Western Cultural Tradition

Reading List:

Olney, Metaphors of Self, (handout)

Augustine (354-430) Confessions, Book X

Petrarch (1304-1374) "Letter to Posterity", selected sonnets

Michelangelo (1475-1564) selected sonnets

Machiavelli (1469-1527) The Prince, Mandragola

film: Much Ado About Nothing

More (1478-1535) Utopia

A Man For All Seasons (Bolt) & film

Shakespeare (1564-1616) King Lear & film

Luther (1483-1546) Dillenberger Anthology

Tasso (1544-1595) Jerusalem Delivered

(handout)

Milton (1608-1674) Paradise Lost

Montaigne (1533-1592) Essays

film: The Black Robe

Descartes (1596-1650) Discourse on Methods and Meditations

Pascal (1623-1662) Pensees

film: My Night At Maude's

Voltaire (1694-1778) Candide
Class/Author:

Sept. 3: Introduction - Olney handout
Sept. 8, 10, 15: Augustine, Petrarch, Michelangelo, Montaigne
Sept. 17, 22, 24: Machiavelli

Sept. 19 paper #1 due
Sept. 29, Oct. 1, 6: More & Bolt

Oct. 10 paper #2 due
Oct. 8, 15, 20: Shakespeare
Oct. 22: Luther

Oct. 24 paper #3 due
Oct. 27, 29: Tasso (selections)
Nov. 3, 5, 10: Milton (selections)

Nov. 7 paper #4 due
Nov. 12, 17, 19: Montaigne
Nov. 24: Descartes

Nov. 21 paper #5 due
Dec. 1, 3: Pascal
Dec. 8: Voltaire

Dec. 8 paper #6 due

Course Requirements:
- Class attendance & participation
- One oral presentation (with handout)
- 6 Short papers (5 pages)
- Final exam
"Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
che la diritta via era smarrita."

"In the middle of the journey of our
life, I came to my senses
within a dark wood where the
straight way was lost"

Dante

"The power of the memory is great, O
Lord. It is awe-inspiring in its profound and
incalculable complexity. Yet it is my mind: it is my
self. What, then, am I, my God? What is my nature? A
life that is ever varying, full of change, and of
immense power. The wide plains of my memory and its
innumerable caverns and hollows are full beyond
compute of countless things of all kinds. Material
things are there by means of their images; knowledge
is there of itself; emotions are there in the form of
ideas or impressions of some kind, for the memory
retains them even while the mind does not experience
them, although whatever is in the memory must also be
in the mind. My mind has the freedom of them all. I
can glide from one to the other. I can probe deep
into them and never find the end of them. This is the
power of memory! This is the great force of life in
living man, mortal though he is!

Augustine, Confessions, Bk X, 17

We begin this semester, as we journey through
the Renaissance into the Enlightenment, with
reflections upon the past—Augustine, Dante, Petrarch—
powerful voices seeking the meaning of existence,
examining the essence of the human soul. In our
course this year, we will continue this study of the
human spirit. As we analyze and reflect upon
literary, philosophical, historical, theological and
scientific works of the 16th, 17th, and 18th
centuries, we will move from the universal experience
to the more personal, seeing connections with our
present situation, learning from the past. The
foundation, the framework, against which our studies
will take place, will be the concept of autobiography,
each author's attempt at self-discovery and purpose.
As we examine and sift through the many layers of
meaning in these highly personal and profound works of
literature, we will, no doubt, discover the universal
connections in what it means to be human, to be fully alive, journeying the self-same paths to truth.

Augustine's lament that "men pay no attention to themselves," is echoed in Dante's acknowledgment that at the midpoint of his life he had almost lost all awareness of existence. Augustine's insistence upon the importance of "looking within oneself" becomes Petrarch's major theme. We will spend this semester carefully examining our role in society and in the universe.

This search for meaning in life reappears in the Renaissance—the genius of the human spirit, the emphasis on inward reflection. The belief in an all-powerful God, moves toward a more personal and individual understanding of God, the view of justice and morality becomes more strongly developed, and the search for knowledge and humanity's place in the universe is intensified.

Among all the "happy wanderings" our readings will lead us over the course of this year, I have chosen to focus on (though certainly not restrict us to) one theme, central to being human and that is Relationship. Dividing Relationship into 3 parts, (Dante would be proud), we will explore the following:

1) one's relationship to oneself

2) one's relationship to the other

3) one's relationship to God

examining their interconnectedness, if any, and development through the centuries. Some questions to ponder.... How do I see myself? How do others see me? Is that an accurate perception? Can I relate to men? to women? to authority figures? to the marginalized? to the victim? to the perpetrator? What happens if I'm not functioning perfectly? What if I'm sick, beset with misfortune? Am I there to lend a hand? Do I want to let others know that I have weaknesses? Would I sell my soul? What is a soul? Do I even have one? What good is it to me? How much of my life is my responsibility, how much is the community's and how much is God's? Are the choices I make truly free choices? In the end, how do I make those choices? We all have a "public" self and a "private" self—how closely do mine resemble one another or is that an impossibility given the structures of society?
Now return to these questions and insert the
names of the authors and works (characters) we will be
reading this semester. For example, “How do others
see Thomas More?” “Can Machiavelli relate to ordinary
men?” “Can King Lear take responsibility for his
actions?” “Can Adam and Eve?” “What does Montaigne
really know about himself?” and so on and so forth....

My hope is that this will lead to a broader
knowledge of the material, as well as a more far
reaching knowledge of ourselves and the social,
philosophical, theological and psychological issues of
past centuries and of our own today.

To strengthen this in-depth reflection process, I
would ask that you write 6 short papers, based on this
idea of Relationship and the nature of
autobiography (“coming to consciousness and self-
consciousness throughout the examination of the human
pattern” to quote James Olney), and focused on a
particular text, approximately every two weeks.

Quotes to begin this year’s examination of
the meaning, purpose (is there one?) of life. Keep
these as references, to be used in class discussions,
and with your papers, as points of reflection.

From Olney, speaking of all great writers and poets—
“They were all great men, and in no way more than
this: that each, in the only way he could and as only
he could, testified to his own humanity. Life—their
lives and works and symbols seem to say—has no
explanation, but it may have a meaning. And that
meaning will be discovered by us, if at all, as it was
discovered by these men, if at all, as the correlative
to own’s own being, a metaphor of one’s own self.”

(Metaphors of Self)

From Virginia Woolf— “the beauty of the world which
is soon to perish, has two edges, one of laughter, one
of anguish, cutting the heart asunder.” (Room of One’s
Own)

“Life for both sexes — is arduous, difficult, a
perpetual struggle. It calls for gigantic courage and
strength. More than anything, perhaps, creatures of
illusion as we are, it calls for confidence in
oneself. Without self-confidence we are as babes in
the cradle.” (Room)
From Montaigne - “One must learn to endure what one cannot avoid. Our life, like the harmony of the world, is composed of contrarieties, also of varying tones, sweet and hard, sharp and flat, soft and loud. If a musician liked one sort only, what effect would he make? He must be able to employ them together and blend them. And we too must accept the good and evil that are consubstantial with our life. Our existence is impossible without this mixture, and one side is no less necessary to us than the other.”

“Have you been able to reflect on your life and control it? Then you have performed the greatest work of all.”

“The man who knows how to enjoy his existence as he ought has attained to an absolute perfection, like that of the gods. We seek other conditions because we do not understand the proper use of our own, and go out of ourselves because we do not know what is within us.” (all quotes from Essays).