

Reading Poetry

“American Poiesis: Imagining the Twentieth Century”

University of Pittsburgh
ENGLIT 0315
Fall 2013

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W 6:00-8:30 CL 129

Office Hours: W 3:00-5:00
& by appointment

Required Texts

John Ashbery, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (New York: Penguin, 1990 [1975]).
Amiri Baraka, *Transbluesency: Selected Poems 1961-1995*, ed. Paul Vangelisti (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1995).
T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Writings* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002 [1922]).
Lyn Hejinian, *My Life and My Life in the Nineties*, Reprint Edition (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013 [1980, 2003]).
Robert Lowell, *Life Studies and For the Union Dead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007 [1967]).
Sylvia Plath, *Ariel*, Restored Edition (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005 [1965]).
Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass (Norton Critical Edition)*, 2nd Edition, ed. Michael Moon (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002 [1852, 1891]).

Additional texts to be covered can be found on the calendar below. These will be available on CourseWeb under the heading “Course Documents.”¹

Course Description

The poem is one of the oldest forms of literary production. Whether it be the oral histories of nearly every culture, the mythical epics Homer drew on for his *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, the fragments of Heraclitus and Sappho, the epic of *Gilgamesh*, the *Nibelungenlied*, the incredibly rich Chinese poetic tradition, nearly all religious texts, etc.—poetry has been one of the principal forms humans have employed when trying to understand themselves and the world that they are thrown into for thousands of years.

But it would not be terribly shocking to suggest that today most people do not read poetry. Other forms of media like the novel, film, television, video game, website/blog, and other hybrid forms, have not only replaced poetry as dominant cultural forms of aesthetic discourse,

¹ The savvy reader will also note that many of the readings come from editors Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy’s *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 5th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005). Obtaining this book is highly recommended, especially if you are planning on pursuing a degree in English or Creative Writing, as it is an *excellent* collection of poetry, and it will continue to come in handy for you long after this class has ended. Acquiring this book is not required; all the additional readings will be available on CourseWeb. And of course it goes without saying that if anyone has any questions or problems with CourseWeb that they should feel free to contact me.

but, in a very real way, today poetry might be said to have been relegated to “the ash bin of history.” Why is this? Why has poetry mostly vanished from our collective cultural landscape, read primarily by a fairly small group of people that include academics, poets themselves, or in most cases, like your own, college students who are required to take some form of English course? Is it because of a common conception of poetry as “difficult”? That poetry is an overly refined, alienating, and fundamentally irrelevant discursive practice? Or is there an attention to language, detail, and form, an ability to *read closely*, which has become in some way antiquated? Has the increased speed of contemporaneity, the hyper-accumulation of texts, and the short attention spans encouraged or produced by contemporary discursive forms (texting, blogging, You Tube, Twitter, etc.) done a kind of violence to the practice of reading poetry? Is there simply *too much stuff* to spend on poetry the kind of attention which it not only deserves, but often requires so as to be read at all?

In other words, why read poetry?

Through our encounter with a number of significant poems and poets, this course will endeavor to complicate this and related questions, to forge a position from which we can begin to ask these questions more rigorously, to figure out what is at stake in asking the question, “why read poetry?” and specifically, why read poetry *today*? The nature of this approach will be directly related to our task in this classroom and its driving question. Namely, not only am I asking you to *read* poetry, it is important that I am asking you to *write* about poetry. So there is an obvious corollary to the question, “why *read* poetry?”: *why write about it*? How do we write about it? What does writing about poetry consist of? What does such writing attempt to accomplish? These questions, along with a host of others, will be our concern for this semester.

