

HUM 110 at Reed College
Syllabus and commentary by Dean Peter Steinberger



Fall semester: The Ancient Mediterranean

The fall semester focuses on the development of culture in the ancient Mediterranean, beginning with Homer's *Odyssey*. The first part of the course examines different foundational and didactic narratives, including two foundational Egyptian myths, the book of Genesis, and Hesiod's *Works and Days*. The second section of the course looks at different perspectives on the Persians during the reign of Cyrus and the period encompassing the Persian-Greek War; works studied include Persian royal inscriptions, Herodotus' *Histories*, Aeschylus' *Persians*, the biblical books *Esther* and *Ezra*, and monumental Persian palace architecture. In the third section, the course examines the works from classical Athens, including the Parthenon, dramas by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides and Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*. The course concentrates on the Mediterranean peoples' relation to the gods, to their political communities, to each other and to other peoples, and seeks to study these relations through the evidence of material culture (sculpture, vase painting, and architecture) as well as literary, historical, philosophical and political texts. Themes for the semester include the development of civic and religious architecture, the rise and development of the Greek polis, the relations between different cultures, and notions of virtue and justice.

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Spring semester: The Hellenistic Period and the Rise of Roman Empire

The second semester continues the study of the ancient Mediterranean, tracing the development of Egypt, Palestine and Rome from the fourth century BCE to the first century CE. The term begins in fourth-century Athens with the critiques of individual and polis virtues made by Plato and Aristotle in the *Republic*, the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*. In the second section, the course examines the encounter between classical Greek, Macedonian, Egyptian and Jewish cultures in the Hellenistic period; works studied include Theocritus' *Idylls*, the biblical books of *Maccabees* and *Daniel*, Hellenistic statuary and the city of Alexandria. The course then turns to the rise of Rome within this larger context, tracing the transition from Republic to Empire in the works of Plautus, Livy, Sallust, Virgil and Ovid, as well as Roman statuary and civic monuments. The course concludes with a comparison of different models of virtue and vice throughout the Roman empire, now encompassing the areas studied earlier in the semester, with a reading of first-century Jewish texts, Seneca's philosophy, and Petronius' *Satyricon*. As with the first semester, the question of how different cultures interact and develop is prominent, and a range of cultural products are studied and compared: history, poetry, drama, philosophy, statuary and civic architecture.

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What Hum 110 Is All About

By **Peter Steinberger**

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I'll be returning to Hum 110 next year after a long hiatus. During my time as dean, I taught one or another course every year, but always in political science, never in Hum. I love teaching political philosophy, but I also love Hum 110. So I'm absolutely thrilled to get back in the course—especially now, with its terrific new syllabus.



I do have one regret, however, and that's the absence of a number of wonderful Hum lectures that are no longer part of the course. I miss those lectures. They brought astonishing insight and erudition to the difficult and challenging materials of the ancient world; and it was with that in mind that I first proposed the publication of some of the best of them. I'm delighted that this will now finally occur as part of Reed's 100th birthday. Three superb lectures will be published in subsequent editions of *Reed*, and I'm honored to have the opportunity to offer here a general introduction to the series.

Hum 110: A Primer

Since 1943, Humanities 110—or Introduction to Western Humanities—has been the foundation of the Reed College curriculum. As most of you know, Hum 110 is an intensive, year-long course required of all first-year students. The basic principles of the course, and a significant portion of the actual syllabus, have remained largely unchanged over time. For over 60 years, students in Hum 110 have engaged in the study of archaic and classical Greece, focusing on Homer, Hesiod, the lyric poets, the plastic arts (including vase painting, sculpture and architecture), Herodotus, Thucydides, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, the pre-Socratics, Plato, and Aristotle. Of course, the syllabus has always also included substantial non-Greek materials, but those materials have changed over time. Most recently, and up until this year, the spring semester was devoted to the study of imperial Rome and Rome's encounter with its eastern periphery, roughly from Augustus to Augustine.

Traditionally, the goals of Hum 110 have been several: to introduce students to serious college-level work, to introduce them to Reed's distinctive approach to teaching, and to provide an opportunity for rigorous writing instruction. Perhaps most importantly, Hum 110 seeks to introduce students in a systematic way to the various

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disciplines—history, literature, philosophy, aesthetics, social science—of which the liberal arts are composed.

