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Book Reviews

**Eric Ashley Hairston, *The Ebony Column: Classics, Civilization and The African American Reclamation of the West*.
Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2013.**

Reviewed by John Berteaux

In today's world, one has to defend any university course that does not instantly lead to a specific career or occupation. In a recent *New York Review of Books* article, author Marilynne Robinson states, "There is a great deal of questioning now of the value of the humanities, those aptly named disciplines that make us consider what human beings have been, and are, and will be" (Robinson 28). Robinson's article makes plain why I often find myself defending my chosen discipline – Philosophy. After all, a university education is expensive and, moreover, once the student leaves the university, food, clothing, and a place to live don't come cheap; one has to make a living. Hence, students, administrators, and parents ask: "Philosophy? What can you do with that?" If questions about the usefulness of the humanities are apropos, then Professor of English, Law, and Humanities Eric Ashley Hairston asks a far more compelling question in his book, *The Ebony Column*. Given that we live in a society in which race matters socially, politically, and economically, Hairston asks us to consider the value or usefulness of a classical education for today's black American student.

In defending my chosen discipline, generally, I turn to philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) for support. The essence of Hairston's argument, however, intimates that I could just as easily have turned to African American sociologist, historian, and civil rights leader W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963). In *The Value of Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell, a contemporary of Du Bois, considers what it is that makes philosophical questions unique and worth taking the time and effort to think about. Russell writes, "The 'practical' man . . . is one who recognizes only material needs, who realizes that men must have food for the body, but is oblivious of the necessity of providing food for the mind" (Russell 154). He insists what makes philosophy special is that it aims at a kind of knowledge that "gives unity and system to the body of the sciences, and the kind which results from a critical examination of the grounds of our convictions, prejudices, and beliefs" (Russell 154).

In fact, Eric Hairston (159) insists that W. E. B. Du Bois's "analysis of the opportunities, dangers, and challenges African Americans face clearly pits the pursuit of the good life and its meaning, wisdom, and culture – the virtuous life – against the barbaric pursuit of wealth, power, and possessions." For example, he reports that Du Bois draws on the classical myth of Hippomenes to demonstrate that virtue and liberty can be destroyed by materialism. One version of this story is that Hippomenes fell in love with Atalanta. Atalanta did not want to marry.

As a result, she set up a test. She was known to be a very fast runner. She conceded to marry anyone who could beat her in a foot race with the caveat being that anyone who tried to beat her and lost would be punished by death. Atalanta raced all her suitors save one: Hippomenes. In the end, she agreed to race Hippomenes. He defeated her by placing three golden apples in her path. When Atalanta stopped to pick up the apples, Hippomenes passed her and won the race and her hand. Hippomenes's desire to possess Atalanta unfortunately led to their doom.

While Bertrand Russell claims the utility of philosophy is found in its indirect effects on the lives of those who study it, similarly, W.E. B. Du Bois saw the classics as an antidote to vulgar materialism. In sum, then, both Russell and Du Bois were concerned that we integrate or balance our practical and intellectual pursuits. They were critical of applying a wholly practical or economic meaning to the term "useful" (Hairston 160; Russell 153).

Hairston observes that "an actual examination of Du Bois's education reveals remarkable depth and a significant investment in classical texts and subjects" (Hairston 167). Yet, he complains, treatments of Du Bois's work rarely mention his classicism or pays only superficial attention to his classical education (Hairston 159, 160). According to Hairston (160),

Despite Du Bois's overt use of classics in *The Souls of Black Folk*, especially in his core educational philosophy, few scholars have pondered the implications of the preeminent African American scholar of the twentieth century having envisioned African American education as a classical education. None have adequately addressed what lessons, virtues, strategies, or tools Du Bois intended for an education grounded in the classics to provide African Americans. The absence of the classics from scholarly discussions of Du Bois is hardly to be believed, given the sheer volume of commentary on Du Bois.

In addition to W.E. B. Du Bois, Eric Hairston draws on the compositions of classicist and ex-slave Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753-1784); classicist, ex-slave, and abolitionist Fredrick Douglass (c. 1818-1895); and classicist, educator, sociologist, and black activist Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964). Hairston posits that these scholars came to redefine the classics, using the field to give unity to a body of work that resulted in a critical examination of 19th century racism. One implication of the recognition of their commitment to the classics is that it raises the following question. What if "old white men ideas" really are ideas that were developed by women and people of color?

The upshot of all this is that, on the one hand, Eric Hairston suggests the classics contain a wealth of “moral and intellectual lessons . . . relatively objective and practically race-neutral” (Hairston 157). Yet, at the same time, his treatment of these scholars reclaims the Western Civilization story for African Americans as part of their heritage (Hairston xv). They remind us that “many Africans had been part of the classical world and part of the Roman Empire . . . classical sources like Herodotus and Tacitus [suggest] African Americans had proof of both black historical presence and historical context” (Hairston 16). In a world in which Western Civilization courses have all but disappeared, Hairston himself writes, “I endeavor to provide a partial correction of the multigenerational and multiracial failure to chronicle the journey of African Americans in the West and within the experience of Western Civilization” (Hairston xv).

Hairston’s point is that the classical education received by Wheatley, Douglas, Cooper, and Du Bois demonstrates that the classics have always been central to the African American intellectual tradition. By allowing these scholars to reject the stereotypical characterization of intellectual deficiency foisted on blacks, the classics: 1) offered a unique reading of race and gender; 2) posed a transforming set of ideals that shaped African American culture and freed blacks from the narrow confines of a Christian morality, replacing it with a humanistic theology, a theology that is evident in the work of Douglas, Cooper, and Du Bois; 3) allowed for a critical examination of the ideologies upon which American society was based. Ultimately, Hairston’s goal is to demonstrate that it is not what the ancients said but what African American classicists did with what they said that matters.

Hairston’s argument is both compelling and clear. The case he makes is important in a world in which “those disciplines that make us consider what human beings have been, and are, and will be” are facing extinction (Robinson 28). While these black scholars explode the Thomas Jefferson myth of blacks as subhuman, inferior, and intellectually deficient Hairston essentially claims that they did much more. Their use of the classics was liberating in that it indicated black Americans could do more than mimic and put on a show. They could sublimate cultural interpretations of “useful” and integrate intellectual and cultural pursuits. That they illustrated the classics could serve as a basis for a critical examination of society; you would think the field might offer tools for challenging contemporary racism.

Endnotes

Robinson, Marilynne. “What Are We Doing Here?” *The New York Review of Books*, vol. LXIV, no. 17, Nov. 2017, p. 28,35 & 36.

Russell, Bertrand. *The Problems of Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, 1959.