

POSC 262

Displaced Lives: Freedom and Meaning

Winter 2021

Class Hours: T TH: 1:45-3:30

Classroom: Virtual

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Office: Willis 418

Office Hours: TTH: 3:30-4:30, W: 3:45-4:45, or by appointment

Course Description

In today's world, most of us value individual freedom: the ability to freely move and freely express our ideas and associate with others. However, today we are experiencing a severe pandemic, which curtails our ability to freely move and to entirely choose how to live our lives. We experience a situation in which the world curbs our ability to pursue our desires and projects. Can we still be free when the freedom of movement is severely curtailed, or it becomes impossible? Can we still be free when we cannot speak up our mind? Can we still be free when we are expelled from the world? Can we find meaning in distress and oppression? Can we still be political and have an impact on the world even when political action becomes impossible? Hannah Arendt called the times when individuals are expelled or withdraw from the world, dark times. Arendt asked herself if, in these times of seclusion and exclusion, humanity can still be preserved and if the displaced lives of individuals can still illuminate the world and humanize it.

To inspire and guide our reflection on how to find meaning and freedom when our will and possibilities for acting are limited by happenings in the world, which we cannot fully control, we will read in this course the memoirs, dairies, letters, and interviews of quite different writers and thinkers. They lived through different times and had to confront varied forms of political oppression and historical turmoil. Their memoirs, letters, and dairies were the media they chose for replacing their diminished freedom of movement with freedom of thought, the freedom to reflect on their times and lives and to judge them.

We will start with the Jewish Austrian writer, Stefan Zweig and will read his memoir, *The Life of Yesterday*. Zweig's life and his ideals about Europe were shattered by both WW I and the rise of the Nazis to power in the 1930s. Zweig committed suicide in Brazil at the beginning of 1942. In a review of Zweig's memoir, Hannah Arendt criticized him for succumbing to nostalgia for his past life and to escape from a world whose horrors and injustice he refused to fight. We will end the first chapter of our class with a critical discussion of Arendt's judgment of Zweig.

The second chapter of the class will be dedicated to Mikhail Bulgakov. We will read excerpts from his dairies and some of his letters. Bulgakov lived during the most difficult times of Stalinist Russia. He could have left Russia during the civil war in 1921, but he chose, instead, to stay. He paid dearly. Bulgakov was banned from having his plays performed and his books published. Secretly, he wrote his masterpiece, *The Master and Margarita*, which was published decades later, in 1973, after Bulgakov died in 1940. We will read Bulgakov's play, Molière,

which portrays in a fictional manner, the relationship the artist, the creator, has with authoritarian political power.

The third chapter of the course is dedicated to the Jewish Romanian writer, Norman Manea. We will read his fictional memoir, *The Hooligan's Return*. Manea lived through the fascist and communist years in Romania. In 1986, he escaped communist Romania and went to Germany and later to the US. In 1997, after the fall of the communist regime, Manea returned, for a short visit, to Romania, after an absence of 11 years. The focus of our reading of Manea's memoir is to understand how he coped with the wounds of exile and how successful he was in turning the handicap of displacement into a source of creativity.

The fourth chapter of the course will introduce you to the memoir of the Palestinian American writer Edward Said, *Out of Place*. Said had to leave Palestine and establish himself with his family in Cairo where they lived for many years. However, with the rise of nationalism in Egypt, the family had no choice but to leave again and established themselves in Lebanon. Said came to study in the US and he lived for the rest of his life in New York. The question that will lead our reading of Said's memoir is about the extent to which he was successful in constructing his identity through the repeated fractures of exile. Can we really live with the constant feeling that we are out of place and we never quite belong?

