

IN THE HUMANITIES CLASSROOM

A Set of Case Studies

*Caroline Walker Bynum, Mary Harvey Doyno, Dorothea von Mücke,
Frederick S. Paxton, Ramona Naddaff, Katharine Wallerstein*

Introduction: To Support Our Claims

The bookstores these days are full of tomes defending the university and the humanities. Newspapers print earnest op-ed pieces lauding the critical thinking or sense of values that the humanities can bring. To young people afraid of a tight job market and under pressure from scared parents, these all seem a little vague. How do the humanities teach someone to think critically, to value responsibility, to respond aesthetically, to vote wisely, or to care for the environment? No one really explains *how* they do so, only that they *do*. It seems to me entirely appropriate for the general public to be a bit skeptical of such undocumented claims.

In the essays that follow, we offer five quite specific descriptions, each of an ordinary day in a humanities classroom. In other words, we try to take readers (who may not be humanists or even the parents of college students forced to meet “distribution requirements”) through what it is like to sit in an art history, literature, or history class for 50, 90, or 140 minutes, talking, thinking, responding, assessing, learning, and struggling with such *recherché* material as paleohistory, ancient rhetorical theory, or African power figures. The six instructors who here recount the flow of discussion in a single class period (or at most two) come from diverse types of institutions, and the courses they describe are aimed at very dif-

Common Knowledge 23:1

DOI 10.1215/0961754X-3692122

© 2017 by Duke University Press

ferent student bodies. Two describe elite private university populations—those of Princeton and Columbia—with courses aimed at advanced undergraduates and graduate students, respectively. One describes a premier public institution, the University of California at Berkeley; the class offered is a large lecture course. One account is based on a study-abroad program of Connecticut College, a small, private undergraduate institution on the East Coast. One recounts an introductory “western civ.” class at Sacramento State University in California, a campus with a large minority population. The subjects taught range from history, German literature, and art history to classics and archaeology. Two essays describe an introductory class; the others treat classroom discussion during the middle of a term. Each vignette is written from the point of view of the teacher; students might tell a quite different story.¹ But the experiences described nonetheless encompass a wide expanse of pedagogical techniques and goals. The instructors themselves range from a newly minted PhD and a graduate teaching assistant, on the one hand, to a retired professor returning to the classroom, on the other. In at least one of the essays, the ill ease that can erupt in a classroom when painful or offensive issues are touched on gives a needed whiff of reality to what might otherwise seem a triumphalism about teaching that would be unsuited to these times.

None of the descriptions below is intended to be exemplary or paradigmatic. None is to be taken as an instruction manual. None argues for a particular model of cognition or pedagogy, or for a particular theory of literary interpretation or viewer response, although several of the authors are (in other contexts) themselves theorists. All of the essays eschew jargon. None makes an explicit effort to connect the subjects taught to current political, moral, or religious debates. Rather, the point of the exercise is to allow readers to experience humanities teaching through the sort of slow, ruminative reading, looking, and thinking that all of us instructors encourage in our classrooms.

—*Caroline Walker Bynum*

1. The authors have changed student names and a few details so that no one will be embarrassed. Moreover, the descriptions are perforce based on memory, not videos or transcripts. Memory is labile. Nonetheless, each author is certain that his or her story captures what went on in the classroom. The authors wish to thank Pauline

Yu, president of the American Council of Learned Societies, and Brooke Holmes, director of the interdisciplinary PhD program in the humanities and professor of classics at Princeton, who have supported this project from the beginning.

WHERE IN THE TEXT?

Mary Harvey Doyno

I am an assistant professor of medieval and Renaissance culture in the department of humanities and religious studies at Sacramento State University, where, at the time of writing, I was teaching two sections of the first half of our department's core survey, Arts and Ideas: Ancient and Medieval. Because I live in Oakland, I must wake up every Tuesday and Thursday before my children and the sunrise to make the two and a half-hour journey from my home to Sacramento. I could shave off nearly an hour each way if I were to drive, but I prefer the train since it gives me time to work and leaves me far less frazzled overall.

On the Thursday in question, I take the 6:30 instead of my usual 5:30 a.m. train so that I can nurse my four-month-old baby. The later train gets me to campus just before my 9 a.m. class, leaving me nervous that either the train or the light rail that I take from the station to campus will be late, but I have decided that, while the baby is still so little, the anxiety is worth it.

After forcing myself to eat something and writing “good morning” notes to my two older children (four and nine years old), I put the finishing touches on packing my bag—laptop, books, coffee, breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the ride home—and drive to the Amtrak station to begin my day. It is almost Halloween, and we are halfway through our fifteen-week semester. It is pitch black outside. Daylight Saving Time will soon end. It will be nice, I think, to watch the sun rise over the Sacramento delta as I make my way to work.

As the train makes its way north, I put the finishing touches on my class outline. We have reached the point in the semester where I breathe a sigh of relief: the late Roman world and the rise of Christianity. I am a medieval historian whose research focuses on the religious and political history of late medieval Italy, so once we are securely within late antiquity I am teaching familiar material. But nothing about the course is familiar or easily accessible to my students. Arts and Ideas is usually populated by freshman needing to fulfill their Introduction to the Humanities general education requirement, but my sections also have their share of fourth-, fifth-, sixth-, or seventh-year (and beyond) seniors. (Less than 10 percent of Sacramento State students graduate in four years.) The class is always a mix of ethnicities and social backgrounds: roughly one-third Latino/Hispanic, one-third Asian, and one-third Caucasian, with maybe one or two African American students. As I do each semester, I have students this fall with a variety of academic aims and interests. Several are hoping to get into the university's popular nursing program; a number intend to study kinesiology; a few are looking at business majors, and possibly one or two are thinking about the humanities. Most of them, however, have no idea what they will study. And, for most, this class is their first opportunity to study the premodern world. I have found that I will quickly get into trouble if I assume that everyone can find Rome on a map or will find a phrase like *republican Rome* or *imperial Rome* meaningful.

I have already spent the weekend and the first part of this week going over my lecture outlines, retooling my PowerPoint presentations, and editing my discussion questions. During this early part of class preparation, I always ask myself if I am presenting too much information—if I am at risk, that is, of my students missing the forest for the trees. Does it really matter if they know this point or that one? How many people, ideas, events, and images should I introduce? How many texts? How much time should I spend giving them the bigger picture of Rome under the rule of Augustus or the religious history of ancient Palestine?

I will spend the next week introducing the term *late antiquity* to help students think about how periodization reflects an argument about change over time. But this week we are focusing on the interaction between Romans and Christians and on how those interactions shaped the culture of Christianity. I lectured on Tuesday (for no more than twenty or twenty-five minutes, the maximum that I have found my lower-division students can pay attention to prepared remarks) about Roman religion and about how strange the emergence of a new monotheistic religion was to Roman sensibilities. For this class, students have read a collection of first-century letters exchanged between the Emperor Trajan and Pliny the Younger. Pliny was serving as provincial governor of Bithynia (modern-day Turkey), and, in addition to seeking the emperor's advice on a number of mundane administrative matters (building a new bath house, addressing

the province's poor response to a fire), he asks Trajan how he should deal with the increasing number of Christians.

My aim in this class (as in every class) is to teach my students how to read for content and argument—how to discover both the text's argument and their own. This might seem like basic work, the bread and butter of every humanities course. But for my students it is an activity that they have rarely, if ever, been asked to undertake. When they read, they read for “the answer.” They skim in a manner that makes clear how much of their reading is done on screens. My goal is to get them to digest the words on the page in an entirely new way: to understand that, while there is rarely an answer to be found, there is an infinite amount of meaning and significance in everything we read for the course.

In Tuesday's class, I hoped that students would see that our sources paint a more nuanced picture of how Romans dealt with Christians than the images of blanket persecution that we tend to have in mind. Pliny writes that, except for their refusing to pledge loyalty to the emperor, he cannot see anything inherently dangerous about how the Christians of his province are behaving. Trajan cautions Pliny not to act on anonymous accusations and to give Christians multiple opportunities to swear their loyalty to Rome and its emperor.

Today's class will be harder than Tuesday's, but it also has the potential to yield more dramatic results. Students have read *The Passion of SS. Perpetua and Felicitas*, an early third-century text that combines an anonymous narrator's description of the deaths of two women (Perpetua and Felicity), amid a group of other North African martyrs, with the prison diaries of two of these Christians, one female and one male (Perpetua and Saturus). Perpetua's diary, on which we will concentrate our discussion, flips back and forth between her descriptions of interactions that she has had with her father (who pleads with her to renounce her faith to save her life) and her accounts of a series of visions that she was experiencing in prison. The visions all seem aimed at reassuring Perpetua that, ultimately, her impending death will be a victory.

On the train, most of my preparation time is spent reading. Just as I want to teach my students how to read carefully and analytically, I find that I will have a more successful class if I simply read, as if for the first time, a text that I have already read perhaps thirty times. By having the words, the sentences, and the transitions at the forefront of my mind, I can be more flexible in the classroom. I can give up once and for all the sense that students need to know this or that particular point and instead respond to their interest, keeping my eyes on the prize of teaching them to read and think in new ways.

When I arrive in the classroom just a minute or two before our 9 a.m. starting time, I come upon silence. Almost all of the forty-five students are there; as commuters themselves, most of them have budgeted more than enough time

from their homes to campus. But they sit with their heads lowered, either tapping away or watching a video on their phones. I immediately break the silence with a “good morning” that is just a little too loud so that I might rouse those in headphones. I spend these first few minutes connecting my computer to the projector and writing an outline, along with key terms, on the board. As I do so, I try to pull the students out of their technology: “How is everyone doing today?” “Who is looking forward to Halloween?” “Anyone planning to dress up?” I can usually get a few students to engage with me. This time is also when I work on learning their names. With three classes of around forty-five students each, even at the semester’s midpoint I have trouble remembering the names of those who rarely talk. I will try in these first few minutes to single out at least one quiet student. I might ask something about the other classes he or she is taking or about what attracted him or her to this course (there are various options for fulfilling the general education requirement), and I have to be ready to laugh at the inevitable answer (“because it was offered at 9 a.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays”). I am hoping to set the tone for the rest of our seventy-five minutes: in this class, we engage—with texts, images, and, most of all, each other.

“Okay, let’s get started,” I say to the class and then add, as I seem to do at each and every session, “we have a lot to do today.” I begin with the basics. What is the title of today’s text? When was it written? Who is the author? While a quick reading of the editor’s introductory paragraph will supply answers to my first two questions, I intend the question about authorship to get the heart of our discussion beating. I reap a few blank stares, and then one or two students look down to check the text and raise their hands. To my last question, Raul, who looks so relaxed at his empty desk that I expect him to slide onto the floor at any moment, speaks up: “Perpetua and Felicity.” “What leads you to that conclusion?” I ask Raul, walking over to be within a few feet of his desk. “Well, it’s about these two ladies who die,” he responds, as if my question did not make sense.

“You are absolutely right. This is a story about people who die. But let’s start from the beginning and see if we can figure out who the authors of this text are, because I don’t think the people who die can be describing their own deaths, right?” “Raul, would you read the first paragraph?” And I add, as the students have come by now to expect, “slowly and with passion.” Raul begins to read the narrator’s introduction, tripping over several words. When he skips a line, I correct him in the most matter-of-fact way that I can, wanting my interjections to convey that I am reading along with him, rather than pointing out a mistake.

