Literature and art help us transcend the deficiencies of modern life

By: Kennedy Parker, CHaSS Communications Journalist

USU Uintah Basin’s professor of English, Alan Blackstock, in collaboration with Roman & Littlefield, Willa Cather, and E.M. Forester published a book titled Transatlantic Transcendentalism. The book explores liberal humanism and modernism as well as the authors’ search for transcendence. Transatlantic Transcendentalism dives into the “imagined alternatives to the lamentable present embodied in the novels of Willa Cather and E.M. Forester and examines how literature and the arts might assist in transcending the deficiencies and disunities of life in the modern era” said Blackstock.

While teaching Cather’s A Death Comes for the Archbishop while simultaneously working on a research article for Forester’s A Passage to India, Blackstock came across a number of parallels between their works which gave him the idea to create a course that encompassed the idea of “only connect” liberalism. “Only connect” is a curriculum style which assumes that an educated person should be able to see connections which allow concepts to make sense within the realms of the real world and how to act in the real world in creative ways. The book was then developed to explore the idea of connecting across boundaries that arise between differences in class, culture, nationality, and religion. “The research I conducted while preparing and teaching the course also generated a number of conference presentations and articles comparing the work of Cather and Forster, ultimately leading to the present volume. The responses from my students and peers to the course and the presentations convinced me that an “only connect” approach to Cather and Forster would allow a variety of readers, from students to teachers and critics, to connect meaningfully with both authors, and with the period, tensions, and questions their works so memorably evoke” said Blackstock in a personal communication. Blackstock provided a quotation from E.M Forster which encompasses the essence of Transatlantic Transcendence.

“And occasionally we see that beautiful creature, the flying fish, which rises out of the water altogether into the air and the sunlight. English literature is a flying fish. It is a sample of the life that goes on day after day beneath the surface; it is a proof that beauty and emotion exist in the salt, inhospitable sea.”

--E. M. Forster, “Notes on the English Character.”

Blackstock disclosed that the writing process was a fairly quick one. While preparing his new course, he had already gathered a lot of material that he would use to write Transatlantic Transcendentalism. However, the publishing process proved to be more difficult. “[Because] a new editor-in-chief took over halfway through, and revising the manuscript after receiving the editor’s and reader’s comments, along with securing permission to quote from the authors’ work, took some time and effort as well. I am grateful for a grant from the USU English department that allowed me to hire a professional indexing company to create the index for the book--that saved a great deal of time and headache” said Blackstock.

Black stock is currently working on a new article called “Writing Against the Forster Project” which considers the relationship between Forster’s work, A Passage to India, and Midnight’s Children by Salman Rushdie.

When asked to offer any advice to students, faculty, and alumni of CHaSS, Blackstock said “My advice on life in
general is this: to transcend the stream of the present and to rise above the inhospitable sea, follow the flying fish.”