two together stand for America's double root in what is absolutely best and what is merely most practicable. . . . He says of the Constitution that 'It can scarcely be made better than it is,' and he warns: "Don't interfere with anything in the Constitution.—That must be maintained, for it is the only safeguard of our liberties." In this way the preservation of popular government is linked to the defense of the American Constitution.[88]

The dialogue, previously between Jefferson and Lincoln, now includes Madison who played such a prominent role in drafting the Constitution.

---

85. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 2.

86. Eva Brann, "A Reading of the Gettysburg Address," 40.

87. Eva Brann, "A Reading of the Gettysburg Address," 44.

88. Eva Brann, "A Reading of the Gettysburg Address," 45.

Three Statesmen

The three statesmen participated in extraordinary ways in America and Brann's writing brings them and their contributions into sharp focus. Two knew each other and the third spoke of them reverently. Brann refers to Jefferson and Madison as two noble souls and their friendship as one of like-minded opposites; Jefferson was only eight years older than Madison, but, Jefferson exclaims "father never loved son more than he loves Mr. Madison."[89]

Lincoln writes to Henry Pierce to decline an invitation to speak in Boston at a birthday celebration honoring Jefferson, and closes with:

> All honor to Jefferson--to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.[90]

Brann has high praise for Madison. "I think of Madison as the most imaginative conservative statesman I know of, imaginative in envisioning very specifically how things actually work on earth, conservative in devising an edgily innervating stability."[91] Of Lincoln, Brann calls him a republican statesman: "he made it his continual rhetorical task to guide public feeling, that is, to convert the sound principles of the founding documents into the sober passion of the citizens."[92] A more personal sentiment is expressed in her essay "Lincoln for a Refugee."

---

89. Eva Brann, review of *The Republic of Letters: The Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and James Madison 1776-1826,* by James Morton Smith, in Christian Science Monitor 28 (June, 1995).

90. Abraham Lincoln, "Letter to Henry L. Pierce and others," April 6, 1859. Brann quotes this passage in "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 3.

91. Eva Brann, *Then and Now: The World's Center and the Soul's Demesne*, (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2015), 105.

92. Eva Brann, "A Reading of the Gettysburg Address," 20.

> I've entitled this little essay 'Lincoln for a Refugee'. But the happy fact is that this is the same Lincoln whom my native-born colleagues and our students from anywhere are apt to admire. I think what he is to us above all is proof that one human being can unite within himself the qualities of the common and the noble, the democratic and the deep.[93]

Of Jefferson, she begins her essay "Was Jefferson a Philosopher?" with the following: "Was Thomas Jefferson a philosopher? If so, in what sense? I can imagine two opposing questions raised in rejoinder. He was a statesman—why should we expect or require him to be a philosopher also? He read and reasoned and wrote throughout his life—why should we hesitate to give him the title?" One must read to the end of the essay for an answer to at least one of the questions.[94]

Contributions

The definition of contribute is to give, especially to a common fund, or to supply or furnish such as an idea or article. It comes from the Latin and Old French (*contributio*) meaning a levy imposed by a body politic upon a district or population, a payment, or a dividing and distributing. Eva Brann's contributions to American Political Thought do not originate from a levy imposed by the body politic, but she gives freely to a common fund of writings on education and America. We have drawn widely from her writings on these topics to capture a sampling of her contributions. Rather than developing new theories, her contribution takes the form of probing and recapturing original understandings and conceptions; she takes seriously the thoughts and ideas of those who have made substantial contributions to America through the vehicle of liberal education and sees this type of education as a means to perpetuate American

---

92. Eva Brann, "Lincoln for a Refugee," Humanitas: The Journal of the George Bell Institute 11, no. 2 (2010): 111.

93. Eva Brann, "Was Jefferson a Philosopher?" 654.

foundations. We live in a time when attempts to erase, dismiss, or recast American history are like a runaway stage coach. It is similar to the battle to diminish liberal education. Brann has dedicated much effort to the study of the writings of those who have lived before us, thinking about them, and understanding them. In her lecture on the Declaration of Independence she refers to it as a *logos*, "a work of justification and explanation, an account-giving."[95] With that as a starting point in American Political Thought, the student recognizes the depth of the foundation of America and the risk of dismissing or ignoring it. She aims to make what she studies relevant to the present, but within certain limitations. She began her talk "On Compromise" with a statement on politics: "I am not a great believer in philosophizing, by which I mean trying to get to the bottom of things concerning current affairs. That's because I think there has to be some calming distance and some extended thinking for unsettling events to reveal their stable shape."[96] That stable shape is found in many of the authors and writings that I have referenced in this paper. More importantly that stable shape can serve as an anchor to grasp when discussing political topics. My effort has been to bring to the forefront a few of the ideas and arguments in her writings that relate to these topics. I conclude by identifying her contributions to American Political Thought with respect to specific participants.