When he finishes, I respond: “Well read, but what does that actually say? Can you put what you’ve read in your own words?” Raul begins by repeating various phrases from the text, but it is clear that he does not understand it. I try to reassure both him and the rest of the class. “This is a difficult text. Let’s take it sentence by sentence. Why don’t we have one person read a sentence while

someone else tries to put that sentence into their own words. Imagine that you are explaining to your best friend the sentence you have just read. Let's start with you, Raul: read that first sentence again—and Summer," I turn to a heavily tattooed and pierced woman who always sits in the front row, "you be ready to translate into English."

My last comment gets a chuckle of relief from a few students. I have noticed that the more I recognize how strange and foreign our sources are, the more students are willing to struggle with a difficult text. In saying something like "translate into English," I know that I am walking a fine line between conceding the opacity of our sources and turning them into jokes. I do not want students to come away thinking that the ideas we raise in class are ones that interest only academics. I want them to feel, instead, that the work they do with me gives them the skills and tools needed to join in any intellectual conversation, no matter how unfamiliar it might seem at first. After spending a few minutes of reading and talking about the narrator's introduction, where he (scholars assume it is a he, but, as I point out to my students, we just do not know) makes a case for the importance of these martyrs' stories and introduces Perpetua and her diary, a few students have helped the rest of the class realize that we are dealing with a text that has multiple authors.

I want to give students a moment to breathe after doing this kind of detailed and painstaking work, so my next question is a broad one. "What kind of text is this? Is it an epic like the *Iliad* or *Aeneid*? A speech like Pericles's funeral oration? A set of decrees or laws like the moral legislation of Augustus that we read?" They all shake their heads, no, no, no. "Okay, then, what kind of text is it? How would you categorize it? If your roommate were to ask you what you were reading, what would you say?" "It's about these Christians who die," Summer answers. "It's about these Christians who die," I repeat back to the class. "How do we know that they die?" Summer raises her hand again, responding in her usual defensive and somewhat sarcastic tone. "It says right here that"—Summer looks down at her book and begins to read from the text's final lines, in which the narrator describes the Christians' deaths in the arena—"she screamed as she was struck on the bone; then she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat.' I think that means she died." Summer produces a laugh from the rest of the class. "I think I would agree," I reply. "So if it is about these Christians who die, what kind of text is it?"

I catch Guadalupe's eye. She looks ready with an answer but terrified to raise her hand. "Guadalupe, how would you categorize this text? We've decided that it's not an epic, not a speech, not a set of laws. What, then, should we call it?" I know it is risky to single out quiet students. The last thing I want is to embarrass those afraid of talking in class. I warn students on the first day that I will call on them but reassure them that they are welcome to ask for a pass. I believe that

the more relaxed I can make this singling out, the more it is a regular matter of our class sessions, the more those who normally would not volunteer to talk will join our conversation. Guadalupe's mouth twitches a little, and I can see dread wash over her face, but she manages to get out, "It's kind of a diary and kind of a celebration of these people." "Exactly," I respond. "You've hit the heart of it. The text consists of the diaries of two of the Christians, Perpetua and Saturus, being held in prison by the Romans. But it is partly something else as well. What is that something else?" "An actual account of their deaths," Amanda offers without raising her hand. "Yes," I reply, "an actual account of their deaths—but not a journalistic or objective one, right? This account makes an argument for the significance of those deaths."

I then decide to pose a kind of question that I often use to test the waters of a class, to see in which direction the students want to go. "I like what we've established so far about the nature of this text. But I'm really curious to hear what stood out for you as you were reading it. What scenes, passages, or ideas grabbed you? At what point did you say 'umm . . . ?' or 'oh!?' " At first, I get nothing. The students look at me skeptically, as if I must have a particular answer that I am trying coyly to elicit from them. I pose the question again, reassuring them that indeed I am simply interested in their reactions. My doing so opens the floodgates. I have at least seven hands in the air. I take the next twenty to thirty minutes calling on those students. Svetlana responds to the multiple interactions that Perpetua describes having with her father while she was in prison. In each, Perpetua's father tries ever more desperately to convince her to renounce her faith in order to save her life. Svetlana tells the class that she found it "sad how upset her father was and how mean it seemed like she [Perpetua] was being to him." Austen comments, on Perpetua's vision of her impending battle in the arena, that he thought "it was pretty strange how Perpetua saw herself turning into a man when she was fighting the Egyptian." And Sabina, referring to comments that Perpetua makes in her diary about the state of her cell, "thought it was weird that Perpetua would be worried about how the prison looked when she was about to die."

As the students offer their reactions, I repeatedly respond with "where in the text do you see that?" or "what particular part of the text do you think made you feel that way?" Often they claim that they do not know; they just got a "feeling." I will then push them a bit, asking if they would take the next few minutes, while we are getting ideas from other students, to find the place that first sparked that feeling. My aim here is to teach them not only to trust their instincts but also to let a close reading of the text support, deepen, and perhaps challenge their initial feelings.

After calling on a number of students, I shift into a sort of lecture mode. As we have been talking about and reading passages that interested them, I have

been writing words and phrases of theirs on the board. I spend the next ten minutes drawing lines and arrows from those to new terms and ideas that I add. I write “time” and draw arrows to the points that students have made about Perpetua’s visions, meanwhile asking whether those visions reveal information about the past or about the future. I write “power” and talk about how the text brings up questions of who has power, not only in the relationships between Romans and Christians but also in those between fathers and daughters. I write “identity,” drawing an arrow toward points that students made about Perpetua’s claim, in interactions with her father, that she could not be called anything but a Christian. I draw another arrow from “identity” to “gender/sex” and then circle a number of relevant passages from the text that students have quoted, including the one concerning the vision that puzzled Austen.

My goal during these ten minutes is to model for my students a way to take an initial reaction to a text, along with a close reading that deepens and contextualizes that reaction, and use that material to form broader arguments about both the text itself and about its historical context (in this case, the context is late Roman and early Christianity). I want students to see the work that goes into making an argument. But I have to be careful not to steal their thunder. I need to convey that I am only rephrasing or redescribing what they have already noticed in the text themselves. I also have to be careful not to go too far in my redescriptions. If I offer fully formed bits of analysis, it becomes my work rather than theirs.

After adding new terms to the board, I ask: “Keeping in mind the categories that you have found, do you now have any new questions about this text?” Summer again raises her hand: “Why were they so sexist back then?” My category of “gender/sex” has clearly resonated with her. While *sexism* strikes me as an anachronistic term in this context, I do not want to silence Summer’s budding argument, so I work with it. “Where do you see sexism?” I ask. “It says right here that Perpetua fastened her hair clip while she was being gored by the cow,” Summer volleys back. Summer again reads to the class from the narrator’s final paragraphs, describing the martyrs’ deaths. I respond to her with another question—“why might the hair clip strike us as a strange detail to mention here?”—thus changing Summer’s adjective from *sexist* to *strange*. As I ask, I move away from her to make clear that I am directing my follow-up question to the rest of the class.

Dimah’s hand shoots up: “Why does it matter that her hair look good if she is about to die?” “Very good question,” I reply. “Dimah, would you read the full passage?” Dimah reads:

First the heifer tossed Perpetua and she fell on her back. Then sitting up she pulled down the tunic that was ripped along the side so that it covered her thighs, thinking more of her modesty than of her pain. Next she asked for a pin to fasten her untidy hair: for it was not right

that a martyr should die with her hair in disorder, lest she might seem to be mourning in her hour of triumph.

“What stands out for you in what Dimah has just read?” I ask the class. Summer is again the first to answer: “That women are supposed to look good even when they are dying.” Summer’s brashness prods a number of other students awake. At least five hands are up. I call on Antoine first: “I don’t think it’s sexist. I think he is saying that it is important that she look good so it’s not like the Romans win.” A number of students nod in support.

“Okay, so maybe we have some disagreement here,” I say. “Some of you are seeing sexism and some of you are seeing an argument about how a Christian ought to look so as to seem victorious even in death. I’m not sure there is an answer—that one way of reading the passage is right and the other way wrong—but I think we should go back to asking the kinds of questions we were asking earlier to get a better handle on this issue. My first question would be: ‘whose point of view is this?’”

“It’s the narrator, the guy who was watching them die,” Sofina offers. “Yes, it is. Is there anywhere else in the text that we see an argument being made about what women or men are supposed to do, or can do?” Lexus replies: “Perpetua imagined herself turning into a man so that she could defeat the Egyptian.” “But I don’t think that was as much about what a woman can do or a man can do as it was about her becoming someone different from who she was at the beginning,” Patsy interjects. “Tell us more,” I respond, walking toward Patsy, who sits at the back of the room. “How does Perpetua become someone different?” Patsy responds: “It’s like she sees herself as a mother and a daughter in the beginning, but by the end she isn’t even a woman anymore.” “Interesting point!” I exclaim and mean it. “How do you see that point as working in the passage that Summer read as sexist?” “I don’t think it’s sexist as much as the narrator is trying to make Perpetua into a woman again.”

I am both excited and caught off guard by the depth of Patsy’s response, but before I can think of how to respond a student has opened our door and peeked his head in, making clear that we have run out of time. So I conclude: “We will come back to this question next Tuesday. Keep reading the assignment for Tuesday, but I will make sure we have time at the beginning of class to finish this discussion.” The students pack up their bags, take out their phones, put their headphones back on, and shuffle out the door, as my next group of students, likewise in headphones, waits dutifully for them to leave before entering the classroom. I have fifteen minutes to run to the bathroom, eat an apple, and make small talk with the incoming students before I begin to work, once again, to rouse a group of freshmen out of their phones and into a world of intellectual engagement.

TEACHING ABOUT OBJECTS

Caroline Walker Bynum

It is a Monday morning in late January 2015 and not so much snowing as sleeting. I have been appointed the Robert Janson–La Palme Visiting Lecturer in the art history department at Princeton and am headed off from my home in New York to give my first class. I have to get up very early to catch the train to Princeton, and I am going to discover, as the term wears on, that all the bad weather in February and March 2015 arrives on Sunday night or Monday morning. By the time I have taken the subway from Manhattan’s Upper West Side to Penn Station on 34th Street, the New Jersey Transit commuter train to Princeton Junction, the so-called dinky (a commuter link) from the junction to the town of Princeton, and a shuttle bus to campus, my feet are soaked and some of the teaching materials pulled behind me in a suitcase on wheels are sodden from water leaking in. It is the first day for my graduate and advanced undergraduate seminar, *Art History 435: Devotional Objects in Late Medieval and Early Modern Northern Europe*, and as a retiree from a position that was in any case mostly devoted to research, I have not taught for several years. Despite the weather and the lengthy commute, I am looking forward to my return to the classroom.¹

In this first meeting, I need above all else to raise the question of what a devotional object is. I want to do so by Socratic method to ensure that the students will discover that embedded in this question are assumptions about what

1. A short version of this essay appeared in “Object,” *Threepenny Review* 145 (Spring 2016): 19–20; reprinted by permission.

religion is, what art is, and what objects do. In other words, I want them to see that “things” have the capacity to intersect with a power beyond the everyday, that cultures predispose their members to find power in certain sorts of object but that the specific physicality of objects in itself shapes our expectations of them, and that seeing and touching are not the same as “reading” (a term too often used—and inappropriately, I think—in speaking about art). I want them to realize, with something of a jolt, how political and social structures condition who makes objects, who donates them, who controls and who consecrates them. But I also intend to insist that the very fact that we each, as individuals, see from only one perspective requires of us not a response of relativism but rather a more acute responsibility to get our own categories straight.

