

Description of Readings

The leading theme of this course is the question of the difference between the ancient and the modern world. Students who have taken Foundations of Western Culture I will obviously have an advantage in dealing with this question. Classroom discussion approaches this question mainly through consideration of action and characters, voice and form. What follows is the running argument of the course, as it informs the various works.

Our first class, an introduction to the problem of the modern, focuses on the meaning of two historical events: Martin Luther's proclamation of his 95 theses at Wittenberg in 1517, and Nicolaus Copernicus's publication of his work *On the Revolution of the Celestial Orb* in 1543. The first event signals the emergence of modern individualism (the individual conscience in immediate confrontation with God, without the mediation of church structure), and the second event signals a transformation in man's relation to the cosmos (we are no longer at the center of the universe). Generally speaking, both events operate over time to unsettle the ground and the framework of human existence, effecting a profound disorientation, psychological and cosmic. At the same time, they open up the possibility of new spheres of endeavor, scientific and artistic, and the possibility of a new decentered humanism.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1600-1601) is about the entrance into this modern world, where "the time is out of joint." The first line of the play -- "Who's there?" -- indirectly raises the question of human identity. Hamlet, who has studied at Wittenberg, is burdened with a sense of the inauthenticity of the external world and the inexpressibility of the self: he has "that within which passes show." The earth, which for an earlier age was a "goodly frame," the well-ordered house of God, with the "majestical roof" of the firmament overhanging, is now nothing more than a "foul and pestilent congregation of vapors," and the human being, in former times the noblest work of God's hands, a creature little lower than the angels, is now no more than a "quintessence of dust." In the course of the play, Hamlet discovers the limits of the classical ideal of reason: there is for him no straight line from the thought to the deed. The more he thinks, the deeper he falls into the abyss of self-consciousness, which raises endless doubt and makes "cowards of us all." He does not abandon reason but works his way through its snares and wrestles with the specter of the past; he arrives at a principle of play, in the sense of both theater and sport, the world as stage and arena. Not reason but "readiness" is the key – something beyond the distinction between active and passive.

*Don Quixote* (1605, 1615) is the first modern novel. This is indicated by the opening chapter, which, unlike the chivalric romances that situated their one-dimensional heroes in an idealized landscape of heroic exploits, gives us a detailed account of the protagonist's daily life, including the organization of his household, his customary food and clothing, his income, and his habits. This empirical emphasis is maintained throughout the novel, especially in its attention to the bodily life of the characters; at the

same time, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, initially conceived in terms of a dialectic of mind and body, aristocrat and peasant, are each highly individualized, making for unprecedented moral complexity in their developing relationship. One of the most innovative of the novel's devices is its formal self-reflexiveness. It is constantly calling our attention to the fact we are reading a novel – ostensibly to save us from the fate of the madman who has read too many tales of chivalry. But this arch novelistic self-consciousness, functioning to call into question the integrity of literary voice, actually works to unsettle the classic distinction between art and nature or fiction and fact, and makes us complicit with the old man dizzied by his books.

Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) takes up the sort of questions Hamlet entertains: questions about human identity and the ground of being. He begins likewise at a distance from classical certainty. He knowingly enters a deep sea of doubt. He asks: What is certain in this life? It is possible that all I consider real, all objects before me, are illusions planted by an evil genius; I cannot be *sure* (as I am sure that one and one makes two) that I am not now dreaming. But even if all objects are false appearances, they appear as such to me, to a subject that perceives or thinks them. I think, therefore I am. By this means, Descartes draws back from the abyss he opened and re-establishes the ground of certainty on the self as a thinking thing, a structure of reflection. This will last until Nietzsche dissolves the ground of certainty once more by pointing out the *linguistic* status of the "I."

*The Misanthrope* (1666) is a modern satire. Whereas classical satire holds up examples of vice and folly to the light of reason, which works to correct or at least illuminate them, Molière's satire revels in incongruity and absurdity without necessarily providing any hope of amendment. There is a distinct ambiguity in the treatment of the main character Alceste, who is at once noble and self-deceiving, generous and arrogant, a man of considerable courage and overarching vanity. The ideals of honesty and decency, each justified in its own right but rendered absurd when taken to an extreme, are put at loggerheads in the very first scene. Contradictions rule the action. Characters suffer the loss of illusions but don't change. As in *Don Quixote*, satire here subserves a moral realism.

Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782) marks the Romantic turn in modern Europe, something already implicit in the principles of individual conscience (Luther) and decentered cosmos (Copernicus). The soul is sensualized, its freedom understood as a power of expansion. At stake in Rousseau is not classical reason but multidimensional experience in a dynamic world, in the great ocean of nature. He steers his way by following the impulses of his heart. Thinking is closely tied to solitary reverie. What in the Renaissance was known as melancholy has become anomie, a problematic relation to the social collective. Rousseau helped pave the way to the French Revolution.

Dostoevsky's underground man – taking the abject, obsessed self-consciousness of Hamlet to new extremes – is right around the corner.

*Pride and Prejudice* (1813) documents a pivotal stage in the transformation of a classical ideal in modernity: the movement from a class-bound to a moral understanding of nobility (what for the aristocratic Hamlet is the criterion of being), a development that is simultaneous with the emergence of individualism out of feudal prerogatives. In proposing that the institution of marriage be rooted in personal compatibility rather than family interests, in justice rather than advantage, Elizabeth Bennet takes up the banner of “liberty, equality, and fraternity,” however obliquely. At the same time, without abandoning the principle of nature, Jane Austen subtly revolutionizes the form of the novel by her exploration of the multilevel, partly unconscious life of consciousness and the intimate dynamics of domestic existence.

In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), Nietzsche undermines the Cartesian cogito, and with it all classical certainty. He discerns in Descartes’ ground of identity, the unquestioned ego, a grammatical prejudice, namely, the historically evolved structure of subjectivity: that which causes us to say “I.” According to Nietzsche, this scarcely conscious causality is a function of the universal will to power, which posits or constructs unities – spatial, temporal, psychological -- where “in truth” there is only flux. The self is a multiplicity, the world an arsenal of masks for the self. Actions are always essentially unfathomable. In place of logical reason is constitutional ambiguity – the deepest truths involve contradiction – and in place of a world order or ontological ground is the Dionysian ocean of transformations, indeterminate world play. It is in a sense another Copernican crisis in thought -- at once the advent of nothingness (nihilism as the sign of authenticity in thinking) and the adumbration of strange new gods.

Kafka's comic metaphysical novel of modern society, *The Trial* (fragment, written 1914-1915), unfolds the experience of groundlessness in the everyday world – the world of private apartments and overcrowded tenements, grimy bustling city streets, offices and corridors and stairways without end. The archaic labyrinth is reborn in the horizontal and vertical coils of modern bureaucracy. All the classical oppositions threaten to melt away. In unfailingly sober and precise language, the novel narrates an elusive nightmare in which everything somehow follows inevitably without ever “making sense,” like messages in a code to which the key is lost. We are never sure this horror story – this relentless anatomizing of futility and despair -- is not a (Jewish) joke, told in a deadpan tone, at only a few removes from vaudeville. The hero K., always inquiring and ready to learn, never attaining to certitude or justification, embodies something centrally anonymous in the human being (he responds as “we” would do), after the shattering of the traditional ground of identity in the ego. Likewise, there is no “plot” in the traditional sense: the story un-folds – with the mesmerizing power of a fairy tale – topographically, according to K.'s fruitless penetration and analysis of the intricately interarticulated, recessed spaces of the law.

“The Waste Land” (1922) is T. S. Eliot's hallucinatory vision of the modern metropolis, directly inspired by Charles Baudelaire's somber and vivid collection, *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), the first and most popular portrayal of city life in lyric poetry. In a manner that is typical of the high modernism of the early twentieth century, Eliot's poem brings together the most advanced with the most archaic. His technical means are modern, intimately

related to contemporary developments in music (atonality), painting (cubism), and cinema (intercutting and superimposition). Making use of the method of montage to organize his materials, he registers the experience of shock, discontinuity, and fragmentation in the multiperspectivity of modern urban life. Making use of the method of ventriloquy or polyphony – along with an art of citation -- to voice his lines, he renders the spiraling plurality of the self (“I am all the names in history,” said Nietzsche). And yet his motifs are traditional, ancient, mythic, deriving from forgotten systems of magic, tribal rituals of fertility and burial, ancestor worship, the death and resurrection of the vegetation -- the wastes of tradition, in short, reprocessed through a modern imagination at once tragic and parodic, individual and collective.