First, as teachers of American Political Thought she reminds us

(a) that we can ask questions and leave some unanswered. In her discussion of the phrase in the Declaration of Independence "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God," she asks, How many sets of laws are intended? Why are there "Laws" in the plural? Are the "laws of nature"

---

95. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 3.

96. Eva Brann, "On Compromise," Speech at Ashbrook Center.

Newton's laws of physical motion? She poses many more and then states it is a hard exercise for another day to answer these questions, but the reader is invited to ponder them further.[97]

(b) to look for sources outside of the standard corpus. For example, she includes a discussion of Lincoln's patriotism in an essay entitled "The *Eumenides* of Aeschylus: Whole-Hearted Patriotism and Moderated Modernity."[98]

(c) that the assault on liberal education is to be met with fierce defense. Such a defense begins with understanding liberal education and the purpose that it serves in a democratic republic and then reading widely and using the tradition of philosophy and political philosophy as well as math and science to bolster our arguments. This also contributes to breaking down the department barriers that exist in the modern University that can stifle conversation.

Second, as students of American Political Thought she reminds us

(a) that leisure is not a concept that died with the ancients, but one that we should recapture to the extent possible and nourish. She refers to "futzing around," which may not be strictly speaking leisure, but is similar to taking time to think deeply. In her words, "futzing around is the best way to zero in (i.e. in thinking and writing start broad and draw in, emulating in reverse the nautilus, that beautiful realization of the logarithmic spiral which grows outward by proportional increments)."[99]

(b) to be aware of the conversations that are occurring between philosophers, authors, statesman, and citizens. Whether the participants are living or separated by centuries, hear the dialogue and

---

97. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 7.

98. Eva Brann, "The Eumenides of Aeschylus: Whole-Hearted Patriotism and Moderated Modernity," The St. John's Review 50, no. 2 (2008): 13, 18.

99. Eva Brann, *Open Secrets/Inward Prospects*, 145.

engage it. For example, see that Jefferson was a man of the Enlightenment, but discover when he made a decisive break from that thinking or Madison who, when appointed deputy of the Constitutional Convention, "turned his attention and researches to the sources ancient and modern of information and guidance as to its object. Of the result of these he had the use both in the Convention and afterwards in the 'Federalist.'"[100]

(c) of the value of reading fine literature. In a talk entitled "Can the Reading of Literature Make Us Better?" she begins with the statement: "My talk gives an answer: Yes, it can."[101] She lists six positive points: delight, empathy, sympathy, enlargement, friendship, and backbone. It was only the limit of her allotted time that she confesses stopped her from adding to the list. All of these experiences that result from reading will make us better students, writers, and conversationalists.

Third, as political scientists (for those who accept such designations or labels) she reminds us

(a) that the discipline is not in a good state. I offer a brief observation. Though labeled "a discipline," there is no discipline with respect to fields within political science today and there seem to be no limits. At this APSA meeting there are 57 Divisions that offer 1,306 wide-ranging papers and an additional 136 Related Groups, which prompts one to ask, What is political science? Brann reminds us that such questions are among the best starting points and while many may not like the answers, initiating the discussion is necessary to recapture the foundations of political science.

---

100. Eva Brann, "Madison's 'Memorial and Remonstrance," 41-42, quoting from "James Madison's Autobiography."

101. Eva Brann, "Can the Reading of Literature Make Us Better?" Maryland Humanities Fall (1992): 4.

(b) that institutions of learning such as St. John's College provide a contrast that is worthy of notice to what has become standard practice at other institutions. Brann offers suggestions.