Teaching a first class is always difficult and never more so than in elite institutions with their so-called shopping periods, in which students can add or drop course registration without penalty. There are usually a few no-shows who registered but changed their minds, a few teary-eyed pleaders who just have to have a place in spite of having failed to sign up earlier, and a few who wander in twenty minutes late looking for the classroom. Thus, despite preregistration, one has a fluctuating population at exactly the time when one needs to accomplish the two most important goals of any course based on discussion: ensuring that everyone is included and establishing robust conceptual categories to guide discussion in the following weeks. Moreover, for a professor in her seventies, name retrieval is simply more difficult than for the young, and regardless of my internally frantic efforts at employing mnemonic devices, I spend much of the first class calling Susan “Danielle” and Joe “Joel.” There are three hours to fill, and the young people have very different levels of preparation. Nonetheless, I begin.

The first part is easy. I put students in pairs (fortunately, there are fourteen so it comes out even) and have them interview and then introduce each other to the group, hoping they will not have each settled down beside a friend from previous classes but will meet someone new. No one finds this a juvenile exercise. Advanced students also like to talk about themselves, and I urge each student to find out something surprising about the other that will help us remember names (a technique that will, I hope, also help my elderly brain to sort out Susie from Dani). Several students, themselves religious, are serious about exploring Christian devotional objects. Several—who turn out to be among the most committed and smartest in the class—are college seniors, majoring in fields such as politics or electrical engineering, and are there “just for fun.” One is a football player, eager to refute the stereotype. Three of the graduate students are studying modern art, especially non-Western, and want to expand their conception of what art is, without any anticipation of how unsettling it may be to do so. In any case, the introductions go well. But there are two hours left.

Even if the professor does not intend to lecture (and a seminar is not the

place for lecturing), every week of a course must be carefully planned. Topics must be building blocks conceptually as well as chronologically. And for each three-hour block, there must be a road map charting where the instructor hopes the exploration will go yet leaving space for the unexpected to emerge. Readings for each week have to be chosen not only to provide enough background that students are not left without basic information and definitions but also to challenge their assumptions. Anything that bores the professor will probably bore the students too. If I am assigning John Calvin on the beauty of the universe, I have to know exactly how I mean it to intersect with his rejection of images. If I am using a recent catalog entry for a woodcut containing an inscription with a good deal of Latin, I need to be sure that someone in the class can read the Latin and contribute by showing its pertinence, but I need also to be ready in that week to discuss the issue of text as object.

Planning a discussion is difficult enough when material has been assigned ahead of time and read. But how do I organize a first discussion when there have not yet been assignments?

I introduce three objects to the class, two of which I can also show projected on the screen. The first “object” is actually a set of two small papier-mâché medallions about 11 cm in diameter, made by nuns at the monastery of Wienhausen in northern Germany between 1450 and 1520 and today displayed in the cloister museum. Formed in molds and then hand painted by individual nuns to reflect the spiritual concerns important to each, the medallions depict Christ between the Virgin Mary and his “beloved disciple” John. Each shows a curious curly border across the bottom that looks to us a bit like ribbon candy. On one, the sister doing the painting has highlighted Christ’s side wound against a stark white body; on the other, Christ’s entire torso is speckled with red blood drops. Both have holes at the top, and on one a leather thong for hanging is still affixed. Unknown until the 1950s when they were discovered under the floorboards of the nuns’ choir, the objects raise a host of issues with which the course must grapple. These include questions of gender (is there such a thing as “women’s art”?), periodization (what is the relationship of Middle Ages to Reformation?), and the category of art itself (are the little medallions “art” or “craft,” and does that distinction work for periods before the modern era in the West?). The medallions also raise the issue of viewer response (including the intentionality of artists and patrons as well as of worshippers) and force us to question the very nature of representation. (Is the little ribbon across the bottom of the medallion a cloud, suggesting that the depiction is of a vision, or are we looking at an image of Christ? If the latter, what sort of image can one have of the ineffable or departed divine? If the former, how can one depict a vision?) Even the existence of the little medallions raises questions—questions about preservation. Why were the objects hidden under the floor, if they *were* deliberately hidden (rather than dropped), and how would

art history be the poorer if such things had not survived? Finally, the medallions raise questions—unavoidably, given twenty-first-century study techniques—about size: how big is the object, and does its size matter? The question will loom so large and recur so frequently as the course goes on that we all will laugh each time I pull out my bright pink tape measure and ask: how big is 11 cm (or 111 cm or six feet), anyway? Everything looks the same size on the computer screen or projected on the wall, but size is an important (and often neglected) clue to function, use, and significance.

Our second object of study is a *n'kisi n'kondi* or power figure, made in the nineteenth century by the Yombe group of the Kongo peoples in the Chiloango River region of what is today the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The wooden figure, 118 cm (or about 46 1/2 inches) tall, has a body studded with nails, as well as part of a surviving beard of nails along the chin, and a large cavity in the lower torso that once contained organic, medicinal material. The figure has staring ceramic eyes and what to Westerners appears to be an open-mouthed grimace. A label from the Metropolitan Museum, which owns and displays the object, tells us that sculptors and ritual specialists collaborated in making such figures and that the material in the abdominal cavity was intended to attract an inhabiting spirit. It also explains that the dozens and dozens of nails, brads, and other bits of metal driven into the body, predominantly but not exclusively into the torso, document vows sealed, treaties signed, and socially disruptive events in some way settled. In addition to accentuating some of the issues that the little medallions raise—issues of size, gender, and “craft” versus “art”—the *n'kisi n'kondi* forces the viewer to face much more directly the question of how a devotional object draws into itself the power of an “other” beyond itself. Must such objects be ritually endowed with power (in Western terms, “consecrated”), or is their power bodied forth by their physicality itself (the wood, nails, resin, and other organic materials) or by what they “look like” (a bearded male figure)? What are the limits of such power? Do European religious objects have power in the same way that a *n'kisi n'kondi* does? What social relations and events can the viewer see palpably *in* the object as it stands before us? Why are the acts that constitute the figure as it stands before us—acts of piercing and breaching—understood, by Kongo peoples themselves and by the anthropologists who study them, to resolve conflict and end social ruptures? Does this paradox of a piercing that documents reconciliation differ from the way a Christian religious object records or repairs relations and events? What happens to the power of an object such as a *n'kisi* when it is placed in “secular” space as a “display”?

The third “object” that I present to my students is very different from the previous two. It is a text about an object, and the object—water—could hardly be displayed in a museum. Yet, in the text I chose, water indubitably possesses the power of the holy. I provide for the students, in an old-fashioned photocopy,

a selection from Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, a novel that, it turns out, two of my students have read. The speaker is an elderly Calvinist minister writing to his young son in 1956, and he tells the story of how he, as a child, baptized a litter of kittens down by a creek, to the consternation of the cat mother, moistening their brows and "repeating the full Trinitarian formula." Two of my students are offended by what they consider the sacrilege of baptizing cats—which clearly bothers the novel's narrator as well—and their outrage itself raises interesting questions for discussion.

The passage, beautifully written like all of Robinson's prose, is complicated but poses stark questions about how something from the physical world relates to an "other" that some would call "the holy," others "spirit power." The old minister provides one of the best musings I know on how the "stuffness" of things matters:

I still remember how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind. For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me to be a real question. There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be. . . . It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me.²

Then, in a complex move, the narrator goes on to quote the "famous atheist" Ludwig Feuerbach, who is (the narrator claims) "about as good on the joyful aspects of religion as anybody, and he loves the world." Feuerbach asserts that "water has a significance in itself, as water." It is "in virtue of this its natural character" that it is "the image of the spotless nature of the Divine Spirit."

As with the medallions from Wienhausen and the *n'kisi n'kondi* from the Kongo, this American text raises questions about why the specific physicality of an object or material such as water is crucial to the way it "represents" what is beyond itself (whatever that "beyond" may be). We are also made to consider whether *image* or *symbol* is the appropriate term to express this relationship, what power "feels like" as well as "looks like," how not only suffering and horror but also joy and beauty relate to devotion, and whether denominational commitment matters in understanding religion. The students who are offended by the child's act of baptizing will also have to deal with the cheerful atheist Feuerbach, although, as I easily discover, no one in the class is a Calvinist. The passage makes clear that, whatever one's own religious position, "representation" is more complex than "looking like." Just as a congressman may represent his district but

2. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004), 23.

does not do so by looking like it, so the “likeness” of water to blessing is not one of visual similitude. It is ontological, having to do with the nature of things. Indeed “representation” can be contradictory, even paradoxical. We see that water and word may convey blessing, even if not sanctioned by religious law to do so, just as breaching or wounding might “represent” or body forth healing or knitting up. Such awareness lingers on beyond the initial encounter with water and wood, nails or papier-mâché. Yet differences among our three cases intrude. The Calvinist minister is guided by his belief system. What if there is no written theology? What about cultural setting? Do piercing, painting and touching, fluidity and coldness, mean the same thing in the Yombe religion of the Kongo in the nineteenth century, in the fifteenth-century German north, and in the Calvinist Midwest of 1950s America? How far should we go in assuming that certain psychological or physiological reactions are present across cultures? What more do we need to know in order to answer such questions?

The issues raised by these materials will all recur in a more theoretical way in the readings I have assigned for week 2 of the course. But what I need to do, in week 1, is to make their urgency felt. I divide the students into four groups and set them the task of deciding, on the basis of the slides and the textual handout, what a devotional object is. It is important that discussion be pinned to these specific materials, lest it become too autobiographical. (A little of “what I felt when I saw the *Mona Lisa*” goes a long way.) After about thirty minutes, during which time I move among groups to interject destabilizing comments if the students seem to be settling on easy answers or to encourage them if they seem hopelessly ensnared in circular questions, we reassemble around the table. I stand at the blackboard while a student from one of the groups begins to report on its conclusions. I try to write down, condensed and organized in outline form, the definitions they propose.

A devotional object is an object, they begin—a thing. It is an excellent start. One of the art historians, attuned to materials, notices the thinginess—the tactility—of the papier-mâché medallions. The surface is raised, almost like Braille. Does this matter? How were they used? The observation leads to a discussion of prayer and meditation. Are these Western categories? someone asks. (Today’s students are always quick to argue that their own categories must be relativized by comparing them with non-Western ones. Anticipating this objection is one reason I have used the *n’kisi n’kondi* as an example.) Would one “pray” to or with a spirit figure? Does it matter whether one believes in the Christ on the medallions or the spirit in the *n’kondi*, someone else asks. This question leads to an intense argument about “belief”—a topic that a reading from David Morgan’s edited volume *Religion and Material Culture*, assigned in week 2, will address in a more theoretical manner. The difference between “believe in” and “believe

that” is sorted out, but we arrive at the somewhat uncomfortable conclusion that neither category is of much help in understanding what the nuns do with their medallions or the Yombe with the *n’kisi n’kondi*. Someone tries to fit in the water of baptism as an object or material that relates effectively to holiness or power only when it is in action. Is *doing* necessary to activate a devotional object? What, then, if we put it in a museum?

The discussion becomes more general. Everyone has been to a museum of some kind. Museum experiences are shared. (I realize that I will need to enhance the reading on museum theory planned for a later class.) Reservations and clarifications fly back and forth. I do not always understand a point being made or condense it accurately in my blackboard accounting. Students feel free to correct these mistakes. We all learn something about listening. Almost everyone speaks, and I have ascertained by circulating around the classroom that, at least in the small groups, everyone has contributed.

During the following week, I will write up for e-mail circulation what I think we accomplished in our initial discussion. I list our conclusions like this. A devotional object is physical; in other words, size and stuff matter. A devotional object is “other”; it connects with something beyond itself that is powerful, not ordinary, not in our everyday world. It is experiential, not just theological or philosophical; that is, it is not primarily something about which one has beliefs or to which one assents intellectually (although what Protestants call “belief”—and we talked about this category in class—is not irrelevant). The object is processual, relational, or performative: there is an act that connects the material stuff with the “otherness.” Moreover, the object is representational. There is some way in which it “reflects” or “stands for” the “other,” which is to say that there is some element of ontological (but not necessarily visual) similitude or likeness. Although we may not all understand each of these categories in the same way, all have been defined in the previous discussion and made to some extent exact by our three case studies or examples. At the end of the course, by which time each student will have chosen a particular object for study, we will return to the list to see whether what we decided in the first class proved helpful in further work.

