When in 1785 Charles Nisbet came from Scotland to Pennsylvania, he could claim to be a missionary, sailing west to the edge of British civilization much as Saint Paul had hoped to cross the Mediterranean to the western end of the Roman Empire, Spain. Nisbet was a Presbyterian minister and so was obeying, at the invitation of others, the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20), Christ’s post-resurrection command to His bewildered disciples to preach the Gospel to the ends of the Earth.

However, Nisbet was also a scholar, known by his contemporaries as a walking library, and so he can be seen as a missionary not only for his Christian faith, but also for the Western culture that had shaped the contours of his mind. These lectures from 1792 on literature and literary criticism stand as evidence of Nisbet’s erudition. As one browses through their pages, there does not seem to be a famous author from classical antiquity to his own day that Nisbet had not read. Nisbet had read them, and he quoted them, often in their original languages. From Homer and Vergil to Chaucer and Milton, from Aristotle to Cicero to Joseph Addison, no one seems to be left out. There is Xenophon and Samuel Johnson, Cervantes and Quintilian. Nevertheless, there is one remarkable omission, unusual when one finds mention of Tasso, Petrarch, and Boccaccio: Nisbet seems never to have read Dante.

In these lectures, Nisbet takes his lead from Aristotle’s Poetics, with its careful distinctions between genres and its ways to assess works of literature. As one would expect, Nisbet spends much time discussing poetry, whether Ovid, Pindar, or the Psalms, but he also discusses other branches of literature. There are dramatists such as Sophocles, Seneca, and Shakespeare, and novelists such as Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett, and Dean Jonathan Swift. Nisbet also has time for his contemporaries on the Continent, such as Goethe, Rousseau, and Voltaire, men whose perspective he could not have found congenial. In the classical tradition Nisbet inherited and handed on, literature also included history, and so one should not be surprised to see Nisbet
discussing Herodotus, Tacitus, and Edward Gibbon. After all, those historians, and many others besides, crafted their sentences and paragraphs as carefully as any poet refining his verse.

Attending Nisbet’s classes on Western literature was not the usual Humanities survey course one might encounter today, a literary “From Plato to NATO” in three months. Instead, the student received a framework for understanding the long trajectory of European belles lettres. “Received” is the best word to use; the student was the passive recipient of Nisbet’s phenomenal memory. The student’s activity in his (for the students of Nisbet were all young men) reception of these lectures was limited to writing his notes. It was a time-honored pedagogical method, called “praelection,” and the modern student must remember that at the root of the English word “lecture,” is the Latin word for reading. Nisbet taught as centuries of European instructors had taught, by slowly reading his text, and the student patiently (and here one does well to remember the root, to suffer) copied down what was being read to him.

Thus, in the literal sense, education was seen as traditional, a handing over of a legacy of learning. This approach to education assumed the student would keep his notes and refer to them in later life. Most of Nisbet’s students became Protestant ministers, some became lawyers and politicians. Nisbet’s style may at the time have seemed brutally dull, but by the end the student had absorbed one of the great gifts of Western education, the value of critical thought.

It was a process of continuity extending back at least as far as the days of the medieval universities and the heritage of Christian humanism they preserved from ancient Rome through the Fathers of the Church. For us, an unexpected benefit is hearing echoes of Nisbet’s actual voice: amidst the student’s misspelling of names of authors he did not know and scrawling misheard Latin quotations, he records a reference to “Dane Swift.” Across a little more than two centuries, one can still hear the Scottish accent of Charles Nisbet.

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