At the heart of Alan Ryan’s collection of studies of modern liberalism is his insight that liberalism “is best understood as a theory of the good life for individuals that is linked to a theory of the social, economic, and political arrangements within which they may lead that life.” In its best sense, liberalism makes possible the individual’s attempt to fashion a life for himself as part of a community. To establish this possibility, modern liberalism opposes itself to despotism, theocracy, and capitalism, each of which implements a notion of the good life at odds with choice and self-determination. “The essence” of liberalism, says Ryan, “is that individuals are self-creating”—a thesis he finds affirmed by Kant, Mill, Russell, and Dewey. Society and the state must foster the expansion of individual choice, both by letting men alone and by securing the conditions of meaningful choice.

The thirty-three essays in The Making of Modern Liberalism span more than forty years of scholarly work and feature a wide selection of Ryan’s conceptual and historical efforts. His historical work serves to highlight the particular form of liberalism he favors—“staunchly modern, nonbourgeois liberalism”—and for which he makes a number of strong claims. Self-creation, he says, can thrive in community rather than threatening it, and we can have our Mill and Dewey without living in the shadow of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Our liberalism can be communitarian, and our communitarianism liberal. Our liberal culture can be rich, and our socialism even more entrepreneurial than capitalism. We can have our Locke without bourgeois capitalism. Even Hobbes can give us a rich account of the inner life. Perhaps most strikingly, we should set about “coercing the illiberal into decent behavior” and seek “to ensure that there exist no political cultures except liberal ones.”

Ryan’s theses are bold when taken in all at once, but he metes them out among delicate investigations of Mill, Russell, Berlin, and Dewey. The fundamental concept of self-creation, however, is less clear than the conditions Ryan sets on it. Self-creation, in Ryan’s view, cannot be isolated or solipsistic lest we commit the faults of Nietzsche and Sartre, the continental apostles of self-creation. Whatever self-creation is, it must be intelligible to the wider community but should not be based on identity politics and must not create the sort of community that would become despotic or theocratic. It must always remain liberal, and beyond that we know not whither it will go.
Since self-creation is always something to be determined, Ryan’s discussions of self-creation focus on its preconditions. Self-creation does not pursue any particular goal, so its presence is hard to identify and thus its preconditions are of greater interest. What really interests Ryan is being community-minded by making as many communities as liberal as possible.

His vantage point is “not the here and now of any particular nation-state, but the latent community of self-aware and productively intelligent persons.” Since every actual society has illiberal tendencies, almost all the activity of liberals will have to be devoted to creating the preconditions of liberal self-creation. Because of Nietzsche’s illiberal teachings on creativity, however, liberal self-creation never seems to arrive—a problem that explains why Nietzsche is Ryan’s bête noire. Modern society has given us liberalism and it has given us self-creation, but it never seems to give us liberal self-creation, which always remains just around the corner.

Ryan is often exercised by the communitarian argument that liberalism is inattentive to the cultural preconditions of its success. Ryan responds by claiming that liberalism does have “sociological and cultural assumptions” about the preconditions for self-creation, and thus it pays due respect to the importance of community. The society of which men are a part gives them the background from which they can begin their projects and also provides the context within which their projects can be understood. Dewey supplies Ryan’s key thesis on this point: in Ryan’s words, that “individual projects embody social resources.” What people do reflects their social context, and they do nothing of note if their deeds are unintelligible to those around them. Since nobody yet knows what the best way of life is, we have to adopt the spirit of J. S. Mill and make room for the experimentation that might lead us to the answer.

To explain this sort of contextualized innovation, Ryan appeals to the string quartet and to the popularization of classical music, both forms that give proper weight to something common (intelligible music) and to individual exploration. But it seems that whenever innovation succeeds in creating a new form or model, the new soon risks appearing as an inheritance, which liberalism cannot tolerate. Self-creation has to point to the future. We might want to change the community’s way of life as a whole, or we might think our experimentation yields a result the community should accept—like a new and superior symphonic form. How can innovation avoid falling afoul of liberalism itself? Ryan nobly calls for a moderate form of self-creation, but his readers would benefit from a deeper account of how to restrain innovation while keeping self-creation as the goal.

Ryan wants society to provide a context for our creativity, but the usual sources of that context—paternal and political authority—are opposed by liberalism. Our creativity is measured against a society without definite authority, and it makes new ways of life that, because of liberalism, will never become authoritative. Ryan’s modest view of self-creation combines a suspicion of extreme innovation with a commitment to the basic principles of liberalism. But “self-creation” seems to be the type of goal that often undermines the modesty Ryan admires.

Ryan thus struggles to put distance between his position on self-creation and the consequences hoped for by Nietzsche and Sartre. Ryan criticizes those thinkers for suggesting that our given identity “is an illusion we subscribe to out of cowardice.” Yet by retaining self-creation as his core concept, he makes cowards out of those who
would embrace their cultural traditions. He says we should accept that our identities are what they are and invent something new on that basis. Community-oriented liberals of Ryan’s stripe assert, in his words, that “human nature is open-ended, that moral and political discoveries are yet to be made, and that the existence of some fixed points on the moral compass does not preclude the existence of open options.” But he does not want to state which points are fixed and which options are open, and thus it is hard for him to measure what innovation would be too much or too little. Liberal innovators, as he calls them, care about innovations that would be good for society, rather than innovations for the individual alone. Perhaps the innovation best satisfying Ryan’s condition is liberalism itself, a doctrine shaping society as a whole while asserting that the good is individual.

