

January 17, 2001

**V55.0404.023, Conversations of the West: *Antiquity and the 19th Century***

Spring 2001

Mondays & Wednesdays, 11:00 a.m.–12:15 p.m., 206 Main Building

Professor Vincent Renzi, Department of Classics & the Morse Academic Plan

903 Main Building

(212) 998-8071

vincent.renzi@nyu.edu

Office Hours: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 3:30–4:30 p.m.

(exceptions posted at <http://homepages.nyu.edu/~vrr1>),  
and by appointment.

Recitations:

§025: Thursdays.....9:30 a.m. – 10:45 a.m.....570 Waverly Building

§026: Thursdays.....3:30 p.m. – 4:45 p.m.....333 Shimkin Hall

§027: Thursdays.....4:55 p.m. – 6:10 p.m.....706 Main Building

Preceptor:

Ms Katherine Hawkins

905A Main Building

kh262@is7.nyu.edu

Office Hours: Mondays, 1:00–2:00 p.m.

Website:

<http://www.nyu.edu/classes/renzi>

Description

Our sense of self, whether experienced as social identity or conscious individuality, seems to be uniquely human. Likewise, we are alone, it appears, among living beings, in attempting to understand the nature of our existence through history, law, philosophy, religion, and art. Self knowledge is thus a peculiarly human possibility; and to consider the achievement it represents is to appreciate the essential features of our humanity.

Overview

As one of the first courses in the Foundations of Contemporary Culture, Conversations of the West serves as an introduction to the study of the liberal arts. The course has a number of complementary goals.

First, it provides N.Y.U. undergraduates with a common academic experience on which to draw both in their interactions with one another and in their later academic work. Although

we may share some books with other sections of Conversations of the West, this core experience is not defined by a canon of texts but by a shared concern to introduce you to modes of humanistic inquiry.

Second, because the course is intended for students early in their college careers, heavy emphasis is placed on building your ability to reason soundly and to analyze texts critically. As in *Writing Workshop*, you will complete frequent writing assignments; however, in this course you will be expected to draw on the lessons learned in expository writing to produce finished work without the constant feedback of a workshop. Likewise, the discussion that occurs in your weekly recitations will be focused on the interpretation of the works we are studying, rather than on the process of writing about them. In this sense, your work in this class should move you beyond the expository essays of *Writing Workshop* to the sort of argumentative essays that will be expected of you later in your academic and professional careers.

Third, Conversations of the West seeks to develop your appreciation of the cultural relevance of selected works in the humanities. Although we shall be concerned to situate these works in their respective historical contexts, the course is not a survey of “great books” definitive of the (putative) Western cultural tradition. Instead, our purpose is to understand how works can be interpreted as constituting a tradition or history and to consider various attempts to define what culture is or might be. I have chosen the works for this class with a view to their relevance to this project and to one another, and because they are challenging materials on which to build academic skills. I do hope that you will come away from the class with an appreciation of their artistic and philosophical merits; but as to whether any are “great books,” I leave it to you to discover if they engage you greatly.

Finally, this class will consider themes, concepts, and ideas of enduring influence and interest. We will be concerned to examine the different ways the creators of the works we shall study have understood our history, human nature, place in the world, and individuality. Our investigation is thus *humanistic* in precisely this sense, namely that it leads us to consider fundamental aspects of our human condition; and the modes of inquiry we shall employ should help you appreciate the extent to which our human self-understanding in turn reflects particular views of our history and human society. This investigation is therefore *liberal* in the sense that it seeks to free us from our accidental historical circumstances, allowing us to gain a greater perspective on the possibilities of human existence.

