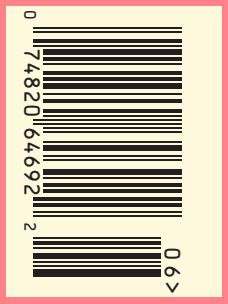
The New Criterion

35th anniversary

June 2017

A monthly review *edited by Roger Kimball*

Volume 35, Number 10, $7.75 / £7.50



The New Criterion *June 2017*

Contributors to this issue

Michael Auslin is the author of *The End of the Asian Century: War, Stagnation, and the Risks to the World's Most Dynamic Region* (Yale).

Conrad Black is the former publisher of the London Telegraph newspapers and the *Spectator*.

Jeremy Black is the author of *A History of Britain: 1945 to the Present* (University of Indiana).

James Bowman is the author of *Honor: A History* (Encounter).

Bruce Cole, a former chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, is a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center.

Anthony Daniels is a contributing editor at *City Journal*.

Denis Donoghue's most recent book is *Metaphor* (Harvard).

Caitlin Doyle's poems have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The Threepenny Review*, *Boston Review*, and other publications.

George Green is a poet living in New York City.

James Hankins is a Professor of history at Harvard University.

William Logan's next book of poetry, *Rift of Light* (Penguin), will be published this year.

George Loomis writes about classical music for MusicalAmerica.com, *Opera* magazine, and the *Financial Times*.

Philippe de Montebello is the Fiske Kimball Professor at the Institute of Fine Arts, NYU, and the Director Emeritus of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Mario Naves teaches at the Pratt Institute.

Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at *National Review*.

David Pryce-Jones is the author of *Fault Lines* (Criterion Books).

Paul du Quenoy is an Associate Professor of history at the American University of Beirut.

Carl Rollyson is the author of *Confessions of a Serial Biographer* (McFarland).

Kyle Smith is critic-at-large for *National Review*.

David Solway's most recent poetry volume, *Installations* (Véhicule), was released in fall 2015.

Andrew Stuttaford is a contributing editor at *National Review*.

Karen Wilkin is an independent curator and critic.

Justin Zaremby is a lawyer and the author of a history of Yale's Directed Studies program, in which he taught from 2008–2010.

The New Criterion. ISSN 0734-0222. June 2017, Volume 35, Number 10. Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 900 Broadway, New York, NY 10003, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. Subscriptions: $48 for one year, $88 for two. For Canada, add $14 per year. For all other foreign subscriptions, add $22 per year. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster and subscribers: send change of address, all remittances, and subscription inquiries to The New Criterion, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to this address within three months of the issue date. All other correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 900 Broadway, Suite 602, New York, NY 10003. (212) 247-6980.

Newsstand distribution by CMG, 155 Village Blvd., Princeton, NJ 08540. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.
Internet: www.newcriterion.com Email: letters@newcriterion.com

Advertising: Telephone: (212) 247-6980 Email: advertising@newcriterion.com.
Subscriptions: To subscribe, renew, or report a problem please call (800) 783-4903.

A higher education
by Justin Zaremby

In 1943, in the middle of the Second World War, the Yale historian George Pierson published a report entitled "A Planned Experiment in Liberal Education." Pierson noted the "precarious situation" and "unsatisfactory character" of the modern college—a judgment shared at the time by people within the academy and among the broader public. Course content seemed superficial and "geared too closely to the average and not very serious students" even as scholarship became more focused and, perhaps, abstruse. Extracurricular achievements consumed too much of student life, allowing "the development of the young men's mental capacity—to slip into second place." The replacement of required courses with electives had convinced students that "all studies were equally broadening and valuable" even while the "legend of the 'uselessness' of the liberal arts . . . still persists, both in the public mind" as well as "in the thinking of many parents and sophomores." "Given the propensity of students to elect easy courses, and of scholars to ride a hobby," he asked, "is it any wonder that many individual offerings in the B.A. curriculum seem dilettantish, or theatrical, or remote from the realities of life?"

