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After Bitter Campus Battles, The 'Great Books' Rise Again

By JACQUES STEINBERG

CHICAGO, Jan. 16— Prof. Bruce Gans was wildly pacing the front of classroom A-307, dashing from Yeats's "Second Coming" to Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," with brisk detours through the Bible, T. S. Eliot, Nietzsche and Arthur Miller.

The setting for this meditation on the great works of Western civilization was not Oxford or Harvard or the University of Chicago. It was a night class at Wilbur Wright College, a community college on this city's North Side that caters to high school graduates considered not ready for four-year institutions, as well as to X-ray technicians, cellular phone sales clerks and bank tellers looking to better their lot.

That so many of the students were Hispanic or black was noteworthy, for their backgrounds are barely reflected in the works that Professor Gans teaches. And yet, in only the second year since the college started its "great books program," in which Professor Gans plays a starring role, 900 students have enrolled in courses under the curriculum's umbrella.

The program's popularity, mirrored in similar new efforts at a dozen colleges across the country, would seem to rebut those critics who have long dismissed the relevance of courses that celebrate the works of a cadre of writers who are almost exclusively white, male and dead. But the classics, it seems, are making a comeback of sorts, sometimes in unexpected places.

"If I wanted to learn more about black writers, Hispanic writers, minority writers, I'd take a course in Aztec culture or Mexican culture," said Oscar Martinez, a 23-year-old Mexican immigrant who studied Swift's "Gulliver's Travels" with Professor Gans last semester. "I'm here to make myself a more intellectual person, regardless of my race, regardless of my background."

The new program at Wright, which, like those at the other colleges, began over the last three years, allows students to earn a minor or certificate by taking a concentration of courses on the so-called great books of the Western canon.

In many instances, the courses themselves already existed. What is different is that the institutions, most of them ranked in the middle to lower end of the academic pack, are taking steps to underline such classes and to emphasize that they are critical to a liberal arts education -- in ways that recall the pioneering "great books programs" at the University of Chicago and Columbia in the early 20th century.

Deans at a number of institutions involved say it would have been virtually unthinkable to create these programs a decade ago when the classics were under heavy fire. But they say that the addition, since then, of minors or certificates in women's studies, African-American studies and gay and lesbian issues has opened a window for those who feel the canon should get its due.

All of the new programs are steeped in long-dead European or other Western writers from Aristotle to Hemingway, according to the National Association of Scholars, a conservative organization that encourages and records the germination of such classes.

And in defining the courses as largely Western, the colleges -- including Clemson University in South Carolina and the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee -- are perhaps writing the next chapter in the two-decade-old debate over which works should be considered great, a fierce cultural discussion that shows no signs of abating.

"I doubt that this signifies a great shift in the culture wars back to traditional learning," said Gerald Graff, the associate dean for curriculum and pedagogy at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "What it does signify is the unresolved nature of the issues in the debate, the fact that 10 to 15 years after these issues erupted, they are still very much roiling under the surface."

The classical canon has been battered by critics who argue that it reflects a Eurocentric and sexist bias, one that has long excluded worthy African-American, Hispanic, African, Asian and female writers. In response, many colleges began increasing the number of works by authors like the Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston and more contemporary writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou.

The inauguration of Western literature programs at colleges like Wright and the repackaging of existing courses like those at the University of Wisconsin, have been shepherded in many cases by professors allied with the National Association of Scholars, which is in Princeton, N.J. The association said it helped stoke this revival in a conference at Lake Tahoe in 1997, to which it invited three dozen professors.

Almost all of the new programs have been started on a shoestring by people who say they believe that such courses have been diluted in the name of political correctness. The Wright program, which receives no outside financing, has a budget of about \$1,000 for supplies.

At the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, students can now pursue a certificate "in the study of the liberal arts through the great books," a rigorous endeavor that requires them to take a two-semester survey course in Western civilization and five courses in "the great books." The program, which withstood a yearlong battle in various faculty committees, emphasizes Homer, Plato and Dante, among other Western writers, although there have been one-time courses in the Koran and in Sanskrit epics.