The course also serves important sociological functions. All first-year students at Reed are reading the same thing at the same time. When it's Herodotus week, for example, the campus is awash in copies of the *Histories*; this kind of curricular uniformity has proved to be invaluable in creating a strong sense of intellectual community. For many first-year Reedies, Hum 110 is a powerful common experience, perhaps more so than any of their other experiences, academic and nonacademic alike. Thus, one frequently hears Reed freshmen fervently discussing yesterday's lecture or tomorrow's reading not just in the classroom but in the dining hall, the locker room, the dormitory, and elsewhere across campus. Moreover, the persistence of the course over time has created powerful connections across cohorts, since many generations of Reed College alumni have read, and at least to some extent have remembered, the very same texts.

Hum 110 is truly multidisciplinary, taught by 20 to 25 members of the faculty typically representing 8 or 9 departments including English, history, philosophy, religion, art history, political science, French, Spanish, and classics. Each member of the faculty teaches his or her own conference throughout the year. Conferences are composed of 15 or 16 students, and meet 3 hours per week. While the so-called "Reed conference method" in fact varies considerably from faculty member to faculty member, in almost all cases the principal goal is to teach through conversation, understanding conversation to be a kind of "unrehearsed intellectual adventure"¹ where student-to-student interaction is crucial and where the faculty member functions, to the degree possible, as merely one interlocutor among many.

In addition to conferences, however, the course also includes three hours of required course-wide lectures per week. It is a long-standing Reed tradition that the entire freshman class gathers at 9 a.m. every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for Hum lecture. The lectures themselves are apportioned more or less equally among the teaching staff, hence most faculty offer two or three lectures per semester.

The Tradition of Hum Lectures

Lectures in Hum 110 are designed, in large part, to provide agendas for conferences. During lectures, faculty present historical and scholarly background, raise interpretive questions, and make arguments. In doing so, students and faculty encounter what is, in effect, yet another text—a secondary text—to be analyzed and debated together with the day's primary text, thereby helping, in the best of circumstances, to enrich and elevate conference discussions. As such, the lectures play a distinctive and extremely important *pedagogical* role.

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Reedies are expected to approach their studies in a manner that might be called scholarly. They are not necessarily expected to be full-fledged scholars in the strict sense—ours is an undergraduate education, not a professional one—but they are expected to acquire the habits and dispositions characteristic of people whose primary goal is not to receive, store, and reproduce information that is already well established but, rather, to engage in original, open-ended, critical inquiry. In this context, Hum lectures are intended to serve as models of scholarly argument. They are offered to students as exemplars of what it might mean to formulate and defend an original thesis of at least some intellectual consequence.

A notable feature of Hum 110 is that the study of antiquity becomes, for many faculty, a kind of second field specialization. Indeed, this is not really a course for amateurs. Over time, most faculty, regardless of discipline, develop considerable scholarly expertise in ancient history, society, literature, and art, such that conferences can be conducted at a high level and lectures can be serious, challenging, and informed by the best and most recent scholarship. Over the years, faculty have taken their lecture responsibilities seriously, largely for pedagogical reasons, but perhaps also because they are lecturing to colleagues as well as students. Of course, lecture styles vary considerably, as does the pedagogical effectiveness of the lectures themselves. In any given year, however, the various lectures compose, collectively, a fairly systematic approach to the ancient world of Greece.

The three lectures that we have chosen to publish in *Reed* are no longer part of the course, for the simple reason that their authors are no longer active members of the Reed faculty. The publication of these lectures is, thus, an especially meaningful development. In my mind, they are exemplary Hum 110 lectures, and they were certainly crucial in the development of my own understanding of the materials in question. David Reeve on the development of ancient thought, Ray Kierstead on the unfolding of ancient historiography, and Tom Gillcrist on the origins of ancient tragedy: for many years each of these lectures was immensely important in shaping and enriching the education of Reed students and faculty alike. Individually, they were landmarks of the course. Today, reading them together can provide a serious and stimulating, albeit selective, introduction to important aspects of ancient civilization.