> For example, the phrase *to make an original contribution* will lose its point, *research* will be replaced by search, *productivity* will go unrewarded—although there should be an obligation to the continual intramural, written articulation of thought, not as a contribution to the abstract world of learning, but as a benefit to the concrete present company.[102]

Fourth, as American citizens who live with the consequences of those who think (or feign to think) about American Politics she reminds us

(a) that the past is worthy of study. She concludes her Declaration of Independence essay with a response to those who assert you cannot look to the past. Her reply:

> To what then are we to look? The present, that moving band of vanishing 'nows,' always produces the wisdom which fits it, evanescent wisdom. The future, which we have yet to make and have some reason to fear, is in its essence non-being, and when appealed to for advice can only reflect our present ignorance. But our past, which is really our perpetual present, is what we have. So why not re-possess what is ours, the more so since it seems to be good?[103]

This is a cogent reply to those who wish to remove all vestiges of the past, good and bad, victorious and defeated.

(b) that the behaviors of respect, rationality, and reverence are necessary if we are to succeed in perpetuating our democratic republic. This topic was addressed above, but I add that her explanations remind us that we are "fellow" citizens and while differences readily surface, our commonality should serve as a reminder of the necessity of decent behavior.

(c) that liberal and civic education provide the foundation of building and sustaining our communities. As discussed above, such an education imparts knowledge, but Brann adds, "a

---

102 Eva Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*, 145.

103. Eva Brann, "Concerning the Declaration of Independence," 16.

college worthy of the name will indeed provide the best possible preparation for life in a real republic, not so much as it is, but—a far more practical knowledge!—as it ought to be."[104]

(d) to seek solutions to problems that we experience. In a talk, Brann made the observation that the traditional moral order is experiencing terrific stresses and strains. She offers a contrast:

> The nature of the American political consciousness used to be fairly clear: a staunch individualism tempered by a rather philistine conformity. Nowadays the individualism is exposed as a 'divide-and-conquer' stratagem by groups seeking to empower their dispossessed members, and the conformity is despised by all who value self-expression.[105]

Her proposed remedy is "to come together again on rather spare moral ground." She refers to American sub-communities that can "enforce such specific precepts as will allow their voluntary membership to preserve their nature and being." She calls this practice a sort of moral federalism, a concept that political scientists understand, and proposes it as a remedy to a large scale problem that is destructive to the entire nation.[106]

Fifth, as beings with imaginations she encourages us to think. This is an important concept as evidenced by references to it in her writings and her book. *The World of the Imagination: Sum and Substance* is more than 800 pages, but that's a project for another day. I share an excerpt from her shorter piece entitled "The Imaginative Conservative" because it alludes to our immediate concern of politics.

> Why is the imagination a specifically conservative concern so that it is rightly attached adjectivally to the noun 'conservative?' The imagination should be anybody's interest, a common interest, for just as articulateness damps rage, so imaginativeness relieves alienation. Thus, as the preservation of expressive (non-twittering) language should be a social concern, the saving of the imagination should be everyone's care.[107]

---

104. Eva Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*, 147.

105. Eva Brann, "Moral Teaching and Free Inquiry," 2.

106. Eva Brann, "Moral Teaching and Free Inquiry," 7-8.

107. Eva Brann, *Then and Now*, 133-134.

She adds, "imaginative conservatism means, at least to me, a grounded flexibility functioning between ideal and real, the imaginative space in which concrete specificity and universal essentiality meet—the twice-lived world, once in experienced fact and again in imaginative reflection."[108] Education is a means to cultivate the imagination and no matter the age of a person the imagination serves to expand our world; "reverse imagination" that works of reflection demand, is a means to capture "incarnate truths."[109] Even though Brann is relying on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in this last example, what I have quoted above applies to politics and conservatism. Politics often-times requires that we deal with the here and now, with practical, factual matters. The imagination, Brann explains, gives political ideas their concreteness in the sense of perceiving the consequences of these ideas, but it also takes us back to the truths that give rise to the ideas. Conservatives are concerned with preserving or keeping things safe, but Brann warns that they can attach themselves to things that are unworthy of preservation or that they can be dug in and become oblivious. The imagination keeps the conservative from these perils; the imaginative conservative can keep us within the bounds of good political practices.