These concerns coincided with "that moment in our whole history when we are freest to consider, and to put into practice, really substantial reform. The return of faculty and students with the end of hostilities will mean the golden opportunity of the twentieth century for those colleges which are resolved, and prepared, to take advantage of it." Yet how could a university do so? The modern research university faced seemingly irreconcilable tensions among its constituents. Students, faculty, and the broader public were all confident that they knew what mattered in education. Students wanted to pursue their whims and extracurricular fancy. Faculty wanted to pursue their research in departments that were becoming increasingly insular. The public wanted practical knowledge and research that spoke to contemporary war-time needs.

Pierson's solution was an experiment in liberal education that included a prescribed honors program for select undergraduates in which students and faculty would eschew the elective system in favor of a directed course of study. The program, known by the anodyne name "Directed Studies," would provide students with a systematic introduction to numerous disciplines, train them to understand the connections among those disciplines and to carefully and closely read classic texts, and encourage the formation of a community of learners among its graduates and faculty. The program was launched in 1946. Over seventy years later, it continues to flourish.

Yale's one-year Program in Directed Studies continues to attract students and faculty with its simple promise of a challenging curriculum and a common experience. During their freshman year, students march from antiquity to modernity in lectures and seminars on Western philosophy, literature, and historical and political thought. After a year of close reading of great texts and weekly writing assignments, under the supervision of faculty from various departments, they pursue majors across the college, united by an *esprit de corps* developed not on the basis of room assignment or social club, but based on the friend-

ship and rivalry that stems from debating ideas with curious individuals. Decades after graduation, alumni reminisce about their time in "DS" while the program's faculty members speak fondly of their own experience and the quality of their students. I had the pleasure of being a student in the program, and the privilege of serving as a member of its faculty years later. In between, I wrote its history. Each of these vantage points affirmed the importance of the program—to its students, yes, but just as much to the flourishing of the humanities in contemporary society.

Roughly ten percent of the freshman class currently enrolls in Directed Studies. Some students are admitted directly to the program by the admissions office and the rest apply at the end of their senior year of high school. Unlike other schools, such as Columbia University, where a core curriculum may define a common experience for the entire freshman class, Directed Studies students opt into the program and thus sacrifice the ability to select six out of the thirty-six credits required to graduate. The program—like other "great books" courses across the nation—is not without controversy. Students and faculty predictably target Directed Studies for being too narrowly focused on the study of "dead white men," even though, as described below, the syllabus (like the Western Canon itself) has carefully evolved to incorporate a growing plurality of diverse voices. Yet the true controversy of Directed Studies stems not from the books on its syllabus, but from the very possibility of a shared academic experience for undergraduates.

Getting a group of faculty members to agree on what students should study is a Sisyphean task. On a practical level, departments vie to offer required courses in order to benefit from increased student enrollments. On a more theoretical level, faculty tend to be so divided with regard to method, both within and across departmental lines, that they simply cannot agree on what students need to learn. If faculty do agree that a core curriculum focused on certain books is viable, then the content of that curriculum becomes a familiar source of tension regarding what narrative—if any—is being forced on students. Debates about what books should be read divide faculty and students on pedagogical, political, racial, gender, and socio-economic lines, as evidenced most recently by the nation-wide campus protests of 2015. Given such moments, it is unsurprising that colleges often feel most comfortable encouraging students to fulfill certain distributional requirements in order to allow students to determine their own educational paths. In doing so, students ostensibly develop certain ill-defined "critical thinking" skills, trading intellectual coherence and campus controversy for intellectual chaos and campus calm.