The spirit of liberal education that finds expression in these course goals is itself an excellent example of the influence exerted on our contemporary society by ancient ideals—in this case derived from Classical Greece. Among the ancient Greeks we find articulated the duplicate concern for a purpose to learning greater than rote mastery of information and for an education that aims to achieve such happiness as derives from understanding our humanity, not merely the fame or profit that comes of technical competence. In this spirit, no direction will here be given for the pursuit of any special study or particular profession; neither will you learn strategies for success in commerce or politics. In this sense the course is entirely impractical in its design; but there are good reasons to think this liberality will nevertheless provide the best preparation for your future endeavors: The skills you learn here are not restricted only to one line of work but are general in their application, and the emphasis is not on the mastery of a fixed body of knowledge but rather on preparation for a life of learning. I cannot claim, more than this, that the course will make you happy; but the not immodest hope shared by many of the authors and artists we shall study is that their works should help you be so. Seen in these ways, the class is preeminently practical, preparing you to flourish in dynamic circumstances in your future studies and professional work, and also, perhaps, for the hard task of deciding what sort of person you will be and what sort of life you will lead. Of course, we cannot presume to measure your humanity. Your overall grade will therefore be based on essays you will write about the works we shall study and your knowledge of basic facts necessary to their interpretation; but your education, I hope, will continue beyond your satisfaction of the course requirements.

### Organization

This class consists of two weekly lectures and a weekly recitation section. This is a typical structure for university-level courses. It most likely differs from that of classes you had in primary and secondary school. Those classes usually meet daily in small groups, provide close direction of your studies, and seek to prepare you with skills and knowledge necessary for later work. By contrast, college classes meet less frequently, ask you to synthesize information from a variety of sources, and require you to recognize independently what you need to know to understand the complexity of an idea—and expect you to take the initiative to learn it.

As with any course, you will get the most out of this class if you prepare in advance. This means doing more than skimming the reading. When you read, you should highlight passages of particular importance and make notes about questions you have or points in the text that you feel bear further exploration. Although the lecture is not primarily intended for discussion, I encouraged you to ask questions both about the readings and about the lectures themselves. Most importantly, after class you should review your notes and re-read the texts.

Because the lecture brings everyone together, it is the best place for me to give you general information, to demonstrate its relevance to the interpretation of the works we are studying, and to discuss broad themes common among them. By contrast, the small size of the recitation makes it ideal for specific discussion of the texts and for personal attention to your development. The weekly writing assignments are intended to build your interpretative skills and to provide a basis for discussion. You should come to recitation prepared both to discuss the week's reading and what you have written about it.

The recitation is not intended to save you the trouble of doing the reading or attending the lectures; neither is its purpose simply to answer questions you may have about them. Rather, the recitation provides a time for focused engagement with your course work. It does not replace but complements the lecture, and it should provide the opportunity for you to integrate the information presented in the lecture with your own insights and those of your classmates. This said, the recitation nevertheless is still only a guide. It remains for you to continue to grapple with the material outside of class—in your conversations with friends, in moments of quiet contemplation, and in re-reading the texts—and in writing your papers and exams.

### Requirements

You are expected to read each of the works listed below, to attend all lectures and meetings of your discussion section, to arrive at class meetings promptly, and to participate actively and appropriately in class. In addition, brief homework assignments and in-class writing exercises (apart from those listed below) will be required, as well as some supplemental reading. A field trip to Central Park and the New-York Historical Society is also required. You will need to make this trip on your own, outside of class. Finally, you will be required to write a report on your trip to Central Park and two essays, and to sit for two examinations, one at midterm and a cumulative final examination. The essays should be five to six pages (typed, double-spaced). All work will be graded as submitted, with no opportunity for revision, and credit will be deducted for poor grammar and spelling.

In determining your grade, we will weigh your completion of the course requirements approximately as follows; bear in mind, however, that you are expected to complete every assignment in order to receive a passing grade for the class.

Class participation, Central Park report, homework, and in-class exercises.....	30%
Papers I & II @ 15% each.....	30%
Midterm.....	15%
Final.....	25%

Note well that a failing grade may be assigned to any student with three absences from lecture and/or recitation. Late work will not be accepted. Incompletes will be considered only in cases of documented medical emergency or other comparably grave circumstances. In the event that you are for good reason unable to attend class, you are expected to contact me in advance (or as soon as is practicable) by telephone or e-mail.

A Note on Classroom Decorum

As a matter of courtesy to the instructors and your fellow students, please arrive at class promptly, and, apart from emergencies, please remain in the classroom for the duration of the lecture or recitation.