Conclusion

The study of Brann's contributions to American Political Thought is a good beginning and serves as an entrée to the wider corpus of her work. Whether it is writings on Heraclitus, Euclid, Homer, Kant, Jane Austen, or Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet*, or the themes of the will, feelings, imagination, or time, her inquiry into these authors and themes is one that readily

108. Eva Brann, *Then and Now*, 135.

109. Eva Brann, *Then and Now*, 137.

welcomes and invites others to join. Whether the truths discovered are pleasant or harsh, she conveys an unspoken invitation to take a seat at a seminar table, to pick up a book, or to scribble (her term for writing things)[110] and thus engage in further study. Her writings are not the end point, but rather serve as a beginning to one's own study. The effort to understand the principles of the Declaration of Independence or discern how best to educate the citizens of a democratic republic can take place between students and teacher, in conversations among those in different disciplines, or among the citizenry. Questions about liberty, equality, rights, and duties are but a few. These questions invite the participation of all citizens and contribute to the practice of self-governance in a democratic republic from a posture of thinking and reflecting.

In the conclusion to *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*, Brann reminds us of Socrates who was condemned to die by his fellow Athenians because he would not stop asking questions and was executed because he refused to run away. She explains that he reconciled the seemingly irreconcilable radical reflection and civic reverence in his death. She makes this point in a discussion about educational communities, but it is also applicable to the American democratic republic, which provides "a ground from which to draw life."[111] The founding and its perpetuation are the sources that begin the reflection, and the liberal education that supports it has as an end what Brann calls "the essence to this best of all practicable polities: that it be a republic of *incomparable equals*."[112]

---

110. Eva Brann, "Tutor Eva Brann (H89) on the Enduring Power of St. John's College."

111. Eva Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*, 147.

112. Eva Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*, 148.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Eva Brann for giving me access to her archival material at the St. John's College libraries. I would also like to thank the staffs at the Meem Library at St. John's College in Santa Fe, New Mexico and at the Greenfield Library at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland for their assistance.

Bibliography

Brann, Eva. “Can the Reading of Literature Make Us Better?” *Maryland Humanities* Fall (1992).

Brann, Eva. “Character and Liberal Education.” Lecture at the Center for Twentieth Century Studies, Middlebury College, Middlebury, VT, April 1981.

Brann, Eva. “Civic Education.” Lecture at St. Catherine’s College, St. Paul, MN, 1982.

Brann, Eva. “Concerning the *Declaration of Independence*.” *The College* XXVIII, no. 2 (1976): 1-17.

Brann, Eva. “Democratic Distinction.” *The Key Reporter* 58, no. 4 (1993): 2-4.

Brann, Eva. “Does It Matter By Whom or When a Book was Written?” *The Collegian* Vol V, no. 1 (1993): 2-7.

Brann, Eva. “Education, the Supreme Court, and the Constitution.” In *Is the Supreme Court the Guardian of the Constitution?*, edited by Robert A. Licht, 59-81. Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 1993.

Brann, Eva. “The *Eumenides* of Aeschylus: Whole-Hearted Patriotism and Moderated Modernity.” *The St. John’s Review* 50, no. 2 (2008): 5-40.

Brann, Eva. “Eva Brann interviewed by Paul Dry.” Paul Dry Books, n.d. https://www.pauldrybooks.com.

Brann, Eva. “Far Pavilions and Pig Pens Nearby: Reading Great Books Together.” Keynote Address at the Knight Foundation Program, Eckerd College, St. Petersburg, FL, November 11, 1991.

Brann, Eva. “The Founding and Higher Education.” Lecture at the Summer Institute for Faculty and Administrators, St. Mary’s College, Moraga, CA, June 1997.

Brann, Eva. “Higher Gossip.” Awarehouse Productions, October 2, 2018. YouTube video, 40.23. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hp5kLBYxgEA&list=PLgyWf7lGuLAGKYfvRrYCHu3TpZjGFMa3s.

Brann, Eva. *Homage to Americans*. Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2010.

Brann, Eva. “Interview of Eva Brann: Highest Learning.” Interview by Gil Roth. (June 10, 2013). *The Virtual Memories Show*, Season 3, episode 12. http://chimeraobscura.com.

Brann, Eva. “Jeffersonian Ambivalences.” In *Philosophers on Education: Historical Perspectives,* edited by Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, 273-283. New York: Routledge, 1998.

Brann, Eva. “Jeffersonian Contradictions.” S.n. 1978, accessed St. John’s College Library, Annapolis, MD, Faculty File E 159.

