

### Suggested topics for the final essay

This paper is due on (or before!) **Friday, April 30 at 5pm**. Please email it as an attachment in .doc or .rtf format to rstanton@barnard.edu.

The topics suggested below are just that: suggestions. You should feel free to work on an original topic that appeals to you, but **you must run your topic by me first**, either on email or in person. I am always happy to review thesis statements, outlines or whole drafts with you during office hours or at a mutually convenient time. Please do yourself and me a favor and consult the “Writing an academic essay” handout (available on Courseworks) before, during, and after the creation of your first draft!

**If you are writing the long (~10pp.) paper**, remember that you must deal with some of the major scholarly work that has been done on the text(s) you are treating, and/or approach your topic from a theoretical angle that you have researched. Don’t forget to append a bibliography to your paper; for citations, use MLA style as given in *The Bedford Handbook for Writers* or *Rules for Writers* (or in the MLA Handbook itself).

**If you are writing the short (~5-pp.) paper**, be sure to frame the topic narrowly enough that you can adequately deal with it in 5 pages, and don’t waste words. Every word in your paper should be working hard for you!

### Topics

1. Distortion, disfigurement, and/or depletion of the human form has been a major concern in many of the narratives we’ve read from Dante on (think, for example, of the people whose heads have been twisted around to face backwards in the *Inferno*). Select **one or two** of the texts we have read since Dante and discuss the role of the physical **human body** in the text. Among the themes you may choose to address might be: deformity, disability (e.g. Lermontov’s blind boy), defacement, violence, illness, nourishment or the lack thereof, “natural” and “unnatural” uses of the body, the body as an aesthetic object. You may find it useful to consult S&W (and their sources) on the subject of “embodiment.”
2. Smith and Watson, in Chapter 2 (pp 42-45), offer eight different theories of **agency**, each associated with a well-known cultural critic: agency as an illusion of ideology (Althusser), as the product of multiple interacting ideologies (Wingrove), as the product of “transverse tactics” or “re-use” (de Certeau), as an opportunity afforded by the flexibility and unpredictability of language (Lyotard), as an act of imagination (Appadurai), as a systematic failure of performativity (Butler), as a subconscious rebellion (de Lauretis), and as a mastery of the “games of culture” (Ortner). Choose **one** of these theories and explore its advantages and disadvantages as a strategy for reading **any one or two** of the texts we have covered since Rousseau. Be sure to research the relevant work of the critic whose theory you are examining; see S&W’s Bibliography (pp. 245-267) for details.
3. Many of the works we have read begin with a **Introduction or Foreword** written by an “anterior narrator” who provides information and/or reflections designed to position us in a particular attitude toward the main text (narrated by another party) that we are about to read. Pick any **two** such texts and examine their use of this device. Try to focus on fine distinctions rather than broad generalizations; if appropriate, you might show how our reading of one of the texts you chose may be influenced by our reading of the other.
4. The syllabus for this course is an open-ended document, subject to constant revision and change. Choose the **one** book that you would drop from a future incarnation of the syllabus and make a cogent **scholarly and pedagogical** argument for its exclusion. Note that this topic requires you to think hard about the **goals and themes** of the course and to justify your choice in terms of those, basing your argument on substantial evidence, not simply personal taste! (Alternatively: pick one

book you would definitely *not* jettison, and defend it in terms of the goals and themes of the course as you conceive of them.)

5. Most of the narrators we have met since Augustine have been readers as well as writers; the texts they have consumed play roles both implicit and explicit in the texts they themselves create, shaping their language, imagery and narrative techniques as well as the intellectual journeys that bring them to the moment of narration. (We might think of examples as diverse as Augustine's debts to Virgil, Cicero, Plato, and scripture; Rigoberta's acquisition of Spanish via the Bible and Marxism; or Wordsworth's struggle with the legacy of Milton and the leadership of Coleridge.) Emulate one or more of these narrators by writing an **intellectual autobiography of yourself as a reader**. Explain to future generations of readers which texts have shaped your life, and why and how. Questions you may wish to consider include: how does your personality affect the choice of what you read and your response to it? Conversely, how has your reading shaped your personality? How has it shaped your writing (you may choose to answer this question by *showing* instead of *telling*)? When did you learn to read and what were the texts that initiated you into the world of literature? What specifically in any piece of reading has moved you or made you think most deeply? What has most repelled or surprised you? Have there been events in your life that were specifically motivated by reading? Mention any epiphanies or formative moments that were catalyzed by reading. Be as specific as you can. Some of the books you have read most recently are the ones on the syllabus for this course; you should not feel obliged to talk about them, but you may find them more accessible to your memory than earlier material.

### **Boring checklist**

- ☐ Does your paper have an appropriate **title**?
- ☐ Did you **number** your pages?
- ☐ Did you **proofread** your paper and check your **spelling**?
- ☐ If you used any secondary sources (including websites), have you **documented** them appropriately?
- ☐ For quotations from our assigned texts, give page references in parentheses in the text. If you are writing about more than one text, identify any ambiguous references by author name and page number: e.g., (Rousseau 68), (Babel 23), (Menchú 221), (S&W 42).