THE WESTERN CULTURAL TRADITION

The purpose of the two year Western Cultural Tradition sequence is to introduce the student to a wide variety of important texts in the history of Western thought. During our year together the primary texts we first consider emerge as part of that phenomenon we term the Renaissance. We will conclude our seminar next spring with an extended inquiry into the development of Existentialist thought. In between we will survey as much of three centuries of intellectual ferment as our time and stamina permit.

I think the appropriate way to begin our seminar is to reflect a bit on the title of the course. By defining our common undertaking as a study of the "Western cultural tradition", we instructors who formulate the "Program" of honors study have implied certain general presuppositions which are themselves worth considering even before approaching specific texts. Why, for example, emphasize a Western (and virtually exclusively European, at that) tradition? And what about the word "tradition" itself? Surely one implication embedded in the course title is that, whatever diversity of attitude and judgment separates one "Western" writer from another, these thinkers share fundamental assumptions about the life of the mind.

Having completed the first year of the sequence, your work in second year ought to render you ever more competent to assess the very foundations upon which this curriculum rests. In the end, the title of the course, its "great books/great ideas" format, should be as much an issue for our mutual concern as the problems raised by the readings themselves. By being self-conscious about the context of our studies, we speak to the broader issue which affects us all: what is the value of a so-called "liberal" education in "arts & sciences"? As our seminar progresses, we may also now and again in our discussions reflect some of the modern intellectual criticism which has challenged these presuppositions upon which our curriculum rests.

Thus, the general question which begins our collective undertaking: can we, too, discover the common themes which constitute this "tradition"? If so, with what affect upon our own intellectual assumptions? Can we develop a frame of reference in which particular texts may be seen in the perspective of a Western intellectual tradition which extends from Classical Antiquity to the present?

The idea of our shared undertaking is to view the reading list as representational, pointing (hopefully) to the general direction of Western thought after the Renaissance. No matter how many texts we discuss, their number will represent only a fraction of the number which we could examine. It seems to me that what ought to distinguish the Honors Program student is the quality of the effort to understand the complexity and scope of the Western intellectual accomplishment. There should be a belief that such an overwhelming task, no matter how seemingly quixotic, is worth the strenuous effort required.

With this premise in mind, I submit for your consideration the following point of departure for our seminar: I suggest that a crucial element in the growth of Western thought from the period of the Renaissance has been an increasing commitment to the potentialities of rational cognition, a process best exemplified in the historical phenomenon we term, by way of shorthand, the "Scientific Revolution". Dealing with the ramifications of rational inquiry and analysis will thus provide an initial structure with which to organize our readings.

The Reading List
Note that the semester is organized around eight principal themes. With each there is a primary and a secondary set of readings. Where the publishers are mentioned for the primary readings, please be sure to purchase that edition. Since theme seven is optional, you need not purchase the primary texts unless you are interested in pursuing the topic.

I. What is the natural order? What relation does the social order bear to it? What is Nature? Law? Their relation?

Shakespeare, Sonnet 35  
Kochanowski, The Laments  
Shakespeare, Richard II (Penguin)  
Machiavelli, The Prince (Hackett)  
Luther, "The Bondage of the Will"  
"The Freedom of a Christian"  
["The Bondage of the Will" and "The Freedom of a Christian" are to be found in J. Dillenger, ed., Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings (Doubleday)]

Durer, The Large Passion & The Small Passion Woodcuttings  
Bach, St. Matthew Passion  
Shakespeare, King Lear (Penguin)  

Other possibilities:  
Shakespeare, Henry IV, Pts. I & II  
Hamlet  
Othello  
Calderon, Life is a Dream  
Benvenuto Cellini, Autobiography  
Erasmus, In Praise of Folly  
Machiavelli, The Discourses

II. Que sais-je? Scepticism and the Scientific Method

And also: "Of Cannibals, Of Sadness"

Descartes, Discourse on Method & The Meditations (Hackett)

Other possibilities:  
Bacon, "The Great Instauration"  
Galileo, "On Theology as Queen of the Sciences"

III Augustinianism, Secular and Religious

Pascal, Pensees (Penguin)  
Milton, Paradise Lost (Penguin)  

Other possibilities:  
Bayle, Historical and Critical Dictionary  
Calvin, Institutes  
Racine, Phaedra  
Moliere, The Misanthrope  
Milton, Areopagitica  
Locke, "Letter Concerning Toleration"  
Hobbes, Leviathan

IV. The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism
Voltaire, "Philosophical Dictionary"  
"Micromegas"  
"Candide"  
[all from The Portable Voltaire, (Viking Press)]

Reimarus, "Passage of the Israelites" (a handout)  
Boswell, "Conversation with Hume" (a handout)

Other possibilities:
Johnson, Rasselas  
Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion  
Montesquieu, The Persian Letters  
Gibbon, Decline and Fall.  
Swift, Gulliver's Travels  
Defoe, Moll Flanders  
Diderot, Rameau's Nephew  
Sterne, Tristam Shandy

V. The Enlightenment: The Science of Freedom

Rousseau, Discourse on the Origins of Inequality  
On the Social Contract  
[Both "The Discourse" and "The Social Contract" are to be found in Rousseau, The Basic Political Writings (Hackett)]

Kant, "What is Enlightenment?"  
[Perpetual Peace and Other Essays (Hackett)]

Other possibilities,  
Austen, Pride and Prejudice  
Kant, Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals  
Beccaria, On Crimes and Punishments  
Reynolds, Discourses on Art  
Smith, Wealth of Nations  
Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman

VI. The Romantic Rebellion

Rousseau, The Confessions (excerpts, esp. 1st 6 bks.) (Penguin)  
Romantic Poetry (a handout)

Other possibilities:
E. Bronte, Wuthering Heights  
Goethe, The Sufferings of Young Werther  
Coleridge, "On Reason and Understanding"  
Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France  
Chateaubriand, The Genius of Christianity

VII. The Individual vs. Society [*nb: this unit is optional]

Stendhal, The Red & the Black (Penguin)  
C. Bronte, Jane Eyre (Penguin)

Other possibilities:
Pushkin, Eugene Onegin  
The Bronze Horseman  
Lermontov, A Hero of Our Times
VIII.  **Rondo**

Cervantes, *The Ingenious Gentleman, Don Quixote de la Mancha* (Oxford)

Finally, Two very useful supplements:

Peter Gay, ed., *The Enlightenment: A Comprehensive Anthology* (Simon & Shuster). It is, alas, currently out of print, but may be borrowed from my office.

And a helpful general guide: F.L. Baumer, *Main Currents of Western Thought* (Yale)