We have filled three hours with energetic conversation about the value of things, their nature, their use, their meaning, and their display—questions that matter to us all as human beings, capable of thought, creativity, and wonder. If exhausted, I am content. The students leave, having put Art History 435 in their shopping basket, free now to decide whether taking the course is worthwhile. (All except one will return.) I turn off the computer and projector and lock the equipment cabinet, gather up the leftover Robinson handouts, and prepare to wheel my slightly damp suitcase back to the shuttle bus. Because it is 4:30 on a January afternoon, the sky outside is already getting dark.

One of the students stops at the door. “Professor Bynum, would you like me to help you carry all that downstairs?” I accept gratefully. “Where are you from, Dani?” I ask. (At last, I have the name right.) “Brooklyn,” she says, and we go down together, chattering about New York. This too—the cheerful exchange between teacher and student as both decompress—is part of the experience of the classroom. After all, it is because we both know that something has happened in our discussion—something critical, communal, intellectual, emotional, even spiritual—that we now need to decompress.

HERDER'S SHEEP

Dorothea von Mücke

My course Aesthetics and the Philosophy of History aims at introducing Columbia University students from all levels and backgrounds to some seminal ideas about art, language, and history. It is a course that reaches out to graduate and undergraduate students who might not normally consider the course offerings of a German department. This fall, among the twenty-four students in my class are three from the PhD program in German, one graduate student from Slavic, two from French, and one from music. Not all of the undergraduates have yet decided on their major fields, but three are planning to major in German, one in biology, one in physics, one in engineering, and one or more each in economics, philosophy, music, art history, and creative writing.

The main objective of the course is to engage with philosophical texts about art and history and to grasp the structure of the arguments made, such that participants are enabled to think with the key concepts, on their own, in other contexts, both now and later in their lives. The seminar format, combined with practices that I borrow from the foreign-language classroom, promotes this result by ensuring that students do most of the speaking, listen intently to one another, and keep the discussion moving forward. Obviously, this kind of class requires intense preparation on the part of both the students and the instructor. Apart from carefully studying the assigned readings in view of some key questions that are communicated to the students ahead of time, each week half of the class members write a very short essay on one aspect of the assigned reading. In

Common Knowledge 23:1

DOI 10.1215/0961754X-3692200

© 2017 by Duke University Press

most sessions, one or two student volunteers introduce the discussion by means of a short presentation. Normally, I meet with the presenters ahead of time.

In my own preparation for today's class, the fourth of the semester, I realized that two students—call them Gail and David—had entirely misunderstood the kind of writing assignment that I had expected from them. They had written a “response paper” to the assigned reading, in which they took some lines from Johann Gottfried Herder's essay on sculpture as the occasion to express their disagreement with the author, who insisted that the most comprehensive approach to sculpture was through “feeling.” I asked them to come to my office hours and explained that, instead of a response paper focusing on their own reaction to an element of the text, I wanted them to engage with the philosophical argument in detail—to translate some important aspect of it into their own idiom and then go back to the text and see where the main terminological differences were, how they would account for these, and then possibly revise some of what they had written. Gail looked at me quite bewildered: “So, all you want is regurgitation?” Although I would not use that word, I agreed that indeed I wanted the first step in our engagement with the text to be a paraphrase of the argument. That humble assignment is no simple task—not with this text or with any other on the syllabus. Moreover, I tried to explain that, in an attempt to turn a summary into a coherent, pointed, economical essay, quite a bit of creativity besides good judgment was required; the outcome would by no means be a set of matching summaries. Then Felix and Leo, who had volunteered to be the student leaders in today's session, walked into my office to check with me about how they would introduce and lead the discussion of Herder's essay on the origin of language. We agreed on what would be the most salient passages to unpack slowly in class, and they showed me a handout, which they wanted to distribute as part of their presentation, of a schematic outline of Herder's central argument concerning the fundamental structure of human language.

In the three weeks before today's class, we have been exploring the contrast between an artwork as representation and an artwork that “comes to life” as an embodied subjectivity through its interaction with the beholder. We have studied this kind of artwork-beholder relationship as it is modeled in Herder's programmatic text “Sculpture” (written in 1772), which bears the revealing subtitle “Some Observations from Pygmalion's Shaping Dream.” According to Herder, if the beholder of a three-dimensional work approaches it properly, he or she will do so guided by “feeling,” meaning both by the sense of touch and by an imaginative loving embrace such as the mythological sculptor Pygmalion gave to his block of marble and thereby animated it. The polemical thrust of Herder's “Sculpture” lies in its rejection of the primacy of sight among the senses, as well as in its opposition to the notion of art as mere representation. Whereas the painter, according

to Herder, produces the illusion of something that is existentially absent, the sculptor produces an emphatic and concrete presence.

To recall issues raised in the previous class session, but also to emphasize the impressive ingenuity that can result from the apparently elementary task of reconstructing aspects of the assigned text, I have chosen to begin today by reading aloud a passage from a student essay on Herder's "Sculpture." In his essay, Amir, an engineering major, made the point that it is by observing how the human infant approaches its environment that Herder develops his sense of how humans experience sculpture. It is a mobile beholder—exploring objects by touching them with both its hands and its mouth, as well as by crawling around them or sitting on them or trying to lift them up—that experiences the world in infancy, and sculpture in adulthood. Everybody listens intently, obviously impressed by Amir's essay. Ellen, last week's discussion leader, observes that Herder's grounding the "proper" approach to sculpture in an understanding of feeling that is rooted in developmental psychology was, in its time, an entirely new approach to art. By considering art from a universal, anthropological perspective, Herder made art no longer the exclusive domain of the connoisseur.

After this glance back at last week's discussion, I introduce the topic for today: Herder's essay on the origin of language, which won the Berlin Academy of Sciences prize in 1771. The assignment for preparation before today's class was to determine what is gained by Herder's insistence on a fundamental distinction between animal language and human language. Today I ask how Herder characterizes animal language. One student suggests that animal language is "an expression of fear, a warning, an expression of hunger"; another adds that "these cries or sounds are immediate, and they are tied up with the immediate context in which they are uttered." A third student says that animal languages "are basically just ways of drawing fellow species members to an animal expressing an affect, which then can be understood by grasping the whole situation intuitively." Based on these initial observations, we reach the preliminary conclusion that, for Herder, animal language is not a means of communicating an idea but the expression of an inner state that is or tends to be the animal's immediate sensual response to its particular surroundings and situation. Only human language communicates discrete ideas. Doing so requires a degree of detachment from the influence of the immediate environment. According to Herder, the fundamental difference between animals and the human biped is situated in the way that animals relate to their environment.

In order to gain a better grasp of that relationship, we need to know more about Samuel Reimarus, one of Herder's slightly older contemporaries, who had been extremely important for Herder's approach to the distinction between human and animal language. I tell my students a bit about this scholar of Ori-

ental languages who had also been an avid naturalist. During the eighteenth century, Reimarus was primarily known as a vocal critic of traditional approaches to Scripture. His contributions as a naturalist did not receive much attention from his contemporaries, because Reimarus's vast, two-volume study of animal instinct dealt with subject matter that ran against the dominant empiricist paradigm of the French Enlightenment, according to which all knowledge is acquired through the senses and through learning. Phenomena that even today we would call instinctual behaviors did not fit easily into that paradigm, since it smacked of innate ideas. Herder's attention to Reimarus's work on instinct is somewhat exceptional. He takes from it the model of how each animal species is related to its own, highly limited "sphere" or "circle."

I suggest, as I ask them turn to page 78 of Herder's essay, that my students observe the many quotations there from Reimarus. Would Amy, the biology major, please read aloud this passage?

It seems to me that a central perspective has been missed from which one can give, if not complete explanations, then at least observations about the nature of animals which . . . can throw much light on the doctrine of the human soul. This perspective is "the sphere [*Sphäre*] of animals."

Each animal has its circle [Kreis] to which it belongs from birth, into which it immediately enters, in which it remains all its life, and in which it dies. But now it is strange "that the sharper animals' senses are and the more marvelous the products of their art, then the smaller their circle is, the more limited in kind the product of their art." I have pursued this relationship and I find everywhere a marvelous, observed "inverse proportion between the lesser extension of their movements, elements, nutrition, preservation, reproduction, upbringing, society and their drives and arts." . . . The spider weaves with the art of Minerva; but all its art is also woven out in this narrow spinning-space; that is its world! How marvelous is the insect, and how narrow the circle of its effect!

On the other hand, "*the more numerous the functions and the destiny of animals are, the more dispersed their attention is over several objects, the less constant their manner of life is, in short, the larger and more diverse their sphere is, then the more we see their sensuousness distribute itself and weaken.*"¹

Here we pause, and I invite the students to translate into their own words what Herder, following Reimarus, calls a *Sphäre* (sphere) and then goes on to explain as the *Kreis* (circle) of an animal. Some suggest *cognition* as a translation for these German terms; others suggest *understanding*. Our biologist comes

1. Johann Gottfried Herder, "Treatise on the Origin of Language" (1772), in *Johann Gottfried Herder: Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 78. Herder is quot-

ing here from Samuel Reimarus, *Allgemeine Betrachtungen über die Triebe der Tiere, hauptsächlich über ihre Kunsttriebe* (1760).

up with the term *environment*, and an art historian with *horizon*. We agree that this circle or sphere is a species characteristic—any particular species’ ecological niche. It is the circle or sphere that defines what sensory data a species can take in, how it will process these data, to what stimuli it will react in this or that fashion, to what it will be attracted, from what it will flee, and so on. In brief, we conclude that Herder uses the term *Kreis* to designate the particular environment or milieu of a particular species—an environment for that species to interact with and perceive.

With this background, Herder’s account of the fundamental difference between animals and human beings becomes clearer. One student suggests that, to Herder, the human being, in contrast to animals, is a world-making creature. The human being is not instinctually programmed and so has to build its own world. The human being has to learn and can build on traditions of what has been learned. In that sense, the human being has history and knows progress. Animals start from scratch in each generation. I ask the class to find a passage in Herder’s text that makes this point succinctly. Several candidates are proposed; we discuss each of these passages and settle on the following:

The human being has no single work, in which he would therefore also act in a manner subject to no improvement; but he has free space to practice in many things, and hence to improve himself constantly. Each thought is not an immediate work of nature, but precisely because of this it can become his own work. . . . No longer an infallible machine in the hands of nature, he [the human being] becomes his own end and goal of refinement.²

At this point, I ask the class to try characterizing Herder’s model of the human being. Ellen, one of the two students who led the discussion of Herder’s “Sculpture” essay last week, becomes very lively and points out that, with this opposition between the animal as a preprogrammed machine and the human being as a world-making creature, we are back to Herder’s model of the sculptor as an alternative god, distinguished by its fundamental freedom and creativity. Here the human being’s lack of instinctual guidance becomes the source of its strength and marks the fundamental difference between the world of animals and that of humans. Ellen also points out that the human being as a world maker, capable of perfection, is coupled with a notion of freedom and an ethical agenda.

