

HMST 296 & 297 HUMANISTIC TRADITION 1 & 2

Introduction

Prof. Robert Myles, 688 Sherbrooke Street West, rm. 267

Office Hours: Friday: 8:30-10:00:

robert.myles@mcgill.ca 514-398-3320

Of necessity (there are only six credits of required courses), the courses concentrate on the cultures of the Western tradition, a tradition shaped primarily by the activities, philosophies, religions and general cultures of ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, and medieval Europe, by the culture of the Enlightenment and the aftermath the horrors of the First and Second World Wars. While many of the effects of this tradition have been positive (at least for our species), some of them have been horrendous (for our species and for others). Some think that the present situation of the human race and even the biosphere in which we live is precarious because of what we, human beings, have done, are doing, and don't do. What are we, something constant and changing, or both? What are the many answers to the question what is it to be human? Can we change the world for the better?

The dividing line between the two courses is the year 1600 (roughly).

These are, above all, *reading and writing* courses. You respond to your reading primarily by writing in your journals (50%), by demonstrating careful reading through objective quizzes (40%) and by participating in a your class discussion groups (10%). Class format is lecture and discussion.

The key to the courses: IMAGINATION. Listen!

Icicles hung round me; hail showers flew.
The only sound there, was the sea booming –
The ice-cold wave – and at times the song of the swan.
The cry of the gannet was all my gladness,
The call of the curlew, not the laughter of men.
The mewling gull, not the sweetness of mead.
(From *The Seafarer* – in this coursepack)

Did you hear the human voice? A Saxon, about 900 BCE, wrote that but you can hear him still. There is something “human” that crosses the centuries. What is it? Alone, in a dangerous, isolated place, with no friends near. “The past is not dead. It is not even past” (William Faulkner). Hearing this voice is possible because of the magic of writing:

Nothing is so purely the trace of the mind as writing, but also nothing is so dependent on the understanding mind. In its deciphering and interpretation a miracle takes place; the transformation of something strange and dead into a total simultaneity and familiarity. This is like nothing else that has come down from the past. The remnants of the life of the past, what is left of buildings, tools, the contents of graves, are weather-beaten by the storms of time that have swept over them, whereas a written tradition when deciphered and read, is to such an extent pure mind that it speaks to us as if in the present. That is why the capacity to read, to understand what is written, is like a secret art, even a magic that looses and binds us. In it time and space seem to be suspended. The man who is able to read what has been handed down in writing testifies to the sheer presence of the past.

(Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 145)

Although much is lost in translation, although much is strange because the world is constantly changing we can still read texts from the past and hear a lot about ourselves and about other people who are both like and unlike us.

Certain voices from the past and present have been deployed in the coursepacks for 296 & 297. *To some degree*, all of us, regardless of our cultural heritage are related to these voices. *To some degree*, these voices are also related to each other. *To some degree*, many of these voices have contributed to constructing -- for good and/or ill -- the culture(s) in which we find ourselves today.

Hegel says that “The course of history does not show us the Becoming of things foreign to us, but the Becoming of ourselves and of our knowledge.” One may critique certain assumptions in this statement (what are they? one object of the course is to help you spot these), but it seems irrefutable that we have many ideas that are not our own, many of our concepts and understandings are received (French: *idées reçues*). If you ask “*Why do I think the way I think?*”, sometimes the answer might be (and often we do not even know it): *to some degree, because of Plato, of Aristotle, of Genesis (even if we are not practicing Jews, Christians, or Moslems), of the Sermon on the Mount (even if we are not Christians), Heloise and Abelard, of Mary Wollstonecraft (even if we do not consider ourselves feminists), of Darwin, of Nietzsche,* An assumption of the course is that, for better or worse, directly or indirectly, both the civilization and the savagery of the west are the products of a tradition that we can trace back (because of writing) for about three thousand years. This tradition is marked by *continuity and change*: the words that define history.

“*What is it to be human?*” Some people (e.g., Richard Rorty in our 297 coursepack) think this question is unanswerable. Indeed, as the material selected will indicate or suggest, there are many, perhaps innumerable answers, some of them are contradictory, indeed some of the texts in themselves may contain contradictions. However, I hope these courses will show that all of them are true – *to some degree* – in revealing the human condition, the human predicament -- what it is to be human.

Why do this? One important and perhaps useful reason is to be able to answer a bit better the question, “*Why do I think the way I think?*” Whether we know it or not, much of what we think is *related* to voices from the past. Relations to the past and the present, which are neither us nor not us, are real, whether we know it or not. Knowing relations to be relations, interpretable and re-interpretable, may increase the quality of our consciousness -- which some think a benefit. The course assumes that the advice of the Oracle of Delphi, *Know thyself*, is advice worth following -- and a lifelong task.