The last chapter of our class is dedicated to the Bulgarian French writer and thinker, Tzvetan Todorov, a friend of Edward Said. Unfortunately, Todorov's book that is closest to a memoir has not been translated into English, so we will be reading a charming series of interviews that Todorov gave to Catherine Portevin. Todorov left Bulgaria in 1963, at the height of Cold War and of the power of communism in the Soviet Block. He thought of himself as a go-between. As a result, the choice Todorov made was to translate the experience of his displaced life into the position of a mediator and moderator, of someone who resists Manicheism and, in general, any dualisms, always trying to think and judge in the context and with respect for the nuances and for the variety of circumstances and individual lives. Todorov chose to transform his (double) estrangement (first from Bulgaria, which he left for France, and second from France, which he periodically left for teaching in the US) into a constantly renewed source of love for other human beings and inspiration for his humanism.

Course objectives

The main objective of the course is to explore and reflect on what it means to live a displaced life. The aim is to understand how displacement and lack of freedom can, nevertheless, become a source of meaning and creativity in our lives, and also enrich the world we share with others, particularly, the language, the sensibility, and the imagination that we need for living a fulfilling life.

Achieving the Course Objectives:

To achieve our course objectives, we will read the following books:

Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*

J.A.E. Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn. Mikhail Bulgakov: A Life in Letters and Diaries*

Mikhail Bulgakov, *Molière, or The Cabal of Hypocrites*

Norman Manea, *The Hooligan's Return. A Memoir*

Edward Said, *Out of Place. A Memoir*

Tzvetan Todorov (Interviews with Catherine Portevin), *Duties and Delights: The Life of a Go-Between*

Course Requirements:

1. **Class Presentation (30%)**
2. **Mid-Term Essay (30%). The topic will be chosen from Zweig, Bulgakov or Manea. The essay is due on February 12 at 5 PM. The essay should not be longer than 10 double-spaced pages.**
3. **Final Essay (40%). You are free to choose your topic and author (from this course, of course). You need to meet with me and discuss this topic. The essay should not be longer than 20 double-spaced pages.**

What is Expected from the Students?

Students will be expected to read, think, form arguments and counterarguments, understand the fundamental concepts, and participate (in a critical and creative manner) in class discussion. That means that students must keep up in their reading assignments and attend class regularly. Students must be fully always prepared to discuss the arguments and concepts from the readings. The best students will be knowledgeable, critical but balanced in their critical assessments, and will develop coherent and sound arguments that they can defend in their essays, in their exams, and in class discussion.

Academic dishonesty:

"All assignments, quizzes, and exams must be done on your own. Note that academic dishonesty includes not only cheating, fabrication, and plagiarism, but also includes helping other students commit acts of academic dishonesty by allowing them to obtain copies of your work. You can use the Web for reference purposes, but you may not copy material from any website or any other source without proper citations. In short, all submitted work must be your own.

Cases of academic dishonesty will be dealt with strictly. Each such case will be referred to the Academic Standing Committee via the Associate Dean of Students or the Associate Dean of the College. A formal finding of responsibility can result in disciplinary sanctions ranging from a censure and a warning to permanent dismissal in the case of repeated and serious offenses.

The academic penalty for a finding of responsibility can range from a grade of zero in the specific assignment to an F in this course."

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES AND READINGS:

January 5: *Introduction: The Meaning and Freedom of Displaced Lives*
Stefan Zweig's World of Yesterday: Security, Loss, and Nostalgia
Reading: Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, Forward and 23-113

January 7: *Europe*
Reading: Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, 115-214

January 12: *World War One and the Struggle for Fraternity (the story of Erasmus of Rotterdam)*
Reading: Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, 215-327

January 14: *The Rise of Nationalism and Nazism: Was it Really the End? (The Story of Michel de Montaigne)*
Reading: Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, 329-462 and Hannah Arendt, "Stefan Zweig: Jews in the World of Yesterday"

First Student Presentation:

- 1) **Read Zweig's book on Montaigne and present the main ideas to class.**
- 2) **Provide a brief explanation/a hypothesis that can help open the discussion about why Zweig chose to write his last book, before he committed suicide, about Michel de Montaigne.**
- 3) **Formulate the class questions in ways that engage both Arendt and Zweig.**

January 19: *The Doctor Who Wanted to be a Writer*
Reading: J.A.E. Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, Preface and 1-110

