Western Civilization Program

OKLAHOMA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

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Past & Present:

The Western Civ. Newsletter

FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the third issue of the OBU Civ. Program's newsletter.

We were recently visited on campus by an OBU alum who is now the assistant headmaster of a classical Christian academy in a nearby city. As he spoke to some of our English majors about teaching in a classical academy, I was grateful to hear him speak of how his love for great books was awakened in our Western Civ. courses. I was also gratified to hear him explain how his understanding of the great tradition and the liberal arts was refined through reading books by C.S. Lewis, Allan Bloom, James K.A. Smith, and many others. Those of us who teach the liberal arts are often called on to justify ourselves and defend our profession. We need not, however, start from scratch in doing so. We have, as it were, a great cloud of witnesses to speak for us: Clement of Alexandria, Augustine of Hippo, Hugh of St. Victor, Erasmus, John Henry Newman, Matthew Arnold, Paul Elmer More, Dorothy Sayers, T.S. Eliot, Russell Kirk, and so many more.

As our young graduate spoke so eloquently and persuasively about the value of the great conversation, he spoke not only with his own voice. He spoke on behalf of a great consensus and legacy regarding the nature and aims of a true education. Let us each hope, in our own modest way — in our classrooms, in our homes, and in the public square — to add our voice to that chorus.

Benjamin Myers
Crouch-Mathis Professor of Literature
Editor, *Past & Present*

TRANSCENDING THE COLOR-LINE IN THE MODERN WEST: WHEATLEY, DOUGLASS, DU BOIS, MORRISON

By Brent Newsom
Associate Professor of English, Oklahoma Baptist University

The origins of Western Civilization are firmly rooted in the classical past of Greece and Rome, the traditions of European Christianity in the medieval and early modern periods, and the philosophical and scientific advances of the Enlightenment. But the West as we know it today is a multicultural, pluralistic society. An honest and accurate accounting of the modern West, then, acknowledges and examines the ways those from "the West"—the nations of Western Europe that rose to prominence and political power throughout the modern period—have interacted with, absorbed, colonized, and been transformed by peoples of diverse cultural backgrounds. One of the most important strains of such inquiry, for Americans in particular, focuses on how African Americans have shaped the story of what we call, in our OBU curriculum, the "Modern West." This brief essay discusses four African American writers we study in this course, each of whom helps convey the story of what the West is today: Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Toni Morrison.

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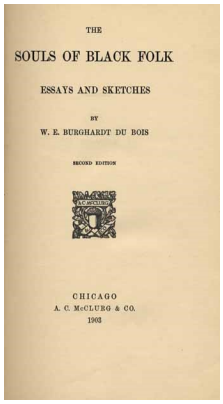
TRANSCENDING THE COLOR-LINE., CONT.

As a child, Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753-1784) was brought to the colony of Massachusetts on a slave ship (the *Phillis*, from which she took her name) and was purchased by John Wheatley of Boston to be a house servant. Unlike the vast majority of enslaved children, the young Phillis was educated in the Wheatley family library, and her interest in poetry was encouraged. She was only seventeen when her elegy for the evangelist George Whitefield was published in broadside, attracting local notoriety and the admiration of the public. Despite this positive reception, it wasn't until traveling to the more tolerant society of London in 1773 that Wheatley would be able to publish a book, the first by an African American, titled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral.* As the title indicates, her poems are deeply influenced by the congregationalist Christianity that Wheatley absorbed from the Wheatley family, but she also celebrated the potential of people of African ancestry and gently prodded her predominantly white audience toward attitudes of charity and acceptance for them: "Some view our sable race with scornful eye, / 'Their colour is a diabolic dye.' / Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*, / May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train." Though she was emancipated by the Wheatleys upon returning from London and was married in 1778, the final years of Phillis Wheatley's short life were largely marked by tragedy and by frustrated ambitions. Nonetheless, her legacy was preserved by abolitionists in the nineteenth century and, in the later twentieth century, by scholars of African American history and literature.

Unlike Wheatley, who sometimes characterized her enslavement as a necessary step in bringing her to the Christian faith, Frederick Douglass (c. 1818-1895) never had reason to portray his slavery as a blessing. Born into the harsh conditions of a massive Maryland plantation, deprived of the nurturing presence of family, denied an education in basic literacy, and abused by slaveholders who used scripture to justify their cruelty, Douglass overcame immense, dehumanizing obstacles to claim his dignity, win his freedom, and earn an important place in American history and literature. His *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) tells the harrowing tale of his early life and of his daring escape to New York. At about the midpoint of his *Narrative*, Douglass pens a sentence that, with classical elegance, functions as a sharp rhetorical pivot: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man." The ensuing account of Douglass re-humanizing what had been dehumanized—his own identity and, by extension, that of all those subject to the system of chattel slavery—presses us as scholars and students to consider oppressive systems of injustice and their legacy in the West.

