Honors Program Sophomore Seminar  Fall Semester 2014

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M/W 11:30am-1pm
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Why read the classics instead of reading works which will give us a
deeper understanding of our own times?’ and ‘Where can we find the time
and the ease of mind to read the classics, inundated as we are by the flood
of printed material about the present?’ …. for this regime to continue
without any contamination, the hypothetically lucky reader would have to
avoid reading the newspapers, and never be tempted by the latest novel or
the most recent sociological survey…The contemporary world may be
banal and stultifying, but it is always the context in which we have to
place ourselves to look either backwards or forwards. In order to read the
classics, you have to establish where exactly you are reading them ‘from.’
Calvino, Why Read the Classics?

“Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovi 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, L’Inferno

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
Reading List

“Reading is going toward something that is about to be, and no one yet knows what it will be.” Calvino, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*


**Michelangelo** (1475-1564) selected poetry from *The Poetry of Michelangelo*, trans., Zaslow, Yale, 1991

**Niccolò Machiavelli** (1469-1527): *Mandragola, The Prince*

**Thomas More** (1478-1535): *Utopia*

**Robert Bolt**: *A Man for All Seasons*

**Michel de Montaigne** (1533-1592) *Essays: To the Reader, That No Man Should be Called Happy until after his Death, On the Education of Children, On Friendship, On Experience*


**Shakespeare** (1564-1616): *King Lear*

**Torquato Tasso** (1544-1595) selections from *Jerusalem Delivered*

**John Milton** (1608-1674) *Paradise Lost*: (please read summaries of all books) and Books I-II, III to line 345, IV to line 535, VIII, 1-205 and 249-end, IX, X, 707-end, XII

**Blaise Pascal** (1623-1662) *Pensées*
Class/Author
I would like to point out here at least two things which I have believed in throughout my career and continue to believe in. One is the passion for a global culture...I want to keep alive an image of culture as a unified whole, which is composed of every aspect of what we know and do, and in which various discourses of every area of research and production become part of that general discourse which is the history of humanity, which we must seize and develop ultimately in a human direction. And literature should of course be in the middle of these different languages and keep alive the communication between them. 

Calvino, *Hermit in Paris: Autobiographical Writings*

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.

Michel de Montaigne, *On Experience*

Sept. 3, 8 Introduction - Olney, Calvino for discussion in relation to the syllabus, and to your own studies freshman year (Augustine, Dante, etc.)

Sept. 10, 15, 17: Petrarch, Michelangelo sonnets/poetry

Sept. 22, 24, 29: Machiavelli

SEPT. 29 (WED) PAPER #1 DUE

Oct. 1, 6, 8, 15: More & Bolt

Oct. 20, 22, 27: Montaigne essays

OCT. 27 (MON) PAPER #2 DUE

Oct. 29, Nov. 3, 5: Franco poetry

Nov. 10, 12, 17: Shakespeare

NOV. 17 (MON) PAPER #3 DUE

Nov. 19, 24: Tasso

Nov. 24, Dec. 1, 3: Milton

DEC 8 (MON) PAPER #4 DUE

Dec. 8, 10: Pascal

FINAL EXAM: DEC 18, 9:00AM
Course Requirements

For clarification, please keep in mind that it is entirely appropriate to read *more than* what is assigned, but *never less*.

- Class attendance and thoughtful participation—consistent, engaging participation throughout the semester, for this is a seminar NOT a lecture course. I expect you to arrive for class having read the assigned texts and well-prepared with questions for discussion and insightful comments.

- One oral presentation: Each student will have an opportunity to lead one class discussion (professor for the day) crafted with intelligence and creativity, providing background about the author and his/her time period and highlighting major themes of the work and connections to other texts read and discussed throughout the semester. Please avoid the monotonous presentation that comes from simply reading aloud your written notes/ideas/questions to your classmates. Engage your classmates in serious and challenging conversation.

- 4 papers (3-5 pages) focused on exploration of central themes from the text in order to address the impact of these powerful issues and their relevance throughout time (content and style do matter). I expect well-written, clearly developed and effectively articulated arguments that demonstrate serious reflection and thought. Please refer to the quotes and questions offered in the syllabus as catalysts and possibilities for your writing. At this time I would also like to call your attention to the following website: www.bc.edu/integrity.

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 remarkable and varied qualities of the human spirit, in all its greatness, in all its wretchedness, to use Pascal’s favorite adjective to define the human condition. 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. My hope would be that you all can become ever more critical readers of the texts and of yourselves, viewing an author’s words with respect and a perceptive eye. Language and the written word are powerful tools that can be viewed as magnificent artistry or grotesque propaganda. 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. The search for meaning in life intensifies in the Renaissance, focusing upon the genius of the human spirit, the glorification of the human body, and the emphasis on inward reflection.

Over the course of the semester, as we examine connections between past centuries and our world today and explore the fundamental sociological, philosophical, theological and psychological mysteries of the human condition, we will be able to build upon some of the texts and topics that you have already studied last year or will be studying in other courses this year. By relating to these authors, their texts and one another, we can come to a greater awareness of our own essence.

In addition to the quotes at the beginning of the syllabus, the following may also prove helpful in this year’s examination of the meaning/purpose (if there is one) of life. Keep these as references, to be used in class discussions, and with your papers, as points of reflection.

From James 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.” (A 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.” (Essays)