HON-H234 Literature of Time and Place
The Concept of the Genius: Studies in German Culture
Instructor: Marc Weiner
TuTh 9:30-10:45 a.m.
WH 204

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Topic: “The Concept of the Genius: Studies in German Culture”

The course examines one of the most cherished, pervasive, and contested concepts in the history of Western civilization: the genius. What is a genius? Is he (and until the early 20th century, it was definitely a “he,” and not a “she”) someone who masters a craft and then transforms it, or a natural force that transcends mundane rules and limits of mere mortals? Is he a vessel through which a greater power speaks, or a dynamo of original and intentional creation? Is ingenious creation always spontaneous, or can it be gradual? Is the genius always an artist, or does he show up in other areas of human activity? Do we associate a given kind of genius with a given national provenance? And finally, who decides who’s a genius and who's not, or in other words, when does a genius turn into a charlatan?

The course is intended to raise all of these issues through examination of a number of different kinds of works (philosophical theory, essay, poetry, short story, aesthetic treatise, music drama, political manifesto, psychological biography, cultural criticism, and the novel), with emphasis given to those from German-speaking Europe. While we will begin with the figure of the inspired poet in classical antiquity and the divine artist in the Renaissance, we will then proceed to an examination of the questions above and the genres just identified from the Enlightenment to the “Sturm und Drang,” Classism, and early and late Romanticism, to the Fin-de-Siècle and the Weimar Republic, and finally to the immediate aftermath of World War II.

There are three (3) writing assignments, the first two ca. 5-8 pages in length each, and the final paper ca. 10-12 pp. Paper I should concern a summary of, and a response to, a given aesthetic work (on the syllabus) as a hallmark of genius; Paper II should assess any one (or at most, two) theories of genius (also discussed in class). If they wish, after their papers have been returned, students may revise and resubmit either Paper I or Paper II within one week of its return, after which the grade for the revised version will replace that of its original. In the final weeks of the course, preceding exam week, students will give a short presentation in which they describe an independent research project, the subject of which will have been agreed upon by the student and the instructor no later than three weeks beforehand. These projects will form the basis of the final paper, which will be due at the time scheduled for the final exam (in place of the exam).

Your presence and participation in discussions are an important part of the dynamic of the class. A student may have up to two (2) unexcused absences; every absence thereafter (without the proper documentation from a Dr. or senior academic advisor) will lower the final grade by 1/3 (e.g., for three unexcused absences, a grade of “A-“ would be lowered to “B+,” for four
unexcused absences “A-” would be lowered to “B,” etc.). Nonetheless, credit is not given for attendance alone, but solely for participation.

All texts will be read in English translation. No knowledge of German is required. No Credit Given in Germanic Studies. However, the course counts toward the college's distribution requirement in the Arts and Humanities.

Grades will be computed as follows:

- Participation = 40%
- Writing Assignment I = 15%
- Writing Assignment II = 15%
- Final Paper = 30%

Recently, the faculty have been advised to include the following on the course syllabus, which I quote here verbatim (with the exception of the passage regarding the specific form of documentation required). Please do not be offended by this text; it is simply a matter of policy:

Plagiarism constitutes using others' ideas, words or images without properly giving credit to those sources. If you turn in any work with your name affixed to it, I assume that work is your own and that all sources are indicated and documented in the text (with quotations and/or citations, either in the form of foot- or endnotes, or of parenthetical references to a List of Works Cited).

I will respond to acts of academic misconduct according to University policy concerning plagiarism; sanctions for plagiarism can include a grade of F for the assignment in question and/or for the course and must include a report to the Dean of Students Office.

For further information, please refer to the Code of Student Rights, Responsibilities, and Conduct.