Part of that legacy entails the conditions of African Americans in the years after slavery was finally abolished. Writing just after the dawn of a century that seemed to hold great promise, W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) declared that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line." That century would supply significant other problems as well—totalitarianism and military industrialism come to mind—but Du Bois rightly diagnosed that entrenched challenges linked to race and racism would persist long after slavery in America (and the war the nation fought over it) had ended. In *The Souls of Black Folk,* Du Bois, a pioneering sociologist and the first African American to earn a doctorate from Harvard, elaborates on this "problem of the color-line." He offers a trenchant argument for the equality and enfranchisement of black people and, like Wheatley, hails the rich potential of the black community. He also explicates the troubling psychological experience he labels "double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." Du Bois's academic work and his activism continued in this vein throughout his long life, though he was often frustrated by the slow pace of change—by the stubborn persistence of the very problem he articulated with such insight.


THE
SOULS OF BLACK FOLK
ESSAYS AND SKETCHES
BY
W. E. BURGHARDT DU BOIS
SECOND EDITION
CHICAGO
A. C. McCLURG & CO.
1903

Twenty years after Du Bois's death, the novelist Toni Morrison (b. 1931) would write "Recitatif," a short story that blurs the color-line Du Bois found so prominent in the era of racial segregation. This story, the only short story published in the Nobel laureate's decorated career, traces the intertwined lives of two girls, Roberta and Twyla, from the time they meet at an orphanage through momentary reunions in their young adulthood and middle age. These chance encounters are set in the context of the Civil Rights era, and at each meeting the two women are clearly divided by the distinctions of race—yet Morrison never reveals which character is white, which is black. This ambiguity confronts readers with our own assumptions about race, and ultimately forces us to question where such assumptions come from in the first place.

For a number of reasons the Modern West course, the final leg of our Western Civilization sequence, has become one of my favorite to teach. Students are coming to the end of an intellectual journey that has introduced them to great works by Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, and many more, and that has offered them an intellectual history of the West from antiquity to the present day. Throughout the semester, that present is illuminated by figures like Wheatley, Douglass, Du Bois, and Morrison, each of them tracing the troubling story of race in America, each of them helping us see that goodness, truth, and beauty transcend any line that divides us.

Dr. Brent Newsom teaches courses in creative writing, literature, editing, and composition. He is the author of the poetry collection *Love's Labors* and the librettist for *A Porcelain Doll*, an opera composed by OBU Professor of Music Dr. Jim Vernon. He also writes fiction, for which he received a Fulbright grant, as well as book reviews. With OBU Associate Professor of Graphic Design Corey Fuller, he co-edits *Ink & Letters: A Curated Journal of Art, Creativity, & Christian Faith*.

A 2003 OBU graduate, Dr. Newsom obtained an M.A. in English: Literary Studies from Louisiana State University and Ph.D. in English: Creative Writing from Texas Tech. He returned to Bison Hill to join the faculty in 2012.

SURPRISED BY JOY

Surprised by joy—impatient as the Wind
I turned to share the transport—Oh! with whom
But Thee, long buried in the silent Tomb,
That spot which no vicissitude can find?
Love, faithful love, recalled thee to my mind—
But how could I forget thee?—Through what power,
Even for the least division of an hour,
Have I been so beguiled as to be blind
To my most grievous loss!—That thought's return
Was the worst pang that sorrow ever bore,
Save one, one only, when I stood forlorn,
Knowing my heart's best treasure was no more;
That neither present time, nor years unborn
Could to my sight that heavenly face restore.

William Wordsworth

SEARCHING FOR GARDENS OF GRACE: ENGLISH RELIGIOUS LYRIC POETRY 1600-1900

Poetry certainly plays an important part in any education focusing on the great books or the history of ideas, but most of the poems students encounter in the academic study of Western civilization is of the epic variety. We asked one of OBU's best Civ. professors, Dr. Jonathan Callis, to recommend some lyric poetry that works well in the Western Civ. classroom.