Ryan comes close to endorsing Mill’s thought that many of the “manifestations of human nature” that we see are in fact “inimical to human flourishing.” Such a statement would not be too far from the teaching of Nietzsche and Sartre. Ryan’s complaint that existentialism views innovation as primarily “solitary or self-centered” has a certain truth to it, but understates existentialism’s political commitments. Nietzsche was concerned about the question of political unity in Europe, and Sartre’s political efforts are well known and still controversial. In a later essay, Ryan portrays Dewey as an alternative to Heidegger but then tends toward Heideggerian language to describe Dewey. Ryan praises Dewey’s belief that “there was no deep truth about the world” and that Americans had succeeded “in constructing an identity and a world in which they could be at home.” But this phrasing, so strongly reminiscent of Heidegger, cannot establish the distance that Ryan wants.

Though his example of the string quartet is a telling one, Ryan should offer further examples of what liberal self-creation might actually involve. He examines the making of modern liberalism but does not look at really existing liberalism—the world of cultural change that has emerged in the last two hundred years. Nor does he analyze the accounts of self-creation offered by the social theorists who came after Nietzsche. He says that he favors Dewey’s goal of “fully transparent self-understanding and communication,” combined with “a large dose of old-fashioned social democracy.” His work would be stronger if he explained further what self-understanding or communication means in the concrete.

Though Ryan often criticizes capitalism, he expresses his hope that socialism would in fact be even more innovative and entrepreneurial. Yet the way of life promoted by liberal capitalism has been key to the experience of modern self-creation. The very notion of the “self-made man” is a capitalist one, and entrepreneurs can create symbols without the slightest concern for their meaning or their lack of meaning. Market innovation carries none of the burdens of liberal self-creation, and its ease makes it more common. But Ryan has nothing to say about these aspects of modern self-creation, except to assert that socialism would outdo capitalism at its own game.

Since so many past examples of human creativity have occurred prior to liberalism, Ryan has some difficulty pinning down a fully coherent definition of liberal self-creation. Indeed, Ryan occasionally seems uncertain how to balance the old limits on political liberalism and the need to make self-creation a more common phenomenon. Bertrand Russell, he notes, was even sympathetic to the regime ironically proposed in *Brave New World*. Mill’s thought is more
elusive, and Ryan suggests it would yield “infinite variety” in aesthetic but not political or religious culture.

What is certain is that liberalism, in Ryan’s view, inspires community spirit because of its potentially limitless concern with converting illiberal communities. But since liberalism’s core assertion is that the core is for us to determine, its energy is poured into the defense of the mechanisms of liberalism. In an essay written in 2004, Ryan argues that “liberalism is intrinsically imperialist,” and he calls for “a nonmilitary but morally uninhibited global liberalism.” Though he sardonically admits the need for “preserving enough individual conservatives, fundamentalists, bigots, flat-earthers, and whatever else” to serve as sparring partners for liberals, he has no need for illiberal communities.

The real fervor of liberalism lies here, in the vehemence of the antiliberal struggle. All at once it opposes despotism and quenches the human thirst to fight, yielding the clean violence that characterizes the liberal order. But can liberalism provide the same inspiration for Ryan’s admirably modest version of self-creation? Nietzsche’s view was that liberalism’s political principles make self-creation ultimately inconsequential. No human being is deeply moved by things of no consequence.

Ryan is rather indifferent when faced with Tocqueville’s suggestion that liberalism might become paternalistic. He regards Tocqueville’s famous prophetic warnings against soft totalitarianism as flawed—because totalitarianism was never “soft,” and liberal democracy’s victory over totalitarianism implies that liberal democracy itself cannot be totalitarian.

Once self-creation is liberalism’s goal, everything that is not self-creation must be optimized for the sake of self-creation. Good health, for example, is a precondition of self-creation, and so liberalism must be valetudinarian. It turns out to offer a sense of purpose, order, and structure, just like the older forms of community, but through membership in the administration, the media, or the security services. Since technology and social science promise to automate everything except creativity, liberals have grown ever more insistent on their employment by the liberal state. If Alan Ryan’s modest form of self-creation is to succeed, however, it requires a more robust defense against liberalism’s pettier tendencies, and against self-creation’s tendency to reject liberalism altogether.

“SOMETHING HIGHER”

David Middleton

A Vertical Mile by Richard Wakefield
(San Jose, CA: Able Muse Press, 2012)

Richard Wakefield is a poet whose subjects are both the common experiences of humankind throughout the ages and also special concerns that have emerged in modernity. Wakefield grew up in rural Washington State and has lived and taught college English there all his life. His knowledge of the history, geology, geography, seasons, weather, and flora and fauna of his native state is extensive.

Writing in metrical verse that almost always rhymes (there is little blank verse), and especially favoring the interlocking abab

David Middleton is poetry editor of Modern Age.