Indeed, the high quality of these lectures and the range of topics they address suggest that they should be of value not just to undergraduates but to all students of the ancient world and of the Western humanistic tradition in general. They have been explicitly designed to bring serious scholarly materials to bear on very large issues of broad concern, and to do so in ways that speak to connections among a variety of cultural forms. As such, their appeal should be wide ranging indeed.

The Principle of Density

Making sense of these lectures requires understanding that they were presented as part of a humanities course, understanding *humanities* here in a rather distinctive

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sense. Traditionally, Hum 110 has not been conceived as a Great Books course, though nearly all of the readings would by any standard qualify as great indeed. Similarly, it has not been regarded primarily as a history course or a course on Western civilization, though the syllabus obviously has a strong chronological

dimension. At Reed, a humanities course is understood to be a multidisciplinary exploration of one or more social formations.² It is an investigation of culture, viewed in its manifold representations and from a multiplicity of perspectives. The strategy is to examine at least some of the principal artifacts of the culture in question—including, though not limited to, significant and substantial works of art, literature, and philosophy—explicitly and systematically in the context of one another. Thus, for example, the *Medea* is read self-consciously in the light of Platonic philosophy, Platonic dialogues in the light of Thucydidean history, the *Peloponnesian War* in the light of Euripidean tragedy, and so on. The goal, at least in part, is to look for connections, and for differences as well, with a view toward characterizing the underlying unities and tensions, agreements and conflicts, of which a culture is composed.

Thus, for at least some faculty, and certainly for me, an essential, even defining feature of Hum 110 is what might be called the Principle of Density. The syllabus describes, in part, a dense, complex, multilayered, internally resonant structure of socioculture experience. Sometimes the resonance is explicit, often only implicit. But students in Hum 110 are encountering texts that have, arguably, very powerful, comparatively immediate, and multiple connections with one another: literary, historical, ideological, linguistic, philosophical, political, sociological. As products of a “single” social formation—*single* in the sense that it embodies a substantial degree of unity and continuity, even as it evolves over time—they resonate with one another in all kinds of ways. At least, that’s my hypothesis. The systematic exploration of this resonance is, in my opinion, an important feature of the course, an important part of what makes it a humanities course.

To be sure, density is not the only substantive feature of Hum 110. We want our students to learn how to read works of quality and influence; we want to expose them to some important and influential historical materials; we want them to tackle issues of perennial concern; and we won’t complain if, in the process, they acquire some erudition. To all this, the recently revised Hum syllabus—which is being taught for the first time this year—adds an important new element. For what I believe to be the first time, the core materials on ancient Greece are now being studied systematically in the context of broader developments and influences characteristic of the larger Mediterranean world. Scholars have long known that the Greeks did not live in utter isolation but were, quite to the contrary, active participants in powerful systems of economic, social, and cultural interaction involving, at various times, Phoenicia, Egypt, Persia, Rome, and many others. In an important sense, the richness of ancient Greece cannot fully be understood or appreciated without addressing the ways in which it both differed from and was also profoundly

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influenced by the diverse and substantial societies with which it came into contact. By introducing students to important elements of this interaction—by asking them directly to study, for example, Egyptian, Persian, and Hellenistic materials side by side with the materials of ancient Greece—the new syllabus reflects both important currents of modern scholarship and a new-found emphasis on crucial questions of cultural diversity.

Disciplines

My own view—not shared by all members of the faculty by any means!—is that the ultimate goal of a Reed education is to teach students how to think; teaching students how to think means, in the first instance, introducing them to and giving them some facility with the disciplines. A discipline is, one might say, a particular mode or manner of thinking, composed of a more or less distinctive set of concepts, theories, and methods that have proven to be useful over time in making sense of this or that feature of the world. Literary analysis is a discipline characterized by a dazzling array of distinctive concepts—things like *narrative structure* and *synecdoche* and *alliteration* and sign and so on—each of which serves as a tool for classifying or categorizing some set of phenomena. As such, literary analysis is sharply distinct from, say, the discipline of chemistry, which is characterized by an equally dazzling but quite different and unrelated set of concepts and categories.