Each of the following poems follows the "wilderness-to-garden" narrative that characterized so much English poetry from the Renaissance onwards. These religious lyrics, which often fall into the category of pastoral poetry, imagine the world as a great wilderness that needs to be cultivated. As Christian sojourners, the poets search for traces of the Garden of Eden—those natural signs of grace that link us to God on our Christian pilgrimage—in a broken and death-soaked world. Meditating on marriage, nature, death, and the sacraments, these poets recognize God's mercy in both the beauty and suffering of the world.

1. George Herbert, "Love (3)" – Like Augustine's *Confessions*, "Love (3)" follows the restless path of the human heart. The poem's lines expand and contract to show how the human heart draws away from and then turns back toward God's love.
2. John Donne, *Holy Sonnet* VII – Donne's *Holy Sonnets* are filled with violent metaphors for God's presence in the soul ("Batter my Heart" being the most famous). In *HS* number VII, Donne's speaker imagines the world rushing to its end. But then the poem slows down, and the speaker finds the time to seek repentance in the middle of disorder.
3. John Milton, *Lycidas* – One of the richest and most complex Christian poems in English, *Lycidas* ends with a flood of resurrection images to show Christ's entrance into a world scarred by death.
4. Henry Vaughan, "They are all gone into the world of light!" – Having lived through the bloody English Civil Wars of the 17th century, the Anglican poet Henry Vaughan longs to join those departed saints who are now "walking in an air of glory."
5. William Cowper, *The Task* – Read especially the third book ("The Garden"), which follows a poet wandering through the world as he looks for visible signs of God's grace.
6. William Blake, "A Poison Tree" – All of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* merit careful attention, but "A Poison Tree" displays the full range of Blake's psychological and symbolic powers as a poet. Blake's "poison tree" bears the fruit of resentment that we store up against our neighbors. It is the opposite of the Tree of Life.
7. William Wordsworth, "Surprised by Joy" – In the sonnet that gave C.S. Lewis the title for his autobiography, Wordsworth oscillates between hope and despair as he suddenly remembers his beloved, departed daughter.
8. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam* –Tennyson beautifully describes the Christian search for hope in a world where nature seems indifferent to our suffering.
9. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* – Barrett Browning's sonnet cycle is a poetic love letter to her husband Robert (check out Sonnet XIV, a reflection on love's eternal shape).
10. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection" – Just read the poem for the sheer variety of its sounds and images. It's a journey from the temporal world to the permanence of God, who shines through every living thing.

Jonathan Callis started at OBU as an assistant professor of English in the fall of 2015. He has a bachelor's degree from Rhodes College and a Ph.D. from Notre Dame. He started his teaching career at a small international school in Accra, Ghana, where he and his wife Amy taught a variety of subjects to students from all over the globe. In his scholarship, Dr. Callis studies the connections between early modern philosophers like Locke and Hobbes and allegorical poets from Spenser to Coleridge.

THE LIBERAL ARTS: WHAT AND WHY

BY BENJAMIN MYERS

OBU is a Christian liberal arts university, which means our curriculum is rooted in ancient and medieval practices of seeking knowledge and wisdom. The term "liberal arts" – from the Latin *liber*, meaning free – is derived from the ancient belief that the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty is a way of life that is liberating and appropriate for the free person. As Jesus says, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." The western university developed in the middle ages around the study of what was called the *trivium* – the three-fold path of grammar, rhetoric, and logic – and the *quadrivium*, the four-fold path of arithmetic , geometry, astronomy, and music.

Today, we at OBU require students to take a 15 credit-hour core in Western Civilization, along with required courses in the Bible, writing, modern languages, fine arts, math, and science. Why do we maintain such a strong traditionalist core in an age in which higher education is lapsing into the incoherence of cafeteria style education and the utilitarian focus exclusively on career preparation? Let's consider three basic ways of answering that question.

First, broad and deep learning is an activity appropriate for human beings made in the image of God. In his *Politics*, Aristotle writes, "To be seeking always after the useful does not befit free and exalted souls." He does not mean to reject utterly the necessary pursuits that make life possible, but rather to point out that a life reduced only to those necessary considerations is a life of slavery. As Christians, we build on this insight to note that human beings are the only earthly creation of God which He endowed with reason, one aspect in which we are made in His image. It thus is befitting for us – appropriate for who we are as His creatures – to apply this God-given reason in coming to understand as much as we can about God's wonderous creation. A liberal arts education looks beyond narrow vocational training to help students form a robust understanding of nature, culture, and humanity. Human beings are made by the God who is truth itself, and thus we are made for lives spent in pursuit of truth.