The second half of today’s class is to be handed over to Leo and Felix, the physics and philosophy majors who have volunteered to introduce and lead the discussion of Herder’s “sheep passage.” I have isolated this narrative from Herder’s essay on the origin of language as an exemplary passage deserving slow,

2. Herder, “Treatise on the Origin of Language,” 82.

careful unpacking in class. This rich and memorable passage encapsulates the fundamental principles of Herder's theory of language by imagining a scenario in which the instinct-deprived human being, in order to contemplate a sheep, would have to invent a language having nothing in common with how animals relate to their environment. By way of introducing the distinctly human capacity of reflection, Felix and Leo first ask for a volunteer to read another passage aloud:

The human being demonstrates reflection when the force of his soul operates so freely that in the whole ocean of sensations which floods the soul through all the senses it can, so to speak, separate off, stop, and pay attention to a single wave, and be conscious of its own attentiveness. . . . Thus he demonstrates reflection when he cannot only recognize all the properties in a vivid or clear way, but can in his own mind *acknowledge* one or several as distinguishing properties. The first act of his acknowledgment provides a distinct concept; it is the first judgment of the soul—and. . . .

What brought about this acknowledgment? A characteristic mark which he had to separate off and which as a characteristic mark of taking-awareness fell within him. . . . This *first characteristic mark of taking-awareness was a word of the soul! With it human language is invented.*³

As in the case of Herder's use of the term *circle*, we begin here with a relatively free discussion of what he means by *reflection* (in German, *Besonnenheit*). Students suggest many single-word translations—*reflexivity*, *awareness*, *self-awareness*—but also more involved concepts: “the ability to direct attention,” “the capacity to be self-aware of the ability to direct attention,” “the ability to isolate certain sensory data and to screen out or neglect others.” I interrupt Felix and Leo, at this juncture, to tell the class a bit about traditional “faculty psychology,” which divided human reasoning abilities into various hierarchically distinguished faculties, such as logical reasoning, understanding, memory, and the imagination. One student immediately draws our attention to Herder's protest against this hierarchy and shows us a passage in which he advocates a holistic, integrated approach to human reason. The passage on reflection is part of that same argument, and human language clearly is the instrument of reflection here. Language functions as a screen, to curb sensory overstimulation, and as a mirror, to add self-awareness of that capacity.

Felix and Leo now turn to the “sheep passage” itself, which they read aloud. They argue that Herder's account of the origin of human language goes through four fundamental stages, corresponding to how the kind of reflection that we have been discussing comes into being. First, when the human being encounters a sheep, it may do so in a neutral fashion, which a hungry wolf or a ram, driven

3. Herder, “Treatise on the Origin of Language,” 87–88.

by instinct to reduce the sheep to a mere object of need, cannot do. Second, the human subject chooses characteristics of the sheep (for example, its bleating) in order to recall and ponder them in isolation from their context. Third, the human being recognizes this moment as one of awareness and of freedom to direct its attention wherever it chooses. And finally, having reached this recognition, the human being realizes its world-making powers and thus its capacity to shape history.

Leo and Felix then distribute their handout, which condenses the argument as follows:

Language as the Condition of Human Freedom and History in Herder's Treatise on the Origin of Language

“How far can one think without language, what must one think with language?”

“How marvelous is the insect, and how narrow the circle of its effect!”

- I. Epistemology and semiotics
 - Sheep *qua* sheep
 - Sheep *qua* “sheep”

- II. Freedom and history
 - Sheep *qua* subject of awareness
 - Sheep *qua* paradigm for humanity

Responding with enthusiastic laughter to the presentation, students express their wonder and admiration at this schematic reduction of Herder's complex argument.

Then a quiet class member, Sonja, a graduate student in Slavic literature, asks whether there is not also an aesthetic component to Herder's narrative. I invite her to elaborate, and she points out that he describes the human being's contemplation of the sheep as an unhurried, unpredetermined “wish to get to know the sheep.” A number of students agree with Sonja's suggestion, and I promise the class that, when eventually we discuss Kant's analytic of the beautiful and what he means by “disinterested interest,” we will explore this element of aesthetic experience further. Indeed, I go on, Herder's theory of language—especially if viewed through the scenario of the “sheep passage,” in which the human being consciously directs its attention to the contemplation of an external object, without instinctual compulsion toward any specific response—constitutes a key element of Enlightenment neohumanism. Herder's theory, I conclude, also provides a model for the activity of pleasurable contemplation, which is central to Kant's understanding of the beautiful.

Our class time is about to run out. I ask for volunteers for next week—discussion leaders who will focus on how human sociability depends on language, with an emphasis on the details of how history and actual spoken languages are related. I return the essays from last week’s session, and we quickly leave the classroom as the students in another course are entering.

STUDYING DEEP HISTORY ABROAD

Frederick S. Paxton

It is spring in central Italy. I am in Perugia, the capital of Umbria, with eleven third-year students from the small liberal arts college in Connecticut where I have taught for the last thirty years. We are here under the auspices of the College's SATA (Study Away, Teach Away) program, which sends students and faculty abroad as a group, not just to Italy but also to Mexico, Cuba, and Peru, as well as South Africa and Vietnam. It is a popular program, and a particularly good choice for students of limited means, because the college covers the cost of international airfare and provides the faculty director with a budget for group dinners and some travel to museums and other learning sites. Perugia is centrally located, so students can easily get to Rome, Florence, Venice, and other "must-see" places, and, because it is not a major tourist destination, it is an excellent location to learn to speak Italian. Moreover, its compact nature, especially the *centro storico*, where our host institution, the Umbra Institute, is located, makes it a marvelous laboratory for learning about the past, present, and future of the Perugini and their city, which is both very ancient and very much in tune with the present. The Umbra Institute uses the city as an extension of the classroom, from the recent excavations below the cathedral, where archaeologists have uncovered the remains of an Etruscan temple over 2,500 years old, to a variety of research and learning opportunities in local schools and community agencies.

When I finished recruiting students for the program (a process that lasted over a year), I was pleased to see how diverse a group they were. There are five

women and six men here with me, which makes a change from the 60:40 female-to-male ratio at our home campus. Moreover, of the eleven, only four are white (three women and one man). The rest comprise three African Americans (one woman and two men), a Guatemalan-American woman, and three other men, one Chinese, one Afro-Caribbean-Turkish-American, and one Puerto Rican-Dominican-Italian-American. This mix reflects not only the college's recent success in diversifying our student body but also the Umbra Institute's decision to expand its offerings beyond the usual history, art history, and political science courses offered at most study centers in Italy. Thus, students majoring in sociology, psychology, and human development can study, in an international setting, the kind of contemporary issues that those fields address.

I am a historian, and, since the students in the program are required to take a course with me, I was glad that I had decided to offer one that would not require prior work in history but would, so I hoped, give my students a broad historical perspective on the place where they would be spending their semester abroad. The course is titled *Perugia, Etruria, and the Deep History of Italy*, and eight of the eleven students in the program are enrolled. Two of them, Maria and Christian, took my course *History 101 (Big History: From the Big Bang to the Future of Humanity and the Cosmos)* in their first year at the college.

Big History derives from the insight that everything we know about the past is based on evidence that exists in the present and on the realization that scientific fields such as astronomy, geology, and evolutionary biology are, to a large degree, historical disciplines. That is, just as historians typically use the documentary record to reconstruct human history since the invention of the written word, astrophysicists analyze electromagnetic radiation to reconstruct the history of the universe since its inception in the Big Bang. Similarly, geologists use the rock archive to reconstruct the history of Earth, evolutionary biologists and paleontologists use fossils and organic remains to reconstruct the history of terrestrial life, and anthropologists and archaeologists use bones and the remains of material culture to reconstruct the "prehistory" of humanity. Most recently, geneticists have been using the information encoded in DNA to reconstruct the genealogies of individuals and human populations from our common ancestors in Africa, all the way back to a one-celled organism known as LUCA (the Last Universal Common Ancestor), whose DNA survives in every cell of every living thing on Earth.

Given the strides made in all these fields in the last century or so, and particularly in the last sixty years, it is no wonder that some historians want to put it all together in a continuous narrative: the history, in a sense, of everything. Thanks to the value that the liberal arts place on interdisciplinary work, as well as to the small size of the college where I work, colleagues in the sciences were happy to team-teach a Big History course with me so that I could learn how to

do it alone. And thanks to a fortuitous encounter (at the second International Big History Association conference in 2014) with Walter Alvarez's wonderful book *The Mountains of St. Francis: Discovering the Geologic Events That Shaped Our Earth* (2009), I decided to situate my course for the program between "big" and "deep" history. Deep historians study humanity since the emergence of *Homo sapiens* some 200,000 years ago, as distinguished from the comparatively "shallow history" covered by the documentary record, which goes back no further than 6,000 years and tends to exclude the history of people who did not write, or were not written about, even right up to the present.

The course would start with the history of the Italian peninsula, especially the central range of the Apennines (which is as spectacularly visible from Perugia as the front range of the Rocky Mountains is from Denver). Alvarez has dubbed this range the "mountains of St. Francis" in honor of Assisi, which sits on a shoulder of Mt. Subasio, across the Tiber River valley from Perugia, and glows in the sunlight because of the ancient white and pink limestone (known as *scaglia bianca* and *scaglia rossa*) used to build its churches and homes. His book traces Italy's geological past, from its beginnings as part of the African continental plate 250 million years ago, to the spectacular collision with the European plate that created the Alps, about 220 million years later, to the "Earth storm" that subsequently folded and raised the mountains and then began to tear them apart, creating the surprisingly wide valley of the Tiber between Assisi and Perugia (to say nothing of the earthquakes that regularly shake the region). We would turn next to the late Paleolithic, about 50,000 years ago, during the last Ice Age, when the first members of our species occupied the region, and then to the so-called Neolithic revolution, 40,000 years later, when people first began to farm. We would end with an in-depth study of the Etruscans, architects of the first agrarian civilization of Italy, up to their absorption by the rising power of Rome in the last centuries before the Common Era, when most courses on the history of Italy begin.

In line with the aims of this symposium, I will now describe a particular moment in my class's study of the deep history of Italy: two meetings spent discussing the lives of seven women who lived 45,000 to 10,000 years ago and are the common ancestors of just about every European alive today. That is to say, the direct descendants of these women make up seven genetically related groups of various sizes (5 to 47 percent of the population) within contemporary Europe. The discovery of their existence is the result of work led by the British geneticist Bryan Sykes, described in his book *The Seven Daughters of Eve: The Science That Reveals Our Genetic Ancestry* (2001), which I assigned as a follow-up to *The Mountains of St. Francis*. At the end of Sykes's book, after explaining all the twists and turns it took to learn how to read the archive preserved in mitochondrial DNA, which is passed down exclusively from mothers to their children, he draws on

archaeological evidence to imagine what the lives of each of the seven women, whom he calls “clan mothers,” was like—a wonderful move, to my mind, from hard science to science-based historical literature. I had assigned one student the task of reviewing Sykes’s arguments for situating the women in particular times and places in Italy (and elsewhere around the Mediterranean) and had asked each of the other class members to present the key features of one of the women’s lives and lead a discussion of what we can learn from it about the deep human past.

As the students get settled for our first meeting, I list on the blackboard the last three of the eight major jumps in complexity (or thresholds) that scholars of big history use to help make deep time comprehensible. My hope is that doing so will help to situate the week’s work with respect to the transition from the original human lifeway—hunting and gathering—to farming and herding. I also wanted my students to think about the difficulties and possibilities experienced by the first Europeans as they occupied the landscapes whose emergence we studied in the first phase of the course. Finally, I want them to note the dramatic shortening of the intervals between major thresholds, once the forces of human cultural evolution began to drive historical change:

Homo sapiens appears 200,000 years ago

Neolithic revolution: 10,000 years ago

Industrial revolution: 200 years ago.

