

June 2010

Dear Students:

"To imagine a language," wrote the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, "is to imagine a form of life." I invite you to reflect on this remark as you prepare for the 2010 Language and Thinking Program. I suggest you write it out in a notebook and record your reflections. As you read the books by Charles Darwin and Franz Kafka that we are assigning for the summer—more on those below—keep Wittgenstein in mind, and keep taking notes. Put these authors in conversation with one another, challenge them, challenge yourself, read more, take intellectual and creative risks in your writing. Perhaps you'll even want to try to imagine a new language and a new form of life. During your first three weeks at Bard, you will work (and play) a great deal with Darwin and Kafka and Wittgenstein and many other authors. But why not begin now?

On the first day of Language and Thinking, you will receive an anthology of texts with a question wrapped around its cover that announces our theme: "What does it mean to be human in the year 2010?" What, in other words, is the "form of life" that we call "human"? You might think to answer this question by invoking biological categories. If you are reading this letter, I assume you would be classified as a member of *homo sapiens* of the *hominidae* family (Bard hasn't started admitting cyborgs ... yet), and that you might say that to be human means to be of that species. But your body plays host to a great number of other species. Many of the microbes that live in you perform tasks that are crucial for maintaining your health; some threaten it. *Homo sapiens*, it turns out, is in a relation of complex interdependence and struggle with innumerable other species, both within and without the individual body. Our species is also, as we are increasingly aware, tied by countless bonds to the fate of a fragile planet. What does it mean, then, to understand or to imagine our form of life from a biological perspective?

During Language and Thinking, you'll be encouraged to look at questions from many different perspectives, to sample from a wide variety of disciplines, and to write (and write and write) in multiple genres. This thoroughly interdisciplinary approach is signaled by the two books we are asking you to read this summer: Darwin's *On Natural Selection* and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (the required editions of both are specified below). The first sets forth a theory in argument form and is excerpted from one of the foundational texts of the modern biological sciences, *The Origin of Species*. The second is a novella, one of the most influential works of modern literature. The former asks you to think about how one species has "given birth to other and distinct species" over vast stretches of time, while the latter shows how the human imagination can make this happen in a fictive instant. Darwin proposes a brilliantly simple idea to account for phenomena across the whole range of earth's flora and fauna, while Kafka recounts the ordeal of a single household with such subtlety and depth that the work has attained near-universal relevance. Again, I invite you to engage these authors through writing: annotate the pages, reply, rebut, revise, rethink, and write again. Bring the results of your investigations and interventions with you in August.