It is not uncommon, of course, for different disciplines to study the same thing, but they would study that thing in very different ways, using a very different set of concepts or categories. Thus, a literary critic might study a book with a view toward analyzing its rhetorical properties, whereas a certain kind of physical scientist might study the very same book—understood as a particular material object—with a view toward analyzing the chemical properties of the paper on which it was printed, the ink with which the words were reproduced, the glue with which the pages were bound. But in each case, the goal would be to render the object intelligible according to the canons and criteria of the discipline.

To learn a discipline is, I would argue, to develop a disciplined mind, and a disciplined mind is essential for making sense of things. Without discipline, our thinking is apt to be literally chaotic: unorganized, disconnected, random. The world presents itself to us in infinite ways. We are constantly bombarded by an incalculable range and variety of experiences; when we simply react to those experiences, when we fail to impose on them some kind of order or structure, then analysis, judgment, and intelligibility become impossible. We become lost, confused, and powerless. The connection between one thought and another dissolves, and with it dissolves the capacity to define, to classify, to assess, and to think coherently. We lose, in effect, that which makes it possible for us to be civilized, hence that which makes it possible for us to be human.

I believe that Hum 110 teaches disciplined thinking in two ways. First, it introduces

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students to certain fundamental manners of thought—philosophic, poetic, historiographic, aesthetic—by examining some of their earliest systematic and self-conscious expressions. It teaches students what it means to think like a philosopher by looking at the invention of Western philosophy, as manifest in the thought of Thales, Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. It considers the activity of being a historian by exploring the discovery, at least in the West, of the very idea of history in Herodotus and Thucydides. It contemplates what it means to reflect on the world in literary terms by encountering the epic, lyric, and dramatic foundations of our literary heritage. Second, Hum 110 explicitly pursues these manners of thought by comparing them with one another. It seeks to show not just what it means to think like a historian but how thinking like a historian might be different from thinking like a philosopher or poet. It thereby provides students with a larger sense of how the various disciplines or manners of thought are different from one another and how they might, nonetheless, share an underlying commitment to coherence, to the power and intrinsic value of systematic intellectual endeavor.

The three lectures that will be presented in subsequent editions of Reed both describe and inspire the pursuit of disciplined thought. As such, they reflect and embody the conviction—long central to the mission of Reed College—that the sharp distinction between pedagogy and scholarship, between education and inquiry, between the formation of the intellect and the activity of being an intellectual ultimately collapses in the face of a serious and self-conscious commitment to the life of the mind.

The Lectures

“Darkness, Light, and Drama in the Oresteia” by **Thomas Gillcrist**. Gillcrist is a graduate of Duke University and did his postgraduate work in English at Harvard. He taught at Reed, both in the English department and in the humanities program, from 1962 until his retirement in 2002.

“Herodotus and the Invention of History” by **Raymond Kierstead**. Kierstead went to Bowdoin College and earned his PhD in history at Northwestern University. He taught at Yale and Catholic University before joining the Reed faculty in 1978, from which he retired in 2000. He is the author of *Pomponne de Bellievre: A Study of the King’s Men in the Age of Henry IV* (Northwestern University Press, 1968).

“Ionian Thinkers” by **C. D. C. Reeve**. A graduate of Trinity University (Dublin) and Cornell, Reeve taught at Reed from 1976 until his resignation in 2000. He is the author of numerous books and articles including *Philosopher-Kings: The Argument of Plato’s Republic* (Princeton University Press, 1988), *Practices of Reason: Aristotle’s Nichomachaen Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1988), and *Love’s Confusions* (Harvard University Press, 2005). He is currently professor of philosophy at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (London: Methuen, 1962), p. 198.

² In addition to Hum 110, the Reed curriculum includes three sophomore-level humanities courses, one on Early Modern Europe from Dante to the age of Louis XIV, a second on Modern Humanities from the Glorious Revolution to the Second World War, and a third on Chinese Humanities focusing on the Qin/Han and Song dynasties.

—*Author info: Peter J. Steinberger is Robert H. and Blanche Day Ellis Professor of Political Science and Humanities. He has taught at Reed since 1977; he has also served as chairman of the department of political science, dean of the faculty, and acting president of the college.*

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