PROLOGUE

The theme of this book is the transmission of two cultures through legends. The process of transmission is not the handing of a corpse from one age to another, but the dynamic relay of an echo through the canyons and recesses of Western annals. For airwaves of culture die only in a sterile setting. Alive, they pick up their own sounds in the social cultures they strike, and reverberate on and on.

Forward steps in art . . . are the result of the imitation of and admiration for beloved predecessors.

Pasternak, Doctor Zhivago

The carriers in the ancient legends selected as illustrations of the theme are two semi-historical personages: Cyrus the Great from the early Greek world, and Lucretia from the early Roman world. Both stories introduce from their respective societies the theme of transgression of rights: in one against a people, and in the other against an individual. In both, a woman’s courage and determination bring an offender to his rightful doom. In the process of retribution, however, though both were innocent, Tomyris, Queen of the Massagetae, was crushed by the loss of her son, and Lucretia, wife of Collatinus of Latium, herself chose not to survive the loss of her honor.

The Greek champions of freedom in the fifth century B.C. saw an inexorable and divinely ordained law of ethics, imposed upon the overweening transgressor, as an object lesson in the philosophy of history. The Roman champions of freedom were motivated by a solemn respect for the sanctity of
their homes and their women. The stories of Cyrus and Lucretia, both, came from great-souled social contexts where high dignity lifted history into tragic drama, and brought both under the jurisdiction of ethics.

The political and personal ethics in the two stories, born of stern resolve, were not lost in the West, nor were the memories of the two women who held the transgressors accountable under their high sense of propriety. As long as men fall into covetousness and lust, the import of the two stories is clear in its reminder of the need for discipline and of the dire effects of lack of discipline. The story of Cyrus, in various versions now partly lost, was transmitted through the Greek tradition to the Latin, and as the Mediterranean basin was assimilated by Roman culture it was expressed in the two languages. The sources in which the story of Lucretia was transmitted to Livy from the third and second centuries are all lost. But her story too became bilingual. With Greek and Latin as carriers the two stories became a part of the total Greco-Roman cultural experience, which was transmitted to the Latin-Christian tradition of the early Church and the Middle Ages. The complexity of the late Middle Ages gradually evolved into the Renaissance, with a broader pattern of living and a rebirth of old skills. Through the long twilight, the darkness and the dawning, both stories retained a usefulness amid the changing culture of the West, and artists kept the stories alive in succeeding generations. In spite of the broken fabric in the tradition of the stories certain story tellers carried it even when it lost its historical individuality. Some of these story tellers were Valerius Maximus, the Christian Fathers, Orosius, Jordanes, Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, the Gesta Romanorum, Christine de Pisan, Machiavelli, and Bandello. In England, Lydgate, Pettie, and Shakespeare retold both stories.

The ancient body of experience was often, in the long history of European culture, a superior body of experience. Its didactic value was never lost. The broad expression of
Renaissance and post-Renaissance culture in their various arts drew generously from the ancient experience. History, drama, and social values were all superbly combined in the stories of Cyrus and Lucretia. As woman assumed the complimentary mantle of romance, there were elements in both stories which responded to the new concept of her. Her sterling qualities of mind and soul, and even her body as the bearer of those qualities, called forth new expression in the arts. The two stories grew in the creative imaginations of those who sought expression through them, and they found their fulfillment in the fulfillment of the societies which nurtured them.

It is the purpose of this book to piece together the record from the broken fabric of the ages, as its dismembered parts, lodged in museums, libraries, memories, and skills of the present, can be remade and envisioned from this distant point of historical perspective. The classical impulse was central and continuous. Through the ages it was confirmed, supplemented, and modified by the dominant spirit of other times. Though new expressions of it came with new historical impulses and new instruments and skills, the ever-changing and growing culture of the West stayed long in the orbit of the classical impulse and was guided by its magnetism.