Furthermore, a liberal arts education honors God by framing the educational enterprise as an act of worship. The great early Christian philosopher, Augustine of Hippo, in his *Confessions*, writes of his study of the things of this world: "And I said to all these things in my external environment: 'Tell me of my God who you are not, tell me something about him.' And with a great voice they cried out: 'He made us' (Ps. 99: 3). My question was the attention I gave to them, and their response was their beauty." When we are attentive to what is, attentive to *being*, we direct our ultimate attention to the Creator God who is the source of all being. To look for the truth in history or philosophy or biology or physics is to honor the God who is truth. To search for goodness in ethics or political science is to honor the God who is the highest good, the *summa bonum*. To seek real beauty in poetry, music, or art is to honor the God who is not only the source of all beauty but is beauty itself. In short, a liberal arts education is the best initiation into a life of obedience to the direction given us in Philippians 4:8: "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things" (NIV). Dwelling on these things, on the true, the good, and the beautiful, is not just a spare-time activity. It is a way of life, the way of life Biblically commanded to us and for which a liberal arts education, in partnership with the church and the family, uniquely prepares us.

Thirdly, a liberal arts education helps students to receive their cultural inheritance as part of the human story. The twentieth-century philosopher Michael Oakeshott puts it this way: "Every human being is born an heir to an inheritance to which he can succeed only in a process of learning. If this inheritance were an estate composed of woods and meadows, a villa in Venice, a portion of Pimlico and a chain of village stores, the heir would expect to succeed to it automatically, on the death of his father or on coming of age. It would be conveyed to him by lawyers, and the most that would be expected of him would be legal acknowledgment. But the inheritance I speak of is not exactly like this; and, indeed, this is not exactly as I have made it out to be. What every man is born an heir to is an inheritance of human achievement; an inheritance of feelings, emotions, images, visions, thoughts, beliefs, ideas, understandings, intellectual and practical enterprises, languages, relationships, organizations, canons and maxims of conduct, procedures, rituals, skills, works of art, books, musical compositions, tools, artifacts and utensils — in short, what Dilthey called a *geistige Welt* [spiritual world]." Of course, this wider perspective enables students to think about contemporary problems with a greater perspective, but, perhaps more importantly, it also uncramps their souls. Knowledge of Western civilization—a true knowledge of its change and continuity over time, the kind of knowledge available only through a thorough liberal arts education—gives the student room to breathe intellectually, morally, spiritually, and emotionally. It frees the student from the tyranny of the moment, from merely fashionable, inevitably superficial ways of being in the world. Life in the fullness of time is a life more abundant than living in the prison of the moment. As Oakeshott also says, "The world is full of homemade human beings, but they are rickety constructions of impulses ready to fall apart in what is called an 'identity crisis.' Being human is a historic adventure which has been going on since the earth rose out of the sea, and we are concerned with this paraphernalia of learning because it is the only way we have of participating in this adventure. The ancient Greek exhortation Know Thyself meant learn to know thyself. . . [I]t meant, contemplate and learn from what men, from time to time, have made of this engagement of learning to be a man." All people, male or female, of all races and nationalities, are due their share in a priceless inheritance of ideas and expressions.

To sum up all three points, we can say that a liberal arts education is anti-utilitarian, not because it is opposed to vocational preparation – a liberal arts education is excellent preparation for any employment worthy of the dignity of human beings – but rather because it looks beyond practical purposes of career preparation, acknowledging the full human being. A liberal arts education provides one with reasoning skills for work and for civic and political engagement but also encourages students to use reason in pursuit of ultimate truth. A liberal arts education forms students' tastes and sensibilities to endow their working life and their leisure hours with the dignity appropriate to God's human creation. This is the kind of education appropriate to a person set free and seeking freedom.

Benjamin Myers is a former poet laureate of Oklahoma. He is the editor of *Past and Present* and is the Crouch-Mathis Professor of Literature at OBU. His most recent book of poems is *Black Sunday* (Lamar UniversityPress, 2018).

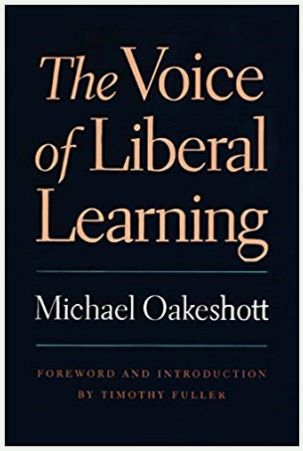
THE VOICE OF LIBERAL LEARNING

By Michael Oakeshott

Liberty Fund, 2001

"How shall a university respond to the current aversion from seclusion, to the now common belief that there are better ways of becoming human than by learning to do so, and to the impulsive longing to be given a doctrine or to be socialized according to a formula rather than to be initiated into a conversation? Not, I think, by seeking excuses for what sometimes seem unavoidable surrenders, not in any grand gesture of defiance, but in a quiet refusal to compromise which comes only in self-understanding. We must remember who we are: inhabitants of a place of liberal learning."

