

Interest Essay

To celebrate the power of ideas has very nearly become a cliché, though perhaps a cliché worth repeating. A long-term lover of classic literature, amateur fiction writer, and dabbling music critic, I am wholly enchanted with the animating strength of ideas. Following a fall semester immersed in theory and intellectual history, I have grown curious as to how the history of philosophy and theory might be entwined with that of literature. The history of ideas seems to be threaded with novelists and poets. They reflect and challenge the thought of their time, occasionally solidifying or breaking away with such force that the readers and thinkers who come after have no recourse but to pay homage to the potency of their ideas. Perhaps they, more often than the philosophers and theorists, come to enchant their cultural imaginations; perhaps their works possess an enduring approachability and striking ingenuity that shines brightest amidst the tangles of intellectual history.

I am interested in pursuing a study of literature and aesthetic projects with respect to their reciprocal relationships with political and social thought. The scope I aim to explore is vast: I hope to do due diligence to the influence and rich intellectual history of European traditions. Yet I want to anchor this study in seeking to better understand the American project. In part, this means studying the literary and philosophical movements that have blossomed here: the American Renaissance, the American Pragmatists, and James Baldwin all come to mind. This also means paying particular attention to the role of literature in democracy—broadening perspectives and giving a voice to the unheard—and in politics more broadly. I think this study invites further consideration of the relationship of aesthetics to politics and society: the troubled history of aesthetics and politics seems to affirm the importance of this inquiry.

I recognize that to investigate American intellectual history in a vacuum would be ridiculous. Beyond providing a uniquely interdisciplinary framework in which I might pursue these topics in literary and intellectual history, I believe that the PST third-year seminar offers a unique opportunity to deeply engage with a variety of influential thinkers alongside other thoughtful students. Beyond offering exposure to a variety of contemporary and historical perspectives—already a worthy reward—this seminar would help contextualize my chosen areas of study, highlighting both the continuity and originality of these American creatives and thinkers.

More absurd than studying American intellectual history in a vacuum would be to study in a vacuum at all. Atop the flexibility and rigorous writing practice, the PST program offers a singularly diverse and vibrant community to inhabit. It is this opportunity that I see at the heart of the program: to temper my thinking and writing with students whose perspectives may often clash with, but always further illuminate, my own. More than in devotion to the pursuit of elusive truths, I wish to spend my college years among peers who inspire, and who leave me more humble and more questioning than they found me.