Marcus starts things off by asking, “How exactly did Brian Sykes know when each of the seven woman lived?” The ensuing discussion takes us back to the text, where we review a chart (which will appear, later, on the midterm exam) illustrating why it was necessary for each of the women to have had at least two daughters in order to have had a chance at having descendants alive today. Discussion of that chart leads to a review of the clocklike mutation rate of mitochondrial DNA, which shows that the common female ancestor of any two people with one variant mutation between them lived approximately 10,000 years ago (or, if they have two, 20,000 years ago, and so on). Marcus sets off another group discussion by remarking that “Sykes says that he came up with the locations where the women lived by using the principle that the place of origin of any genetically linked population normally exhibits more genetic diversity than a descendant population. But why is that the case? It seems like the opposite should be true.” Rather than take time to go over the individual cases, I explain by reiterating a point made earlier in the course: “As you might recall, Africa’s population is the most genetically diverse on Earth because our species evolved there some 200,000 years ago, and so there has been a longer time for genetic mutations to distinguish individuals and groups from one another. Since most everyone else is descended from people who left Africa tens of thousands of years later, their descendant populations differ from one another much less.”

The discussion of the seven women and their imagined lives takes up the rest of our class meeting (and will consume all of the next). As each student presents his or her thoughts and questions, I note their main points on the board so we can map change and continuity over time—from “Ursula,” who lived among the first of our species to enter Europe and stay for good, about 45,000 years ago, to “Jasmine,” who participated in the beginnings of the agricultural revolution 35,000 years later. Jamie, who presents Ursula’s story, is struck by the short life spans of the members of her band, who hunted bison on the plain that emerged along the coast of Greece as water was caught up in the advancing glaciers. He remarks as well on how they were often reduced to “scavenging” meat from carcasses and on how “infants could be snatched from the band’s cave by leopards.” When he notes that “Ursula could only have one child at a time,” Amy asks, “Why? That’s not the case today, right?” Maria explains, on the basis of her knowledge of Jasmine’s story, that “once people began to farm, the added carbohydrates in their diet turned off the genes that had evolved to limit the number of children hunter-gatherer women could have.” “So,” Amy responds, “the women’s bodies had figured out a way to make sure that they did not get pregnant before a child was old enough to walk by herself? That’s amazing.”

Since Ursula lived in the period before the extinction of *Homo neanderthalensis*, her story also leads to discussion of the relation between that group of humans and *Homo sapiens*. When Sykes was writing some fifteen years ago, he wondered if genetic research would eventually show that members of the two groups had mated. Just this morning, I have begun an online discussion forum for the course by posting a link to an article published last Thursday (which has been brought to my attention via Facebook) about research that has already moved beyond ascertaining that almost everyone outside of Africa has inherited some Neanderthal DNA to investigating links between it and particular psychological and physical traits among people today. The post draws a characteristically astute comment from Maria: “I find it questionable that the only things that can be influenced by analyzing the Neanderthal DNA within modern humans are likelihoods of smoking addiction, depression and other health risks,” which, as I point out in class, “makes a lot of sense, considering that genes that grant adaptive advantages are equally or even more likely to proliferate in a population as time passes than ones with negative effects.” In any case, since mating definitely occurred, we decide that Neanderthals could not have been a different species from our ancestors but, instead, something more like cousins. (This stunning twist in the human story became even more complicated recently, when the news broke that we share DNA with still other “cousins,” the so-called Denisovans, whose remains were first discovered in a Siberian cave less than six years ago.)

We turn next to Sonja’s presentation of the life of “Xenia,” who lived in Siberia 20,000 years after Ursula, during the so-called Last Glacial Maximum. In

spite of the worsening conditions, Xenia's band had learned to hunt mammoths as well as bison and to build shelters out of their massive bones. Sonja remarks on the advantage they had over their prey because "they knew the habits of the animals" and so would show up each year at a spot along their unchanging migration routes, where the bison were particularly vulnerable. They also had a new tool, the atlatl or spear-thrower, which greatly increased the power and range of their weapons. Sonja ends her presentation with a rueful note about how life was so hard then that "anyone too weak to walk and carry something had to be left behind to die," but in addition she remarks, with wonder, that a female descendant of one of Xenia's daughters must have walked to the Americas, since some 1 percent of Native Americans alive today carry her DNA. Sonja's is just the kind of response I hoped to foster when I prefaced my posting of the article on the Denisovans with the comment that "maybe in a new edition of *The Seven Daughters*, Sykes could have one of Ursula's daughters get together with a Neanderthal and one of Xenia's with a Denisovan."

The class session ends with Emma's presentation on "Helena," whose band, Sykes imagines, migrated each autumn from the Mediterranean coast of what is now southwestern France to the Dordogne River. Their goal would have been an annual reindeer hunt, beginning with a ritual visit to already ancient paintings in a cave above the river. Emma begins by noting similarities among the lifeways of the three bands presented so far. Like the others, she says, "Helena's people knew the best time and place to intercept migrating animals, in this case a narrow gorge where the reindeer had to swim across the river on their way down from their summer pastures; and yet they were utterly dependent on the success of the hunt." Emma is particularly impressed by the skills of Helena's parents: "Her father made especially fine flint tools that could then be used to make even finer ones, like the needles Helena's mother used to sew the sophisticated reindeer-skin clothing that helped them to survive the long, cold winters." After thanking her, I ask, "Did you notice the other important technological advance in Helena's story?" "I don't know," she replies. "What do you mean?" "Do you remember Helena's father's reluctant acceptance of the other men's use of detachable points for spears launched by atlatls, so that he would not have to make a whole new one if a wounded animal got away?" "Yes," she responds, "but I wasn't sure what it was all about." "Fair enough," I say. "I will bring in images of atlatls to show at the next class, along with a photo of another artifact that typifies the kind of archaeological data that Sykes used to bring to life the worlds of the women whose existence he had discovered. That should help."

We begin that next class with three images (of atlatls) that have taken only a few minutes, via Google Images, to find, download, and insert into a PowerPoint presentation, which I then upload to the course website housed back in Connecticut and now display on a large-screen monitor connected to the laptop here in

Italy. The first image focuses on the throwing-stick itself, which is weighted with a stone attached with leather thongs in the same way that the point is attached to the shaft of the spear. The second image shows how a hunter's free arm acts as a counterbalance; and the third, a two-step throwing sequence that illustrates clearly the added power the device provided: nothing but seven pieces of wood, stone, and leather, but it was in its time the most lethal weapon the world had ever seen.

Matthew then presents his thoughts on the life of "Velda," whose band lived 17,000 years ago in northern Spain, where it occupied a territory between the summer pastures in the mountains and the forests that covered the wide Atlantic coastal plain that had been exposed by lowered sea levels. This band also hunted bison, but the crowded conditions, for people, plants, and animals, had forced a significant adaptation. If the band members left their camp, outsiders might move in, so they settled in one place. Matthew notes that "this made it possible for Sykes to illustrate the differences between the female culture of the camp from the male culture of the hunt, for the men had to be away for extended periods following the movements of the big game."

Earlier in the semester, when we first discussed how the peculiarities of mitochondrial DNA virtually demanded that Sykes reconstruct the deep past from the women's point of view, Matthew thought that it was "no big deal, since that is where the evidence led him." Amy felt that Sykes's work was "groundbreaking, because it provides a map of how we are all related and makes the science understandable in human terms." And Sonja, who has a habit of noting down particularly memorable passages, drew our attention to the very end of the book, where Sykes imagines a thread connecting him back in time to his own clan mother, "Tara": "I feel a strong connection. These are all my mothers who passed this precious messenger through a thousand births, a thousand screams, a thousand embraces of a thousand new-born babies. The thread becomes an umbilical cord." "For me," Sonja said, "that made it powerful—to think about the women."

The lives of "Tara" and "Katrine" are particularly germane to our course, because Sykes locates them in Italy. Tara, who was a contemporary of Velda, lived along the Tuscan coast, and Katrine spent her life on the opposite side of the peninsula, near where Venice is today, some two thousand years later. Amy's presentation on Tara centers on how the men of her band, unlike those of Velda's, were "always on the move": because the large herd animals of the tundra were absent so far south, Tara's band had to hunt (for wild boar and deer). On the other hand, their access to the seashore led to the discovery that a hollowed-out log would float. Once they learned to make their own simple canoes, they could move up and down the coast and more or less settle down to "affluent foraging," as anthropologists have come to call that way of life—a development that may have secured the longevity of Tara's genes. Christian's take on Katrine's story centers

on the lack of social hierarchy among hunter-gatherers. He notes that, while women and men had “separate roles, they seemed to have equal importance” to the survival of the band. Jamie, however, observes that “there is no evidence of women who might have wanted to hunt being allowed to do so.”

Maria is the last to present. Her subject, “Jasmine,” lived in a new geological period, the Holocene, occasioned by warming temperatures in the five thousand years since Katrine’s death. This warming led to the melting of the ice and a stabilization of the global climate more or less in line with conditions that have prevailed as recently as 1950. Jasmine also lived in one of the most ecologically diverse and densely populated places on the planet, the so-called Fertile Crescent, whose arc traced the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, through the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, to the Persian/Arab Gulf. Maria was particularly fascinated to learn, in her reading of Sykes, that, while rising waters around the world obliterated all possibility of life on the great coastal plains, Jasmine’s village, in what is now Syria, “was protected because it was not on a shoreline.” Her village was also much larger than any of the encampments of the other six women, with as many as three hundred residents living off the meat from migrating herds of gazelle, which, once dried and stored, could almost feed them all. Her husband was not much of a hunter, but he had begun to harvest seeds from wild grasses in the hills and learned, together with Jasmine, how to cultivate them, guaranteeing an extra source of food and thus launching the agricultural revolution, a new basis upon which to organize human society.

The midterm exam required my students first to analyze charts and diagrams on the geological history of Italy and the use of DNA as a key to the past and then to write an essay on what the “lives” of any three of the seven women reveal about deep human history. They performed so well that the average grade was B+. After passing back the exams, I walk with the class over to the Museo Archeologico Nazionale dell’Umbria for a last look at Italy and Etruria before the era of the Etruscans. A recently installed exhibit focuses on evidence of the early occupation of the region by *Homo neanderthalensis* and *Homo sapiens* and is all in Italian. Our knowledge of the Italian language ranges from beginner to intermediate (everyone is required to take a language course, and visiting professors are welcome to do so), and thus we can help one another understand the text that accompanies the exhibits, along with the brief videos on how stone tools were made and on how to hunt with atlatls. The students analyze and question the artistic recreations of encampments of *Homo neanderthalensis* and *Homo sapiens* in terms of what we have learned from our study of the deep history of Italy. They are ready to move on to the next phase of our course.

THE WRONG WORDS IN THE WRONG TIMES

Ramona Naddaff and Katharine Wallerstein

This is a story about the dangers of teaching, told from the point of view of two teachers—Ramona Naddaff, an associate professor of rhetoric at the University of California, Berkeley, and Katharine Wallerstein, a graduate assistant there, representing different kinds of experience. As befits specialists in rhetoric, each speaks here in her individual voice.

Ramona

Since I began teaching in the Berkeley Department of Rhetoric, in the 1990s, I have offered an undergraduate course on censorship and the novel. Populated by an ethnically diverse group of juniors and seniors whose skills and talents differ greatly, this upper-division course is often quite popular as a way to satisfy the department's Narrative and Image concentration. Many of the students have not read any novels since high school and remember fondly the joy literature brings. I, of course, want to reignite this joy, but I also want them to think about the politics of the novel through careful readings of literary censorship trials. During the semester, together as a group, we confront sexism, blasphemy, obscenity, racism, and anti-Semitism, to mention but a few of the uncomfortable topics that appear in novels and trials alike. I have taught this course fearlessly. I never have

Common Knowledge 23:1

DOI 10.1215/0961754X-3692224

© 2017 by Duke University Press

considered the dangers that this dangerous literature might generate. And, truth be told, I never have encountered any problems or complaints. The students seem to have enjoyed speaking freely about topics that would now certainly entail a long series of “trigger warnings.”