At Delta State, a university of about 4,000 students midway between Jackson, Miss., and Memphis, a new minor in the "great books" centers on four courses: the classical tradition (Herodotus, Euripides), the Judeo-Christian tradition (St. Augustine, Chaucer), the early modern world (Hume, Jane Austen) and the modern world (Freud, Darwin).

"There was some discussion at one time that we could add a non-Western section, 'great works of the Asian tradition,' or something like that," said Miriam C. Davis, an assistant professor of history. "The problem is we don't have anyone who feels qualified to teach it."

As Professor Gans of Wright College sees it, virtually all the writers who have asked the most profound questions about life -- and posited the most eloquent answers -- did so at least 50 years ago, and more likely centuries earlier. That theirs happens to be an overwhelmingly white male club, he said, is no reason to counterbalance their works with those of more contemporary writers, many of them minorities, who have yet to pass the test of time -- no matter that some, like Mr. Garcia Marquez, have won the Nobel Prize.

Professor Gans added: "I wanted these kids to have a certificate where they could go to a four-year institution and say: 'When I was at Wright College, I read the best that was thought and said. I learned about Thucydides. I learned about Schopenhauer, Plato, Mill, Aristophanes, Kant.' "

One of Professor Gans's students, Keith Morgan, 31, who enrolled at Wright after he left the Army as a sergeant in 1996, said he had seen much of himself in the story of another returning veteran: Jay Gatsby. No matter that "The Great Gatsby" and its creator, F. Scott Fitzgerald, were white, and Mr. Morgan is black.

"I have a dream, just like Gatsby, to be successful," said Mr. Morgan, who hopes to become a guidance counselor and thinks a knowledge of the Western classics will help.

"To me, as a black man, you have to get past your color and just appreciate what's being written," Mr. Morgan continued. "Professor Gans chooses really good titles."

That, like so much of the discussion surrounding the classics, is open to debate.

In starting the "great books program" at Wright, Professor Gans proposed the Bible, the Koran and the works of more than 140 writers drawn largely from a list of the classics compiled by Encyclopaedia Britannica. James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and Charlotte and Emily Bronte were among fewer than a dozen who were minorities or women.

There was no shortage of teachers and administrators at Wright who challenged Professor Gans's definition of "great," including Romell Murden, the dean of student services and the chairwoman of the college's African-American Heritage Month.

"I don't care if it's Britannica who says this or Gans," Dean Murden said, "there are other great thinkers they can pull out for Gans to teach. To believe otherwise is racist in itself."

Sensitive to such concerns, administrators at Wright struck a compromise that drew more than a dozen other professors under the "great books" tent. Those who wish to be included must draw at least half of the books on their syllabuses from the list put forth by Professor Gans.

What may be most remarkable at Wright, where more than half the students are minorities and recent immigrants, is that students who grew up worlds away have been so drawn to courses that center on writers from Western Europe, white America or ancient Greece or Rome.

Mr. Martinez, who moved to Chicago from Mexico when he was a boy, wrote a paper for Professor Gans in which he compared the climate in the cleaning-equipment factory where he worked to the disengaged theorists whom Gulliver observes on Laputa.

"I have encountered similar individuals as the ones described by Gulliver," wrote Mr. Martinez, who wants to be an engineer. "They are my employers. Although they work in the same environment, they do not converse with the common people (factory employees)."

Mr. Martinez, who received an "A" on the paper, said he decided to quit his job after writing those words.

As a graduate of the University of Wisconsin who struggled through Shakespeare with Cliffs Notes at his side, Professor Gans, 49, says he empathizes with his students, who often labor to make sense of works that have confused even the most erudite scholars.

"Anything you get out of something profound," he said, "is better than getting 100 percent out of something of no significance."

Photo: Prof. Bruce Gans runs a tough, but popular, classics program at Wright College in Chicago. Recently he met with a student, Heidi Hernandez. (Todd Buchanan for The New York Times)(pg. A16)