January 21: *Facing the Dictator*
Reading: J.A.E. Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 110- 200 (to Yelena Sergeyevna's diary entry from 9 May 1935) and Mikhail Bulgakov, *Molière and the Cabal of the Hypocrites*

Second Student Presentation:

- 1) Read in addition to *Molière and the Cabal of the Hypocrites*, Bulgakov's play, *Flight* and present its plot and main ideas to class. What does this play tell us about Bulgakov and about his conception about intelligentsia?
- 2) Formulate the class questions in ways that bring Bulgakov's life and the play on Molière together? Or, to put it differently, formulate a hypothesis about the reasons Bulgakov might have had to write about the 17th century playwright.
- 3) How did (if at all) find Bulgakov freedom and meaning in a time of political terror by writing about Molière?

January 26: *The Subversive Novel: The Master and Margarita*

Reading: J.A.E. Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn*, 201-297

January 28: *Preliminaries: Paradise and its Promises*

Reading: Norman Manea, *The Hooligan's Return. A Memoir*, 3-56

February 2: *Memory and Trauma*

Reading: Norman Manea, *The Hooligan's Return. A Memoir*, 59-144

February 4: *Internal Exile*

Reading: Norman Manea, *The Hooligan's Return. A Memoir*, 145-247

February 9: *The Return: Can the Wound of Exile be Healed? Where is Home and What does it Mean to be at Home?*

Reading: Norman Manea, *The Hooligan's Return. A Memoir*, 252-385

Third Student Presentation:

- 1) Read Manea's essays "The Exiled Language" and "Incompatibilities" and present their main ideas to class.
- 2) In your presentation try to connect the two essays to Manea's life and work and show how he found meaning and freedom in his exile.
- 3) Formulate the questions for the last class on Manea.

February 11: *The Shattered Beginnings*

Reading: Edward Said, *Out of Place. A Memoir*, Preface and Chapters I-III

February 16: *Exile and the Dream of Home*

Reading: Edward Said, *Out of Place. A Memoir*, Chapters IV-VII

February 18: *Cairo, Nationalism, and the End of the Levantines*

Reading: Edward Said, *Out of Place. A Memoir*, Chapter VIII

February 23: *The Freedom of Being Out of Place and the Dissonant Meaning*

Reading: Edward Said, *Out of Place. A Memoir*, Chapters IX-X.

Fourth Student Presentation:

- 1) Read Said's essay, "Reflections on Exile" and present its ideas in class. Also, in your presentation show how Said's view of exile compares with Manea and how Said succeeded or not to find meaning and freedom in his exile.
- 2) Also, you will read selections from the last book of the Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish, *In the Presence of Absence*, and elaborate in class on the ways in which the poet transformed his exile and suffering into meaning and freedom through his work.
- 3) Formulate the discussion questions for the last class on Said.

February 25: *A Peasant from the Danube*

Reading: Tzvetan Todorov, *Duties and Delights: The Life of a Go-Between*, 2-64

March 2: *A Peasant in Paris*

Reading: Tzvetan Todorov, *Duties and Delights: The Life of a Go-Between*, 65-188

March 4: Todorov's Humanism: Living a Meaningful, Free, and Loving Life

Reading: Tzvetan Todorov, *Duties and Delights: The Life of a Go-Between*, 189-292

March 9: *The Moral Meaning of History*

Reading: Tzvetan Todorov, *Duties and Delights: The Life of a Go-Between*, 294-412

Fifth Student Presentation:

- 1) Read Todorov's essay, "A Partial Portrait of Edward Said" and present in class its main ideas. Particularly, emphasize and explain the affinity and the differences that Todorov sees between his life of exile and that of Said.
- 2) Read Todorov's essay, "A Dialogic Criticism?", which constitutes the last chapter of his book *Literature and Its Theorists* and present its main ideas in class. Pay particular attention to how exile and living between worlds shaped Todorov's view of literature and its relationship with life.
- 3) Formulate the questions for the last class.