A Future for American Thought: Making Way for the Revolution
HU 6001

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The wasteland grows: woe to him who hides wastelands within.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Numerous are they who are entirely absorbed in a militant politics, preparing for the social revolution. Rare, very rare are they, who in order to prepare for the revolution, want to make themselves worthy of it.

—G. Friedmann

“Cells” of resistance will be formed everywhere against technology’s unchecked power. They will keep reflection alive inconspicuously and will prepare the reversal, for which “one” will clamor when the general desolation becomes unbearable.

—Martin Heidegger

With respect to a true culture and [humanity], we are essentially provincial still, not metropolitan,—mere Jonathans. We are provincial, because we do not find at home our standards; because we do not worship truth, but the reflection of truth; because we are warped and narrowed by an exclusive devotion to trade and commerce and manufactures and agriculture and the like, which are but means, and not the end.

—Henry David Thoreau

These are dark times in which we live. And yet there remain beacons of light to guide us toward a brighter future. American thought has yielded three such beacons in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Henry David Thoreau. This summer we will approach these great American thinkers as guides along the way to a revolutionary future for which we still hold out hope. They will serve to point us toward the singularity and plurality of a reconfigured public realm; a public realm that is not separated from the private realm by what Hannah Arendt describes as a gulf; nor a public realm premised on the exclusion of others. Our work will be premised on the belief that Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau each in their own way—and yet wonderfully together—offer us ways of being-with-one-another that resist the homogenization and leveling of mass society while simultaneously pointing us toward a certain revolutionary future. We propose to join them in their struggle and their search, which is our struggle and our search, for we still await that American Revolution.

1 Revolution=Love
Required Texts

The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson (Modern Library Edition)
Leaves of Grass and Other Writings: A Norton Critical Edition, Walt Whitman
Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau (Modern Library Edition)
Wandering on the Way, Chuang Tzu
The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching, Thich Nhat Hanh

Note

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Proposed Schedule

Monday, 18 July: Setting the Stage and Emerson
  1. Technology, Democracy, Revolution
  2. “Experience”

Wednesday, 20 July: Thich Nhat Hanh
  1. “The Four Noble Truths”
  2. “The Noble Eightfold Path”

Thursday, 21 July: Emerson
  1. “The Over-Soul”
  2. “Circles”
  3. “Self-Reliance”
  4. “Nature”

Monday, 25 July: Whitman
  1. “Democratic Vistas”
  2. Selected Poems

Wednesday, 27 July: Mencius
  1. Books I-VII, with a focus on Book VI
Thursday, 28 July: Whitman
1. Selected Poems

Monday, 1 August: Thoreau
1. Walden
2. “Life Without Principle”

Wednesday, 3 August: Chuang Tzu
1. selections from “Inner Chapters”
2. selections from “Outer Chapters”

Thursday, 5 August: Thoreau
1. Walden
2. “Walking”

Words to Concepts

In the course of this seminar, we shall attempt to refine the following words into philosophical concepts:

- wonder
- wander
- memory
- revolution
- love
- sacred
- tender
- poet/poetry/poiesis
- divine
- religion
- hope
- joy
- extravagant
- bless/blessed
- nature
- America
- awe
- utopia
- advocate
- fugitive
- way
- profane
- surprise
- genius