

Honor 2103 Intellectual Traditions III: The Rise of Modernity

The Farrago From Eye to Mind: Words, World & the Limits of Meaning

Course Description

What does it mean to be modern? Is it a question of *style* — the way something is written or painted or scored or sung? Is it an *historical* question having to do with the rise of industrialization and urbanization, with all those modern *things* appearing in the first decades of the 20th century — skyscrapers and cars and airplanes and wireless communication — and the novel *techniques* and *technologies* invented to express this new world? People, writers and artists especially, have always wanted to be “modern” regardless of when they were born. So how can we distinguish what we call “modernism” from earlier versions of the modern?

One of the ways to understand modernism resides precisely in the question of meaning, in the ways some writers interrogate how language does and does not “represent” or “express” or “signify” how we understand and experience our world. A new reality demands new means and forms of expression, or at least demands that we come to terms with how the old ways fall short. Yet we only have the language we have, with its rules and limitations and insistence on always meaning something. Is it possible to create a “new” or “different” language from the one we use everyday? Can we get the words and phrases we have to create meaning in a different way? To be expressive, does language need to mean at all?

We will explore these and other questions by thinking and writing about how language does and does not offer a *medium* as physical and as sensual and as “senseless” as any other raw material: paint, say, or sound, or stone. Sounds like serious stuff but, as with any material, such a way of thinking offers endless possibilities for *play*.

That’s what we will be doing this semester: playing with these ideas by investigating how various writers have played in and with their language. To do this, we will examine some of the different techniques they’ve invented that foreground language as a complex, physical material bringing words closer to the world or exacerbating the gulf between language and reality, what Samuel Beckett called “the farrago from eye to mind”. This farrago will be our playground where the question of historical “modernism” and what might be more generally thought of as “modern” will be our hopscotch court and material means of expression our dodgeball field.

So roll up your sleeves and don’t worry if you get a few word-splinters under your fingernails!

This course fulfills the Humanities Exploration Requirement.

Required Texts

- Plato, *Cratylus*. Hackett (978-0-87220-416-4).
- Leonora Carrington, *The Hearing Trumpet*. New York Review Books (978-1-68137-464-2).
- Samuel Beckett, *Nohow On*. Grove (978-0-8021-4446-1).
- The Farrago Reader (Canvas).