Welcome to our first Great Texts Newsletter!

We haven’t settled on a name or format yet, but we hope you’ll enjoy this first step towards connecting our community.

Of course, many of you will recognize our temporary name from the title of David Lodge’s academic novel and satire, Small World. Many of us here in the Great Texts program have read and thoroughly enjoy Lodge’s sense of humor. We like to think of ourselves as more highly functional than his characters, of course.

What are you likely to encounter here? Consider this a more informal way for you to keep up with the goings on of our lively academic community. We’d also love to hear from you. Whether you’re a current student, an alumna, or a supporter of Great Texts, this is your spot to connect with like-minded and like-hearted friends.

Our plan is to publish nine issues an academic year, from September to May. Faculty members will contribute informal musings on their latest readings and adventures. We will also feature some faculty and student profiles and the exciting work going on in our community here at Brooks College. Want to make an announcement to fellow alumni? Then write to Jill to submit updates for consideration in the newsletter.

We so look forward to reconnecting with you and to flinging our green and gold afar. From the stadium to exciting new courses being offered in our program (along with tried and true favorites) it has never been a more exciting time to be reading the Greats at Baylor University!

So come on down, visit us when you’re in town, and don’t forget why you started reading Great Texts in the first place: they invite us to reflect on our place in the world and to become better human beings. At the end of the day, stories are the levelers of life: not because they undo our differences, but because they transcend them.

We look forward to continuing the conversation in the months ahead.

- SJM
From the Director’s Table...

Reading, understanding, loving, sharing. Through intellectually significant moments such as these, we learn to cherish and sustain the wisdom of demonstrably great texts.

Baylor University’s Great Texts Program is devoted to reading works from Homer to O’Connor (and beyond) carefully and patiently. Our faculty and students aim at real understanding of the great works, not the superficial acquaintance of mere dilettantes. In so doing, we cherish what wisdom may be found within them, yet while loving the Word of God whose light illuminates our understanding all the more brightly. And through mutually reciprocated friendship, the sharing of hard-won insights elevates our aspirations and multiplies our delight as we discern the truth, beauty, and goodness given us by God.

We welcome you, our readers and friends, colleagues and students, into the ongoing conversation and shared life of our intellectual community. We invite you to read, understand, love, and share the great texts with us. And through this and future newsletters, we offer you a place around our virtual seminar table, hoping to stimulate your minds, elicit your insights, and sustain a worthwhile companionship with you.

- Douglas Henry

On the Virtues of Reading the Greats.

In one of his letters from a Nazi prison, pastor, theologian, and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer tells his best friend Eberhard Bethge that as he looked back on his life, he realized that he hadn’t changed very much. He mentions two important exceptions, one of which was under his father’s influence. Bonhoeffer’s father demanded clear and careful reasoning from his children, and would not accept immoderate or ill-considered thoughts. The other significant change occurred as a result of time spent in New York during the Great Depression. While there he worshiped at an African-American church in Harlem, encountering firsthand the stain on the American soul that is racism. These influences, writes Bonhoeffer, led him to a crucial turn from “the phraseological to the real.”

There are many benefits that come with traveling the path of great texts, but there are detours and cul-de-sacs as well.

One in particular is to get caught up in the “phraseological,” that is, in a strictly intellectual exercise that attends with scholarly expertise to the details of a text, but never moves beyond it. We are enchanted, and rightfully so, by the thrill of learning to read Homer, Virgil, and Beowulf in their original languages, by the creative use of imagery, the well-turned phrase, the cleverer rhetorical strategy, and the precision of a logical proof. These things are not unimportant, for they need to be learned, and learned well. But we can be so focused on these matters that we fail to notice the most important work that these texts do, which is to teach us to be attentive to reality, and especially to what puts the “real” in it.