A Note on the Structure and Thematic of this Course

Consequently, this course is purposely structured, both in its readings and in its writing assignments, to provide a multitude of entrance points into the questions above, specifically around further questions pertaining to *interpretation, the imagination, representation, and history*. The first few weeks of the course will lay some critical and theoretical groundwork for discussing poetry by focusing on issues of form, image, metaphor, sound, close reading, etc. After this, the course will consist of close, rigorous, and expansive engagement with a handful of individual poets who are interested in questions of the imagination, who engage with the aporias of representation, and who inhabit unique historical positions. We will cover a wide swath of literary history and read multiple works by significant contributors to American verse in order to trace these poets’ individual development and provide us with various frameworks for intertextual interpretation. Among others, we will be reading Walt Whitman, T. S. Eliot, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, John Ashbery, Amiri Baraka, and Lyn Hejinian.

Central to the logic behind selecting this group of poets involves providing a space from which to investigate the procession of modernity in relationship to the poetic utterance and national identity—i.e., what can poetry do, or what is poetry’s role in an increasingly mechanized, mediated, violent, war-torn, rapidly paced, and objectified world? What can the imagination, in attempting to represent the world, produce through the poetic utterance in a world increasingly deaf to its call? Or perhaps, how are we to understand, complicate, or interrogate Theodor Adorno’s famous statement: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”? In order to help us with these questions, I will also supplement our reading with the work of theorists, critics, and philosophers who are uniquely engaged with questions of poetry in modernity and postmodernity. We will be consistently asking difficult questions, and we will be

reading some fairly difficult poetry, but it is the contention of this course that confronting the difficulty of understanding the world through poetry is an essential task as we go into the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Course Requirements and Assignments

Texts—Students will be required to have read and be prepared to discuss the assigned texts for each class meeting. This also entails that students bring the texts to class, whether the book or printouts of the .pdfs from CourseWeb. Additional readings for the course (see below) can be found under the “Course Documents” section of CourseWeb. *Failure to bring the assigned text(s) to class will count as an absence.* This course asks students to read *quite* a bit, and *very* carefully. Our meetings and discussions will depend upon the rigorous, intelligent, and frequent involvement of each and every participant of the class, and this involvement is simply not possible if students do not come to class prepared. All students should obtain the edition of the texts specified above. Unless individual arrangements are made with the instructor, electronic versions of the texts will not be permitted. Students are responsible for printing out all the additional readings and bringing them to class. Students should expect to read between 100 and 150 pages per week.

Papers—Students will be asked to write 2 essays of 5-6 pages and a final paper of 7-10 pages during the course of the semester, along with 4 short papers of 2 pages each. These papers are designed to build upon one another in preparation for your final paper. Their percentage of your grade will reflect this process. Consequently, the final represents the most significant portion of your grade. All papers should be proofread and polished. They should be typed, double-spaced, in 12 point Times New Roman font, with one-inch margins, and should accord to MLA guidelines for citation and format.² Papers will be assessed primarily on the *strength of their argument* and the *quality of their idea*. Due dates for these papers are below. The assignments are to follow. All papers should be handed in as hard copies in class *and* submitted on CourseWeb through SafeAssign. There will be a link under “Assignments” to electronically submit your papers.

Quizzes—Students will often be given unannounced short quizzes on the assigned material. Students who have done the reading will, for the most part, find these quizzes quite manageable. Students who fail a quiz will lose two points off the possible fifteen points of their participation grade. If you do the math, multiple failed quizzes could *dramatically* lower your grade (by as much as almost two letters). Unless otherwise informed, all quizzes are open book.

Participation—An absolutely crucial part of this class will be student participation. Though I will lecture from time to time, this class will be primarily discussion based, as I would like to see this course as a collective endeavor into the subject matter. I am quite excited to delve into the material, as I see it as both quite challenging and, in all honesty, quite fun. But this class will be a two way street and will require the input of all its participants. I am completely aware that some students may be more vocal than others, but if I see a student consistently attempting to add to the discussion, I will take this into consideration. I have a habit of a rambling a bit, so please help me with this by asking questions of me if you are unclear. Asking questions can be an excellent

² For a good website on how to do this, visit <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>. Students who wish to use Chicago Style are highly encouraged to do so, but must speak with me beforehand.

way of participating. Since this class will rely heavily on student participation, your attendance is a necessity. Since this section of the course only meets once a week, more than one unexcused absence can be grounds for failure, in which case you may want to consider withdrawing from the course and taking it again under better circumstances. (Also, anyone observed texting in class, whether I call attention to it or not, will be marked absent for the day. Phones will not be tolerated in this class. The use of laptops or tablets is acceptable.)