Brann, Eva. “Learning to Deliberate.” In *Deliberation in Education and Society*, edited by J. T. Dillon, 249-258. Norwood, NJ, Ablex Publishing, 1994.

Brann, Eva. “Lincoln for a Refugee.” *Humanitas: The Journal of the George Bell Institute* 11, no. 2 (2010): 108-111.

Brann, Eva. “Literacy, Culture, and the Shaping of Democracy.” The Nebraska English Journal 33, no. 3 (1988): 2-7.

Brann, Eva. “Madison’s ‘Memorial and Remonstrance,’ A Jewel of Republican Rhetoric.” *The Imaginative Conservative*, June 7, 2013. https://theimaginativeconservative.org.

Brann, Eva. “Madison’s ‘Memorial and Remonstrance,’ A Model of American Eloquence.” In *Rhetoric and American Statesmanship*, edited by Glen Thurow and Jeffrey D. Wallin, 9-46. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1984.

Brann, Eva. “Moral Teaching and Free Inquiry.” Talk for the Unitarian-Universalist Church, November 1993.

Brann, Eva. “On Compromise.” Speech at Ashbrook Center, Ashland University, Ashland, OH, October 27, 2017. Online copy available at https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2018/04/on-compromise-eva-brann.html.

Brann, Eva. “One American Curriculum: St. John’s College.” Danish Ministry of Education and Research, Winter (1992).

Brann, Eva. *Open Secrets / Inward Prospects*. Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2004.

Brann, Eva. *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

Brann, Eva. “Politics and the Imagination.” St. John’s Review 34, (1985): 10-18.

Brann, Eva. “A Reading of the Gettysburg Address.” In *Abraham Lincoln: The Gettysburg Address and American Constitutionalism*, edited by Leo Paul S. de Alvarez, 15-53. Dallas: University of Dallas Press, 1976.

Brann, Eva. “Reflections on Imaginative Conservatism.” *The Imaginative Conservative*, July 13, 2015. https://theimaginativeconservative.org.

Brann, Eva. Review of *Abraham Lincoln: A Constitutional Biography*, by George Anastaplo. In *South Dakota Law Review* 46 (2001): 666-669.

Brann, Eva. Review of *The Republic of Letters: The Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and James Madison 1776-1826,* by James Morton Smith. In *Christian Science Monitor* 28, June, 1995.

Brann, Eva. "The Roots of Modernity." St. John's Review XXXV, no. 2 (1984): 66-69.

Brann, Eva. "Talking, Reading, Writing, Listening." Parents' Weekend Lecture, St. John's College, Annapolis, MD, November 2011.

Brann, Eva. *Then and Now: The World's Center and the Soul's Demesne*. Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2015.

Brann, Eva. "Tutor Eva Brann (H89) on the Enduring Power of St. John's College." Interview by Kimberly Uslin (January 21, 2019). *St. John's College News* (February 1, 2019).

Brann, Eva. "Was Jefferson a Philosopher?" In *Law and Philosophy,* edited by John A. Murley, Robert L. Stone, and William T. Braithwaite, 654-670. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1992.

Brann, Eva. "What are the Beliefs and Teachings of St. John's College?" Paper presented to the Committee on the Liberal Arts, St. John's College, Santa Fe, NM, April 1975.

Brann, Eva. "Why Read Books?" Dean's Lecture, St. John's College, Annapolis, MD, August 30. 1996.

Elliott, W. Winston. "Ten Books by Eva Brann: Spark Your Imagination." *The Imaginative Conservative,* June 22, 2016. https://theimaginativeconservative.org.

The Federalist Papers. The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed01.asp.

Jefferson, Thomas. A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge, 18 June 1779. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0079.

Klein, Jacob. *Lectures and Essays*. Annapolis, MD: St. John's College Press, 1985.

Lincoln, Abraham. "Letter to Henry L. Pierce and others." Springfield, Illinois, April 6, 1859. http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/pierce.htm

Lincoln, Abraham. "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions." Address before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, January 27, 1838. http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/lyceum.htm.

Nelson, Chris. “On the Perpetuation of Our Institutions.” In *The Envisioned Life: Essays in Honor of Eva Brann*, edited by Peter Kalkavage and Eric Salem, 272-279. Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2007.