C. S. Lewis exemplifies the move from the phraseological to the real in an essay entitled “Meditation in a Toolshed.” Lewis describes standing in a dark toolshed and noticing a beam of light shining through a crack at the top of the door. He admired for a time the beam with its specks of dust floating in it. He saw and appreciated the beam, but saw nothing by it. He then shifted positions so that the beam fell on his eyes. Suddenly the picture changed; he no longer saw the beam, but green leaves on a tree outside the shed, and behind it, the sun itself. In the first instance he was looking at the light, in the second looking along it. Young persons in love, for example, see their beloved along the arc of their affection, while a psychologist looks at the pair and classifies the attraction as a biological impulse.

Both views are valid, but to make the latter the exclusive or most significant perspective is to miss what is fundamentally human about us.

There is much to be commended in the practice of looking at a text, for only in so doing will we learn how best to look along it at the world. But if we allow our vision to stop at the text itself, and fail to allow it to direct our attention to the world in which both texts and we are participants, then we not only shortchange ourselves, but the ability of these writings to help us become the kind of people we were intended to be. The move from the phraseological to the real can also be grasped in the difference between an idol and an icon. An idol arrests our gaze and reflects it back to us, whereas the icon directs it beyond itself and toward that which can never become an object that we possess and control.

When we fail to get beyond the details of a great text we limit ourselves to looking at it.

Those who look along a text in order to see the world are those who make the turn to the real. Now to be sure, there has been a great deal of debate over the centuries regarding what puts the “real” into reality, but involving us in that debate, which then continues into our time, is precisely what a great texts curriculum seeks to do. We would be hard pressed to name a topic worthy of our consideration that’s not vested in these historical debates. For example, when during the civil rights struggle the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice, he was taking up a conversation that has its roots in the scriptures and the works of Homer, Aeschylus, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, to name just a few.

The images and ideas, analogies and proofs, stories and syllogisms in the great texts are delights in themselves, serving up a luscious feast for our minds.

The pleasure that comes with reading them should be savored, but we dare not forget that the purpose of eating is to be nourished. That nourishment is found in the real, and the healthiest banquet consists, among other things, of a steady diet in the great texts.

- Barry Harvey
In the Spotlight: William Weaver

This month, we are thrilled to catch up with William Weaver and share a few of his most recent successes. Congratulations, William, on being selected as a recipient of the prestigious Humboldt Fellowship!

What’s your fondest early memory of reading?

There was a girl I liked in third or fourth grade. She was reading an installment of the “Babysitter’s Club.” It was a teen book, the Twilight of the 1980s, I suppose. I thought it would impress her if I read it, or maybe I thought it would be funny, so I asked her if I could read it. She must have thought I was joking, but I really read it. That did make her laugh. This gives you an idea of my view of books and their place in the world.

Why did you apply for this grant and what will it allow you to do?

I wanted to join a team of scholars working on an edition of the philosophical writings of Philip Melanchthon. Melanchthon is known by some theologians and historians, but he is not well known outside of special areas. This could change because increasingly scholars are seeing his significance for philosophy and the human sciences in general. This will be the first edition of Melanchthon’s collected works in over 150 years, and I will be editing some writings on rhetoric that have not been published since the sixteenth century.

I applied for the Humboldt Fellowship in particular because it would allow me to take my family to Germany for up to eighteen months. I have loved my time abroad. I spent a semester in Aix-en-Provence as an undergraduate, and since then, I have tried to find ways to travel. I enjoy learning languages and I’m eager for my children to have that opportunity to learn German.

Why are you passionate about what you do?

I cannot imagine life without books. For centuries books were considered a vital way of knowing the world, and I think that is no longer the case. I don’t mean books aren’t held to be important—it is clear that they are still valued in our culture—but they are no longer assumed to be part of our best, perhaps our best, means of knowing the world. In an essay Walker Percy imagined what he would say to the survivors of an apocalypse that somehow spared libraries. His advice to them: “Read. Read. Read.” It takes a certain view of the world to think that books are the best means of knowing and communicating knowledge about the world. I want to understand this unique property of books, and how it’s been celebrated in the past.