

Course Objectives Humanities 3200 and English 32021

A spirit rock stands alongside some fast water in Lake of the Woods near where I lived as a child. For centuries Sioux and Ojibwa people left gifts beside the rock when they paddled past (and still did, some of them, when I was young), a practical gesture of respect for the power that resided there. When the Europeans moved into the region, they named that stretch of water Devil's Gap in acknowledgement of the spirit rock, and when the railway was built the CPR established a tourist outpost nearby and called it Devil's Gap Lodge. In its honour they painted the rock to make it look like the head of the devil, conceived as a benign Old Nick, and the image since then has identified my home town.

I have many memories of the devil of Devil's Gap, and the most poignant comes from when I was perhaps ten years old. It was one of those magical nights when the moon draws crowds of children into the street in an ecstasy of play—

Boys and girls come out to play,
The moon doth shine as bright as day.

In the midst of the scrum I ran into a friend of my earliest years, and he was full of alarming talk. A visiting evangelist had shaken him up. We were devil worshippers, all of us who lived in that town, and bound for the torments of hell, the evidence as clear as the painted image we so admired.

We have here three stages of an understanding of the world: at first, something spiritually true, the old animistic world with its beautiful integration, the local and the familiar opening so intimately into the infinite, and then, a crude appropriation of the original, and finally, a deconstruction of the appropriation, performed from an inflexible conceptual position ignorant of the original. It is a neat little allegory of the history of Western culture: first the old cosmos out of which everything has grown, second the rough and playful rationalism of an age of commerce and empire, and third a deconstruction from a variety of confidently totalizing ideologies.

The literature that we will be reading together in Humanities 3200 dramatizes, in its way, the key stage of the allegory: the rise of modernity. I hope that the course will draw you into an engagement of some depth with the texts we read, but I hope too that that engagement will draw you into an intelligent reflection on the nature of modernity.

Why bother with a literary record of modernity

when the philosophical or historical record, which deals so much more directly with the matter, is there to be studied? The question concerns the intellectual authority of literature (and indeed of all creative art), and to answer it I'll point to a picture of the world of learning, the substance of which you are familiar with. It is an illumination from the twelfth-century *Hortus Deliciarum* by Dame Herrad von Landsberg, an Alsatian abbess. Dame Herrad's world of learning is a rose, its petals the seven liberal arts, its heart Lady Philosophy enthroned, beneath whom sit Socrates and Plato on an austere bench, not conversing as one might have thought, but busily writing, each in his own book. Literature is nowhere to be found in the blossom of learning, though the eyes of a liberal thinker might spot traces of it behind a pleat of Rhetoric's gown, despite rhetoric's being the discipline of orators, not poets. Dame Herrad places literature outside her charmed circle, underneath it, where four men identified as *Poetae vel Magi* sit comfortably, each on a damascened cushion. One is writing, another sharpens his pen, another reads intently, and another swings his hand theatrically over an open book. Each is intent, even rapt, an effect, no doubt, of what is being insinuated into his brain by the unsavoury black bird at his ear.

The little black birds tell us why Dame Herrad has banished poets from her lovely rose. They are rebels against reason, men inspired, certainly, but by something subversive to order. Had Dame Herrad needed arguments, she would have found them in Plato: poetry produces falsehood masquerading as truth, poetry produces images instead of a direct apprehension of the original, poetry encourages the licence of desire, particularly Eros, and is thereby defective morally and politically.¹ But these are fragile arguments. Plato undercuts them himself with the artistry of his own dialogues. He enervates them with the respect he gives elsewhere to Eros. And Aristotle refutes them easily by demonstrating the profound emotional and moral ordering that the poets effect. Dame Herrad was in fact old-fashioned in her contempt for the argument against Plato, and by the time of Dante, the poets had risen into the rose of learning. Come the Renaissance, and Lady Poetry will take Lady Philosophy's place on the throne, for (in the eyes of theorists like Sir Philip Sidney) the creative act of the poet resembles, more

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I am drawing on Stanley Rosen's formulation of Plato's argument in *The Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry*.

than any other human act, an act of God, “when with the force of divine breath he bringeth things forth.” Poets taught civil society in the earliest and purest age of civilization, and rightly too, for philosophers teach only by precept, historians only by example, while poets teach by both together. Their art has the power “to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls ... can be capable of.”

We can learn something from Sidney, if we set his invidious hierarchy aside. History is a record of experience, philosophy is a reflection on experience, and poetry is a recreation of experience. Each has its value, and poetry’s value lies precisely in what seems irrational about it. It brings thought sharply up against feelings and sensations, all three realized with an unusual vividness, sometimes in conflict with one another, sometimes in splendid concord, the imagination leaping intuitively, swifter than reason, though respecting what reason demands as it plods along, determinedly, behind. The literary record of modernity is worthy of contemplation because it brings into play the whole range of the human experience of modernity, the sensate and emotional as well as the intellectual.

So, as you proceed through the course, I hope that you will engage yourself fully in the texts that we will be reading, that you will reflect intelligently and imaginatively on your engagement, that in your reflections you will contemplate the evidence our texts bear of the rise of modernity, and that, as an unlooked-for benefit, you will enlarge what you already know about the means literature uses to work its effects. To the historian its methods may sometimes seem a little wet and to the philosopher a little low. But there is nothing effete in the lyric grace of—

Western wind, when wilt thou blow,
The small rain down can rain?
Christ if my love were in my arms,
And I in my bed again.

—as it dissolves into the cry, at once a thoughtless blasphemy and an ardent prayer, bearing, to a man left to die on some field of encounter, a hard recognition of what has had value in life. And the humble simile, the most pedestrian of figures, can illuminate whole orders of being by bringing them up against each other unexpectedly, as happens here, in this poem about the moon—

But if one night she brings us, as she turns,
Soft, steady, even, copious rain
That harms no leaf nor flower, but gently falls
Hour after hour, sinking to the tap roots,

And the sodden earth exhales at dawn
A long sigh scented with pure gratitude,
Such rain—the first rain of our lives, it seems,
Neither foretold, cajoled, nor counted on—
Is woman giving as she loves.

The more that you know about its art, the more that literature will enliven your ear, heart, and mind, and the livelier your own talk and writing and thinking will be for it.