The founders of Directed Studies viewed the program as an experiment to test the value of a coherent, elective-free course of study. In doing so, they looked back at the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American college. The ideals of that college were well described in a report issued by Yale in 1828 which stated that the "two great points to be gained in intellectual culture are the discipline and the furniture of the mind; expanding its powers, and storing it with knowledge. The former of these, perhaps, the more important of the two." The human mind was believed to have been composed of numerous faculties, all of which needed to be exercised to ensure intellectual development. Language, literature, moral philosophy, and science were key to that development. Yet by the end of the nineteenth century, two innovative ideas would dramatically change this model.

First was a sense that individual students should be allowed to choose their own academic adventures. Harvard president Charles Eliot became an evangelist for the idea of choice in undergraduate education. Eliot suggested that college students were old enough to know their minds, and to embrace their own interests and aptitudes. "When the revelation of his own peculiar taste and capacity comes to a young man," Eliot wrote, "let him reverently give it welcome, thank God, and take courage." Such freedom would also further the second major development in higher education, the rise of a culture of specialized academic research. In the late nineteenth century, American educators began to emulate German universities, which had developed a rigorous approach to scholarly research, thereby transforming colleges from advanced preparatory schools into research universities. Elective systems and scholarly research quickly began to dominate American schools.

Yet critics of these changes pushed back. The early twentieth century saw a continuous struggle between advocates of a common curriculum and the elective system, and between rigid departmental divisions and more porous organizational structures. The end of the First World War provided additional motivation to examine the value of a common course of study as schools (and the public) asked what skills students would need in order to assume leadership in the post-war era. Indeed, in the wake of the war, leaders at both Columbia and the University of Chicago established core programs which continue to this day. In 1937, St. John's College in Annapolis completely rejected electives and departments, and adopted a rigorous curriculum centered around the study of great books of Western literature, history, philosophy, mathematics, and science. Stringfellow Barr, the president who established St. John's new program, once noted that while critics found the program "authoritarian and fascist, because the student is not allowed to choose what he will study and what he will ignore . . . for the first time in possibly 1,500 years a group of college freshmen has just read Euclid's *Elements* through."

The pervasiveness of election was so strong that, by the time Directed Studies was founded, questioning the merits of election was (and remains) a fundamentally radical act. Indeed, Pierson noted that "There is at the present time no such order and subordination in most people's conception of an education, and we must therefore educate them—and possibly in some measure ourselves—to perceive one." That search for some structure to guide American education in the post-war period was taken up in various forms. Harvard President James Conant commissioned a report, *General Education in a Free Society*, to explore ways in which the tradition of the "liberal and humane arts" could be infused into the American educational system at all levels in order to "cultivate in the largest possible number of our future citizens an appreciation of both the responsibilities and the benefits which come to them because they are Americans and are free."

In their attempt to create a community of learners who would be shaped by a common curriculum and classroom experience, Pierson and his colleagues were thus forward-looking. Directed Studies was not born out of nostalgia for an old system, but with a fervent belief that the old system was vital for a changing nation and world. As part of the program, freshmen and sophomores enrolled in specially designed surveys of Western literature and history, as well as a social science course in which students pursued field research in the Connecticut River Valley. Students were also required to take courses in the sciences, math, and foreign language.

The New York Times called the program a success in 1948, writing that it "gives evidence that students who take a prescribed course of studies do better work than those in the traditional liberal arts division who are permitted to choose their own subjects." Students agreed. In letters written to the dean, they noted that "the esprit of our group freshman year was impressive" and that "the instructors and students alike . . . had a bond of the spirit that will always be one of my most cherished memories of Yale." Another noted that "one gets strongly the impression that this program is of great personal interest to the instructors—that they feel themselves an integral part of Directed Studies, are whole-heartedly in accord with its purposes, and are doing all they can to make the experiment a success."

The program gained the loyalty of leading Yale faculty. Running the program, however, was expensive, and, as early as 1950, the university president threatened to shut down the program in light of the university's financial challenges. The English professor Maynard Mack rose to the program's defense. In a letter to the president, he wrote that "There are certain values no faculty can sell out and keep its self-respect. . . . We cannot have our class agents, our Office of Development, our Alumni magazine and brochures appealing for money for a quality education, while in the meantime, at home, we liquidate the enterprises that make a quality education."

