

Dartmouth-Yale-Blacksburg lecture: "From religion through philosophy to literature".

In our literary culture, the ideal reader puts as much up for grabs as possible when she opens a book. She does not ask "what truths can I learn?" but "how can I emerge with a different sense of what matters?" This has of course always been the case for many readers, but in the past the rhetoric of reading and writing has been less ready to acknowledge this approach to books.

Pre-philosophical and pre-literary religion was superstition (Santayana's "confusion of ideals with power"). One read books about ritual and ritual purity in order to get power. Later, after Bacon, one read science books the same way, and even Descartes' Meditations (though not Montaigne's Essays) can be read as "scientific" in this power-freak sense.