In fall 2015, I was assigned to teach Rhetoric 103A: Approaches and Paradigms in the History of Rhetorical Theory. A lecture course of about eighty to one hundred students, it is required for all rhetoric majors. To my surprise, it was in this course, not the course on censorship, that I found myself attacked for objectifying and dehumanizing women, for outright misogyny, and for violent, insensitive, and destructive pedagogical behavior. Homer, not the Marquis de Sade or D. H. Lawrence, was the corrupting author. A PowerPoint presentation, not a novel, occasioned a student’s suffering and rage against a trauma that he said my teaching had provoked.

Although Rhetoric 103A is required and students should take it at the beginning of their careers, many wait until they are seniors. The reason is simple: the topic of the course bores them. There is little or no interest in reading the ancients or learning about the history of rhetoric when they could be spending their time thinking about the present and the wonderful theoretical dilemmas it poses. I do not fault my students for their resistance; I take it as my inspiration. How will I, for example, make Plato’s *Gorgias* come alive for them and assist them in understanding why they are majors in rhetoric, rather than philosophy? From the start of the semester, I make it clear that I understand their reluctance to read Thucydides and Aristotle. I do not promise that I will make explicit the connections between their beloved theoretical companions—a Marx or a Foucault or a Derrida—and the ancients, but I assure them that they, independently, will see the links and relations. I ask them to imagine themselves as travelers in a foreign land where they must attempt to understand a language other than their own and where glimpses of behaviors different from theirs move them to reflect on the strangeness of their own ways.

I have taught Rhetoric 103A only once before. That class was held in a beautiful, big, airy, and light room. In the fall of 2015, however, I am in the basement of the undergraduate library. It is dark and windowless. It would be just right if I were showing movies. But I am not. The only visuals I will include are simple PowerPoint images, passages from the primary texts that we are reading, and an occasional video or quotation from a secondary source that I have decided to add to my lectures this semester. I have never used PowerPoint before in teaching, and I am curious how it will work, especially as a way to read collectively and to concentrate on passages from assigned texts. Although I request that students bring their books to class and leave their computers, cell phones, and tablets at home, they never seem to listen. I have decided to use PowerPoint to produce surrogate book pages, now and then adding an image or two.

Today's is the introductory class, and I am nervous even though I have written up every single word of my lecture, which I have revised extensively from the last time I gave it. It is only a year since I taught this same course, but it feels like the first time. I have to reread primary and secondary texts; I have to rehearse and memorize; I have to remember not to go too fast or too slow as I read. I am particularly nervous about my new technology. How am I going to show my PowerPoint images and pages? Will I know how to work the equipment? I arrive early so that I can ensure technological ease.

On this first day of the semester, the students look particularly rested and attentive. I know now that by week five they will be tired and anxious and will have stopped reading, and at that stage my new PowerPoint presentations will come in handy. The undergraduates might stop coming to lecture or even to the discussion sections, led by two graduate-student instructors, where they review the week's lecture and get the individual attention they deserve. I will get to know only some of the students by name—the few who are comfortable enough to ask questions and comment during my lecture. It is the third week of August and still feels like summer.

I begin my lecture "What Is Rhetoric?" with a slide that cites five different definitions, given by Greek writers from Homer to Plato. In passing, I explain the ancient connection between rhetoric and violence, some Greeks associating rhetoric with a violent force that overcomes its listeners' resistance to persuasion. I mention that sometimes rhetoric is metaphorically compared even to rape, a trope of special importance in Gorgias's *Encomium to Helen*. I then show an image of the goddess Peitho (Persuasion), next to which I write "rhetoric as rape," thinking that this formulation, which I have taken from an article, will entice students to consider what it means to compare rhetoric with violence.

As one student later recounted: "Let's be clear: this was not an act of sexual violence, not a depiction of sexual violence, not pornography, not a story about rape, not even remotely a sexual discussion, but a casual mention of a metaphor, albeit a gritty one, that was relevant to the course." Still, even now as I write this piece, I fault myself for having been too casual about using the metaphor. At the time, I thought nothing of it and moved on from the image of Peitho to an introduction of the next reading—books 1 and 2 of the *Iliad*. Class ended. It was 5:00 p.m. on a Tuesday, and the students left peacefully.

As I prepared for my lecture on Homer the next day, I spent a lot of time thinking about how I would introduce the epic poet as the inventor of the art of persuasion and about how, furthermore, I could show that, by reading and listening to Homer's speeches, we learn about the art of oratory, of public speaking. I wanted my students to understand how Homer made persuasive speech crucial to the lives and fates of his heroes. Homer, the first European epic poet, was devoted to Peitho, the goddess of persuasion, verbal seduction, charming speech. Having

made that connection with my previous lecture, I would then introduce how, in *Iliad* 2, Odysseus, when speaking rhetorically and persuasively to the army, is exercising a violent force over his listeners; they are no longer masters of themselves. They are overcome by and succumb to the power of his rhetoric. They do what he says. His speech effects a deed.

Before explaining, briefly, the Trojan War and the role of Helen of Troy in it, I pause for questions. There are none, so I proceed. We then read aloud the beautiful first lines of the *Iliad*, which I display on a PowerPoint slide: “Rage: Sing, Goddess, Achilles’ rage, black and murderous.” Preparing to analyze Agamemnon’s response to Chryses when he pleads for his daughter Chryseis’s return, I note that at the beginning of the epic a woman promotes a crisis in the community: Apollo’s priest Chryses wants to ransom back his daughter, whom the Greeks have captured and whom Agamemnon has enslaved as a war prize. I remind them, parenthetically, that Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose work they have read in other classes, writes that “the exchange of women is an element of kinship theory in a patriarchal structure where women were treated as property to create alliances.” I query how value was assigned to women, how they were commodified, and how they were treated as property, then remind them of the so-called origin story, dear to Roland Barthes, about how rhetoric is connected to property debates. I am pleased with myself for making these connections with their other courses. I go on to discuss how the beginning of the crisis in the first book of the *Iliad* stems from a failure of persuasion: Chryses is unable to persuade Agamemnon to return his daughter. I emphasize that there are two conflicting positions and desires here that no dialogue can resolve. And then I stop for questions. This time, there are some.

Students, male and female, voice their dismay over the treatment of women and the injustices of this patriarchal society. They are alarmed by how women were interchangeable, exchangeable, and abused. I listen and try my best to explain, first, that even though this text comes from a moment in history when women were radically dismissed, silenced, and mistreated, we must not dismiss Homer, his epic, and his times wholesale and uncritically. Second, I remind them that in Homer women are not all powerless victims. There are, for example, powerful goddesses like Athena. One might think of the murderer Clytemnestra, I suggest, as a woman who rages against the male machine. Even Helen of Troy, we will come to discover in a few weeks time, is envisioned by Sappho as a woman who refuses to compromise her desire. The students listen and class ends. Some come to speak with me about how to understand rhetoric as persuasion in Homer and about why Nestor is considered a master rhetorician.

The following Tuesday, I walk to class where we are to continue our discussion of Homer. I have much to do today: I want to analyze the speeches of Achilles, Agamemnon, and Nestor; to examine their differing rhetorical stances; and

to discuss more generally the art of making persuasive speeches. I particularly want the class to think about how one's style and mode of argumentation should depend on one's audience. I have made a PowerPoint presentation that analyzes, line by line, "sweet-worded" Nestor's speech. The lecture is perhaps a bit too technical, but I am excited: I have completely rewritten it since reading a new book on Homer and the origins of rhetoric. I am particularly keen to engage in close textual exegesis. My presentation is full of excerpts from the *Iliad* that will be read aloud and that we will carefully dissect.

I am on the phone as I approach the café near the library, where I meet my graduate-student instructors before class. One of them, Katharine, signals that she needs to speak with me urgently. I tell her I will be right there.

Katharine

As a graduate-student instructor for Rhetoric 103A, I held two discussion sections each Wednesday, one at 12:00 and one at 2:00. On the morning of Wednesday, September 9, I started my day as usual in San Francisco. I drove my daughter across town to school then crossed the Bay Bridge to Berkeley, rushing as always, fighting traffic, and cursing at the lack of parking every time I arrive on campus, despite the exorbitant fees I pay for my permit. Conditions were particularly bad this Wednesday, and I did not have time, as I had hoped, to finish reading my students' postings for our discussion section. It was generally not essential to do so. I required that they post weekly comments (on BCourses, Berkeley's online format for extraclassroom activity) so that they would come to the discussion with something thoughtful to contribute. The structure for the commentaries was generous: students were asked to provide no more than a critical reflection, whether a close reading or a broad analysis, on one or more of the readings. They were invited as well, if they wished, to draw connections to issues of relevance today. My larger aim was, naturally, to get them to hone their critical thinking skills, to challenge themselves, and to learn to formulate their thoughts carefully—all of which are foundations of a humanities education—in a class that itself was teaching a foundational set of concepts in a humanities discipline.

Having only glanced at about half of the postings, I thus went into my discussion sections that day with no knowledge that one of my students had written a set of comments that Ramona and I would find very troubling. As it turned out, he was not present (as a "disabilities" student with mental health difficulties, he would frequently miss both the lecture and the discussion section). Nothing was said about his comments in class, and discussion proceeded just as it had the week before. The students were talkative and inquisitive, with about a 30 percent rate of active participation, which I thought, for the beginning of the semester especially, was quite good.

After sections were over, I settled in the library to do some work, and it was then that I looked at the remaining commentaries. Amid discussions of Homeric speeches and techniques of persuasion, I was stopped short by the comments of a student whom I will call “Tony.” A feminist and queer activist, Tony focused his commentary on the oppression of women in the *Iliad*, writing that today, as in the *Iliad*, women are still treated as mere currency. Fair enough, I thought. At that point, he sidetracked into discussion of patriarchy and rape culture, the lack of inclusion of women in “STEM disciplines,” and a variety of other such points that, while worthy, were not written as critical reflections of any kind and did not involve either the reading for the course or the topic of rhetoric. Still, not terrible. The shocker came when he began to attack Ramona. While at first he granted that she was, as indeed she was, critical of the objectification of women in the *Iliad*, he concluded that she actually “condoned” sexual violence and “reinforce[d] patriarchal structures to further oppress non-men-identifying individuals, including women.” Rhetoric may be perceived as violence, he continued, “but to equate rhetoric to rape is absurd, insensitive, and irresponsible. Ramona Naddaff *invalidates, trivializes, and marginalizes* the lived experiences of sexual violence survivors.” Very strong words, and a direct accusation.

After rereading his words several times (in hopes of finding I had read them incorrectly), I took a deep breath and e-mailed Tony to ask him if could come to my office hours the next day to discuss his comments. Though I hesitated about whether or not to contact Ramona right away, I decided to hold off until I had spoken to Tony first. He agreed to come in and the next day showed up at the allotted time, good humored and relaxed. Recognizing the volatility of the situation and, perhaps, of this student himself, I did my best to make the situation feel “safe” and comfortable for him. Still, I got right to the point. I told him that, while I supported his using the commentaries as a format for discussing social and political issues, I was concerned by his tone and by his accusations. During the ensuing conversation, he told me that he himself had been raped. He told me that he had mental health concerns and was working forty hours a week at a job, on top of being a student. I already knew he identified as queer and knew that he was vocal in campus politics. Clearly this young man was juggling a lot, and bravely. He seemed to soften over the course of our conversation, but, still, there were many emotions in evidence, including righteous anger, looking for a place to land.