In 1958, a generous gift from the philanthropist Paul Mellon helped the program to survive. Mellon, a graduate of the Yale Class of 1929, had a strong interest in the idea of a coherent curriculum. In fact, after graduating from Yale and the University of Cambridge, he enrolled in 1940 at St. John's College in an effort to better understand their new program. (Although

he enjoyed the study of Greek language and literature, he found the study of mathematics frustrating, questioning whether students could in fact excel in both the humanities and mathematics and complaining about his difficulties with mathematical proofs to his psychoanalyst, Carl Jung. Ultimately Mellon became a generous supporter of St. John's even though he dropped out of the program to enlist in the army.)

Yale continued to refine the Directed Studies model in the succeeding decades, incorporating courses in art history and film, and even a short-lived program focused on the sciences. It retained a sense of experimentation while holding fast to the conviction that its students benefited from exposure to a common syllabus. Yale's financial state, however, continued to deteriorate, the Mellon funds were ultimately spent, and the program regularly risked dissolution. In 1976, the historian Donald Kagan was tasked with stabilizing the program. He transformed Directed Studies into a one-year program, establishing its three current courses in literature, philosophy, and historical and political thought, and set Directed Studies on the path to survival.

That Directed Studies has continued to exist, despite intermittent (or continuing) culture wars, is a testament to the community of faculty and students that it fosters. The general contours of the program's readings tend not to change. Students can be confident that they will read Plato, Dante, and Milton. Yet when the faculty meet to set the syllabus, they heatedly debate the inclusion of Flaubert, Douglass, DuBois, Woolf, Tolstoy, and Murdoch. These annual meetings force faculty members from various disciplines to reflect on the purpose of Directed Studies and find compromise. Authors appear and disappear from the syllabus from year to year, with each new generation of faculty members struggling to determine what a college freshman *should* read. A faculty meeting called to make this decision would generally become the stuff of a David Lodge novel, but in the context of Directed Studies, the result is an engaging curriculum that studies important, complex, and timeless Western texts.

Directed Studies students take those questions just as seriously and are as likely to argue the finer points of Arendt, as they are to defend or criticize the inclusion or exclusion of her *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Plenty of students appreciate the program as a survey of Western thought, while others demand that the program include a more diverse set of authors. Yet when such students attack or defend the program, they do so from a position of strength. They have had a basic introduction to historically significant texts with peers willing to examine complicated ideas, and they recognize that they were not indoctrinated into a reductive narrative about the West. Instead, at breakneck pace, they have been exposed to and tempted by the complexities of the humanities and have found—in these texts, their professors, and their peers—new companions with whom they can debate politics, metaphysics, and poetry.

At a time when people increasingly receive information through tweets, and express themselves through emoji and Facebook rants, there is something wonderfully subversive about immersing oneself in a great books program. Students in such programs learn that reading requires patience, and debate requires nuance. And their willingness to forestall immersion in the smorgasbord which is the college course catalogue demonstrates maturity and humility. Indeed, in addition to learning how to read and write, students discover that these virtues—patience, nuance, maturity, and humility—are the natural result of a humanistic education.

The founders of Directed Studies realized the importance of those virtues following the Second World War when they revived the search for coherence in higher education, and their importance has not diminished in a frenetic and uncertain twenty-first century. Such programs do more than train students in useful skills. They provide an opportunity for students to ask difficult questions in the context of a challenging community during their college years and after graduation. Most importantly they help train a new generation of students to believe in the transformative power of humanistic inquiry—personally, locally, nationally, and globally. Students graduate from such programs with more questions than answers, but with the faith that asking these questions is a worthwhile endeavor with the potential to shape their own lives, the lives of those around them, and the lives of men and women whom they may never meet, but whose words they may someday read.