Please be sure to shut off all pagers and cellular telephones at the beginning of class.

Recording & Transcription

While you are encouraged to take notes in lecture and recitation, you may not make audio tapes or any other kind of recording in class. Neither may you take or exchange class notes in return for remuneration. Violation of this policy will result in a failing grade for the course.

### Bibliography

The following books and map are required. Please be certain to purchase the editions listed below. All have been ordered through the N.Y.U. Book Center.

Aristophanes. *Four Plays* [*The Clouds, Lysistrata, The Birds, The Frogs*]. William Arrowsmith, Douglass Parker, & Richard Lattimore, transs. New York: Meridian, 1994.

*The New Oxford Annotated Bible, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. New Revised Standard Version. Bruce M. Metzger & Roland E. Murphy, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Euripides. *The Bacchae*, translated and with an introduction by William Arrowsmith. Published together with *Electra* and *The Phoenician Woman*. Volume 5 of the works of Euripides in *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, David Grene & Richard Lattimore, eds. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1968.

Plato. *Five Dialogues* [*Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*], translated by G. M. A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981.

----- . *Phaedrus*, translated, with introduction and notes, by Alexander Nehamas & Paul Woodruff. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995.

Sophocles. *Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone*, translated and with an introduction by David Grene. Volume 1 of the works of Sophocles in *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, David Grene & Richard Lattimore, eds. Second edition. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

*Central Park Map*. Amagansett, NY: Streetwise Maps, 1990.

Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. [1930.] James Strachey, trans. & ed.; biographical introduction by Peter Gay. Standard Edition. New York & London: W. W. Norton: 1989.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear & Trembling*. [1843.] Published together with *Repetition*. Howard & Edna Hong, transs. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

Marx, Karl & Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition*, with an introduction by Eric Hobsbawm. [1848.] New York: Verso Books, 1998.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Genealogy of Morality*. [1887.] Keith Ansell-Pearson, ed.; Carol Diethe, trans. Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Photocopies of the following required readings are available for purchase at Unique Copy Center, 252 Greene Street.

Rosenzweig, Roy & Elizabeth Blackmar. "Private to Public Property" & "The Design Competition." Chapters 3 & 4 of *The Park and Its People: A History of Central Park*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992. Pp. 59–91, 95–120.

Schedule of Classes

Please complete the readings prior to the lecture at which they are first discussed. Be sure to bring the appropriate texts to class.

Lecture

- W 1/17: Introduction.
- M 1/22: Freud, *Civilization & Its Discontents*.  
W 1/24: Freud, *Civilization & Its Discontents*.
- M 1/29: Genesis, Exodus.  
W 1/31: Genesis, Exodus.
- M 2/5: Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*.  
W 2/7: Matthew.
- M 2/12: Descartes, Hobbes, Locke.  
W 2/14: Marx, *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.
- M 2/19: Holiday.  
W 2/21: Marx, *Communist Manifesto*.
- M 2/26: **Midterm Examination.**  
W 2/28: Sophocles, *Oedipus, Antigone*.
- M 3/5: Sophocles, *Oedipus, Antigone* ..... **Paper I.**  
W 3/7: Aristophanes, *The Clouds*.
- M 3/12: Spring Break.  
W 3/14: Spring Break.
- M 3/19: Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito*.  
W 3/21: Plato, *Phaedrus*.
- M 3/26: Plato, *Phaedrus*.  
W 3/28: Euripides, *Bacchae*.
- M 4/2: Job.  
W 4/4: Kierkegaard, *Fear & Trembling*.
- M 4/9: Kierkegaard, *Fear & Trembling*.  
W 4/11: Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*.
- M 4/16: Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*.  
W 4/18: Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*.
- M 4/23: Central Park..... **Central Park report.**  
W 4/25: Central Park. Cole, *The Course of Empire*.
- M 4/30: Conclusion..... **Paper II.**
- M 5/7: **Final Examination.**  
**Note time: 10:00–11:50 a.m.**  
**Location to be announced.**