The problem was that, in an academic context in which the “right” not to be emotionally or intellectually “injured” in any way was much discussed and perhaps excessively protected, Tony had actual power. The situation scared me, and it would scare Ramona even more. I therefore mustered all of the friendliness and comradeship I could as a fellow feminist and fellow activist, as someone who,

though not close in age, understood well his concerns. My hope was that he would listen when I told him that, whatever he thought he might have heard her say in class, Ramona was anything but what he accused her of being. He listened; he talked more, and I listened. I think I gained his trust. At any rate, I hoped that I did. I told him he could come talk to me anytime and asked that he follow up with me about the issues we had discussed. He agreed, though he still insisted that he was going to file a complaint with OMBUDS (a campus conflict-resolution service) and, despite my urgings, refused to speak with Ramona directly, as he did not feel “safe” in doing so. Then he told me one last thing: several other students had seen his commentary and had contacted him about it to express agreement. They had all been talking. He would not say who *they* were, and I did not know the nature of their conversations or agreements or know how many others really were involved, but the possibility that unhappiness in the class was brewing was very disquieting.

My office hours ended barely an hour before Ramona’s lecture was set to begin; although I sent her an e-mail right after Tony left, she did not receive my warning. Luckily, we had the habit of finding each other outside of the library before class, and there she was. Awful as it felt to spring the news on her just twenty minutes before her lecture was to begin, I did so. I filled her in on the commentary, the student, and the meeting, then waited for her to catch her breath. She was shocked, angry, and hurt, as would I be. But there was no time. We quickly put our heads together and devised a plan of action for that day. We both felt she should address the issue in class, particularly if the accusation was no longer the rambling of one student but a conversation among a few or even several.

Ramona

I walk into the room where most of the students are present, waiting for lecture to begin on the anonymous fifth-century text, *Dissoi Logoi*. I decide to be straightforward: “It has come to my attention that certain students were made uncomfortable in lecture the other day. Before we begin lecture today, I’d like to take some time to discuss it. It seems that some of the language I used to treat theories of the violence of rhetoric disturbed and troubled students, as did the discussion of Homer’s depiction of women. I want to make clear that I am not apologizing for what I said. I am, however, sorry if any of you suffered unnecessarily. There is much scholarship on the treatment of women in ancient Greece that emphasizes both their devaluation and their agency. If you would like to read more on this subject, I can give you a bibliography. I did not mean to cause offense by using the word ‘rape.’”

I then allow for open classroom discussion. The responses are multiple. “Tony” remains silent. Two other students speak his view in their own words. Other students decide that they want trigger alerts. One uses the example of being on Facebook or seeing a video where there first appears a warning that the content might be disturbing and suggests that we do the same. At this point, I say: “I understand that, but with every single work we are going to read this semester, I would have to give you a warning. Perhaps you should reconsider whether you want to take this course.” Another student then wonders aloud if they have to read works that they find offensive, to which I respond that they have to make that decision for themselves and take responsibility for their choice. A comment comes from the back: “I didn’t come to Berkeley to have my classes censored. This is the birthplace of free speech.” Another student amplifies this remark: “I don’t think that Professor Naddaff should be censored. And I don’t think that we should dismiss generations of scholarship just because there are words we find troubling and uncomfortable. Part of our education here is to be made uncomfortable in our own thoughts and experiences and to learn to develop critical thinking around controversial issues.” (After class, this student tells us that he has decided to change his honors thesis topic to the question of censorship, comedy, and political opinion.)

Another student raises her hand and asks: “Can we stop now and learn about the *Dissoi Logoi*? That’s why I’m here.” At which point, I ask if there are any more comments, then I invite and encourage them to come speak to me in my office. I make a quick transition into the readings for the day. There is little time remaining. I begin: “The *Dissoi Logoi*, like the Tetralogies of Antiphon, are works of the sophists. While we know the author of the Tetralogies, we don’t know the author of the *Dissoi Logoi*. It is an anonymous text of sometime around the end of the Peloponnesian War, 460 BCE. The use and genre of the *Dissoi Logoi* are uncertain: it may be a collection of pedagogical exercises; it may have been a speech, a lecture, a performance at some kind of competition, a pure thought experiment, which was a popular form of argument at the time. . . .” I am not certain if any of the students are listening seriously, but I forge ahead, hoping to end the class with discussion of a subject about which they have never thought.

We walk out of the room, eager to process the event.

Katharine

I came of age as a feminist in the early 1980s, on the heels of second-wave feminism and at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic and queer activism. In 1984, I went to Oberlin College, which I chose for its activist, artsy, and freethinking student body. I can thus relate to students like Tony. I can understand the

feeling of self-empowerment that comes with the assertion of personal rights. I can understand mobilizing for a cause. In college and in the decades after, I went through the expected iterations of sexual and identity politics. I am grateful to have lived through so many movements and ways of thinking, personal and political, because I am able to understand, despite *and* through a critical lens, their appeal and importance, for college-age students in particular.

I also understand, however, the dangers, in this kind of rights-based thinking, of solipsism and myopia, and worse—a sense of entitlement that has led not to any democratic resolution of the original problem but instead to an identity politics that has become self-centered and personal. I reflected further with Ramona, after class, about how young people are holding their self-protective trigger warnings up like crosses to ward off the devil. To do so risks taking the self too seriously, and the social not seriously enough. I fear that what is happening today, while the result of many forces—not the least of which is a cultural moment of neoliberal values and self-nurturing at the expense of others—is an evolution of identity politics that should be resisted or redirected.

Ramona

It takes the class a few weeks to settle down. I can never imagine speaking freely again. As the semester comes to an end, I receive an e-mail from Tony. He is in trouble and seeking my advice and counsel. My colleagues urge me to stay away from him or at least to have someone present in the room when I speak with him. I decide to see him and to alert the graduate-student adviser that I may need assistance. I am careful and cautious as I listen to this student's description of recent disasters. He feels terribly vulnerable since being attacked the week before and is seeking guidance and an extension on the due date for the assignment. I grant him the extension. I watch every word I say and am relieved when he leaves my office.

Meanwhile, one of our best RH103A students writes that her brother has committed suicide and that therefore she will miss class. Our last reading of the semester is Sophocles's *Antigone*, and it is apparent that this material will be particularly sensitive for the student. I decide to discuss this possibility with her, once she returns to her studies. "The play might help me," she calmly responds. In class, we discuss the tragedy, and one student, with no specific reference to *Antigone*, comments that suicide is a political act. The mourning student asks her: "How is suicide political? Can you explain what you mean?" The student responds: "I do not feel safe speaking about suicide publicly." The conversation ends. The student who has just lost her brother is dumbfounded but chooses to remain silent. The class becomes uncomfortable. We begin where we ended—or

perhaps not. I leave them alone with their discomfort. I too choose silence and return to my lecture. I ask them how they interpret *Antigone's* final lines: "Our happiness depends / on wisdom all the way. / The gods must have their due. / Great words by men of pride / bring greater blows upon them. / So wisdom comes to the old."

AFTERWORD

Caroline Walker Bynum

In the preceding case studies, my colleagues and I have tried to describe, step by step, with no jargon, fancy theory, or hortatory pronouncements, what went on in five humanities classrooms at five institutions in the years 2015 and 2016. We have tried, in other words, to take our readers through an hour or two of actual teaching, showing how ideas build on one another in discussion, how very complex points about cultural context and careful reading are discovered, not imposed, in such discussion, and how instructors plan materials so that this discovery happens, while leaving room for the unexpected.

Longitudinal research suggests that the payoff of studying the humanities is long term. People who go into law, business, medicine, commerce, blue-collar work, or social services tend to say, when interviewed in their fifties, that what they remember most from their higher education and value most about the experience is not vocationally relevant training, which quickly becomes outdated, but the courses in art, music, literature, and, more generally, culture in which they enrolled either because such courses were “distribution requirements” or because they were seen as “just fun.” Statistically based arguments give little sense of why this retrospective opinion obtains. Yet recent reports on the decline of humanities funding imply, though not always very clearly, that something other than utility or entertainment is at stake. As President Drew Faust of Harvard stated in her inaugural address in 2007, the sciences and social sciences look at the present; the humanities connect the long arc of the past with the future. In an interview

with US President Barack Obama, the novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson has made a similar point: we do not value sufficiently what actually happens between ordinary teachers and ordinary students, she argues, yet it is the bedrock of all our values, our successes, and our hopes.¹

I remember attending, a number of years ago, an exhibit of medieval manuscript initials at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and finding in the last room three very elderly gentlemen standing before a large initial illustrating Dante's mountain of purgatory. One waved his cane in great excitement: "It's that book," he cried. "Remember . . . that book!" "Oh yes," said another, "that book. We read it in Western Civ. That book." And, in gusts of enthusiasm, they began to reminisce about a classroom experience that must have been at least sixty years in the past. What they were remembering was not accumulating cultural capital or acquiring marks of status, gaining vocational training or learning responsible citizenship; nor were they remembering solitary study in a dorm room. Rather what they remembered was reading, thinking, and learning about something of great value and learning about it together in the humanities classroom.

We hope that, given the current vogue for memoirs, autobiographies, and personal stories of all sorts, ordinary readers may find the accounts that we give here engaging to follow. At their best, our authors conjure up real students, as well as real teachers, and illustrate the continuing pedagogical struggle to find materials that link professors and pupils and generate animated exchange. We hope that some of the questions raised—for example, what is devotion? how far back can history go? why study the aesthetic theorizing of a past century?—may pique the curiosity of those who are, even at one remove, reading about them here. We hope also that such case studies may encourage young people who love the humanities but fear that teaching is no longer seen as an especially valuable contribution to society. Too often, the message for those considering secondary-school teaching is that one should rise as rapidly as possible to join the administration; too often, graduate students headed for college or university teaching are told that their real job is to publish and that they should avoid teaching whenever possible. The message seems to be that only wimps and second-raters want to teach. The stories given here effectively, I think, falsify such claims. Each of our six authors went to graduate school to study the humanities, driven by a desire to plumb both the dis-ease and the solace provided by art, philosophy, literature, and encounter with the daily life of the past. To each of us, writing and speaking about the humanities form a seamless web; the essays and books that we write grow out of classroom discussion. Classroom discussion is an arena in which discoveries are made.

1. "President Obama and Marilynne Robinson: A Conversation," *New York Review of Books* 62, no. 17 (2015), www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/11/05/president-obama-marilynne-robinson-conversation/.

Finally, we hope that graduates of universities and colleges who have been puzzled by the jargon and infighting characteristic of humanities publishing since the early 1990s may find here affirmation of what the three elderly gentlemen found in an illuminated initial of a manuscript of Dante's *Purgatorio*. These essays show anew how much intelligence, creativity, and planning it takes to teach well. And most humanities teaching, we are convinced, is still respectful of individual gifts and differences, challenging, courteous, thoughtful, and free of politically correct posturing. While great texts from the past may inflict or conjure up pain, they may also provide (as they did for Ramona and Katharine's student still reeling from her brother's suicide) the only space that many of us have for contemplating, even assuaging, such pain. The impact of humanities teaching, as the case of the elderly gentlemen suggests, can last a lifetime.

In closing, on behalf of the editors and editorial board of *Common Knowledge*, I am pleased to invite other teachers of the humanities—and current students as well—to join in the enterprise that begins here with this set of case studies. Detailed essays on the classroom experience may be submitted by e-mail to the journal's editorial office (comknow@biu.ac.il). Teachers and students who would like to discuss potential contributions to this project are welcome to contact me directly (cwbynum@ias.edu).