Michael Oakeshott



FACULTY RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT: SILAS KAINE EZELL

Literary Satire and Popular Culture

Toward the end of Voltaire's *Candide*, the title character and his friends visit the estate of Pococurante, a wealthy Venetian with a vast collection of art and literature. Despite being surrounded by the best of art and culture, Pococurante, in a seemingly deadpan manner, displays an apathetic disposition toward his collection, stating that he "prizes them very little." The episode contains a great deal of humor at the expense of Pococurante himself, along with the classic works he savages in his critique. Pococurante's attitude leads Candid to ask, "But is there not pleasure…in criticizing everything, in pointing out faults where others see nothing but beauties?" Candide's question has great significance as the public sphere, and critical interpretation of cultural artifacts, has exponentially widened after the Enlightenment. My current research project examines how the use of humor in criticism has manifested itself in American culture. With the growth of YouTube and other social media, the ability to self-publish responses to popular culture has increased exponentially. Daily, new content reviewing the latest trends in popular culture appears and can reach millions of views. The review content varies according to the provider, but one thing that they have in common is the use of humor as a vehicle to voice criticisms of literature, film, music, and popular culture. Did this trend begin with YouTube? Perhaps not. Beginning in the early 19th century, American writers began lacing reviews with humorous quips designed to deflate the reputations of critically acclaimed fiction, reaching an apex with Mark Twain's critical reviews of the works of James Fenimore Cooper and Percy Shelley, among others. A similar effort was made among the writers of the Algonquin Round Table, particularly Dorothy Parker. One could argue that such humor in criticism has a democratizing effect on high art in American culture by deflating the analyses of educated literary professors and critics, which opens the door to many other so-called lower genres to occupy the same space as high art in the public imagination. The trend has resulted in a vast amount of YouTube reviews of *The Last Jedi* that rivals even Pococurante's bemusement.

Silas Kaine Ezell is Associate Professor of English at Oklahoma Baptist University. His academic fields of emphasis include American Literature, American Humor and Satire, Mark Twain, Popular Culture, and English Education. His book, *Humor and Satire on Contemporary Television*, was released by Routledge Publishing in June, 2016. Currently, Dr. Ezell's research includes an examination of the democratization of art and culture through the use of humor in critical reviews in American culture.

"*But* desire must also be cultivated; the beautiful does not always immediately commend itself to every taste; Christ's beauty, like that of Isaiah's suffering servant, is not expressed in vacuous comeliness or shadowless glamor, but calls for a love that is charitable, that is not dismayed by distance or mystery, and that can repent of its failure to see; this is to acquire what Augustine calls a taste for the beauty of God (*Soliloquia* 1.3-14). Once this taste is learned, divine beauty, as Gregory of Nyssa says, inflames desire, drawing one on into an endless *epekatasis*, a stretching out toward an ever greater embrace of divine glory. And, as Augustine also remarks, it is what one loves — what one desires — that determines to what city one belongs (*Enarrationes in Psalmos* 2.64.2)."

David Bentley Hart
From *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*
(Eerdmans 2003)

WORDS OF WISDOM

"There is an appealing idea about beauty which goes back to Plato and Plotinus, and which became incorporated by various routes into Christian theological thinking. Accord to this idea beauty is an ultimate value — something that we pursue for its own sake, and for the pursuit of which no further reason need be given. Beauty should therefore be compared to truth and goodness, one member of a trio of ultimate values which justify our rational inclinations. Why believe *p*? Because it is true. Why want *x*? Because it is good. Why look at *y*? Because it is beautiful. In some way, philosophers have argued, those answers are on a par: each brings a state of mind into the ambit of reason, by connecting it to something that it is in our nature, as rational beings, to pursue. Someone who asked 'why believe what is true?' or 'why want what is good?' has failed to understand the nature of reasoning. He doesn't see that, if we are to justify our beliefs and desires at all, then our reasons must be anchored in the true and the good."

Roger Scruton
From *Beauty* (Oxford University Press, 2009)

Western Civ. Program
Oklahoma Baptist University
Box 61214
500 W. University St.
Shawnee, OK

ben.myers@okbu.edu

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