Grading

Participation: 15%

Short Papers: 10%

Essay 1: 15%

Essay 2: 20%

Final: 40%

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a serious and intellectually inexcusable offense. Don't do it. It will result in an immediate zero for the assignment, and could result in more serious action, including failing the class completely and potentially being expelled from the University. *Plagiarism includes: lack of proper citations when quoting from someone else's work, representing someone else's work as your own, and knowingly allowing one's work to be submitted by someone else.* This should ultimately be a fun and stimulating class, and there is absolutely no reason for you not to take advantage of being able to do your own work and discuss it in an academic environment.

Students With Disabilities

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both myself and Disability Resources and Services, 216 William Pitt Union, (412) 648-7890/(412) 383-7355 (TTY), as early as possible in the term. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

Writing Center

Located at 317B O'Hara Student Center, 4024 O'Hara Street, the Writing Center is an excellent resource for working on your writing with an experienced consultant. Although you should not expect consultants to "correct" your work for you, they can assist you in learning to organize, edit, and revise your papers. Consultants can work with you on a one-time basis, or they can work with you throughout the term. In some cases, I may require that you go to the Writing Center for help on a particular problem; otherwise, you can decide on your own to seek assistance. Their services are free, but you should check on-site, call ahead (412-624-6556), or visit their website (<http://www.composition.pitt.edu/writingcenter/index.html>) to make an appointment.

E-mail Communication Policy

Each student is issued a University e-mail address (username@pitt.edu) upon admittance. This e-mail address may be used by the University for official communication with students. I will also communicate with students via their pitt.edu address. Students are expected to read e-mail sent to this account on a regular basis. Failure to read and react to either University or my own communications in a timely manner does not absolve the student from knowing and complying with the content of the communications. Students that choose to forward their e-mail from their pitt.edu address to another address do so at their own risk. If e-mail is lost as a result of forwarding, it does not absolve the student from responding to official communications sent to their University e-mail address.

Calendar³:

- 8.28 *Introductions, Syllabus*
Ezra Pound, "In a Station of the Metro" (handout)¹
Lynn Emanuel, "The Politics of Narrative: Why I am a Poet" (handout)²
Langston Hughes, "Theme for English B" (handout)³
Frank O'Hara, "Why I am Not a Painter" (handout)⁴
- 9.4 **Short Paper 1 Due**
Universe, Work, Audience and The Language of Poetry
M.H. Abrams, "Orientation of Critical Theories"⁵
Cleanth Brooks, "The Language of Paradox" and "What Does Poetry Communicate?"⁶
John Donne, "The Canonization"⁷
Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress"⁸
Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach"⁹
Anthony Hecht, "The Dover Bitch"¹⁰
William Carlos Williams, "This is Just to Say"¹¹
Kenneth Koch, "Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams"¹²
- 9.11 *Metaphor*
Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense"¹³
William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 130"¹⁴
Anne Bradstreet, "The Author to Her Book"¹⁵
W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming," "Sailing to Byzantium," and "Among School Children"¹⁶
Denis Johnson, "The White Fires of Venus"¹⁷
- 9.18 **Short Paper 2 Due**
Versification and Image and Sound
Jon Stallworthy, "Versification"¹⁸
John Donne, "Holy Sonnet 10" and "Holy Sonnet 14"¹⁹
Elizabeth Bishop, "The Fish," "Filling Station," "Sandpiper," "The Armadillo," and "Sestina"²⁰
Harryette Mullen, "Blah-Blah," "Dim Lady," "Kirstenography," and "Variation on a Theme Park"²¹
- 9.25 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet"²²
Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (pp. 662-710)
- 10.2 **Short Paper 3 Due**
Walt Whitman, "Preface to *Leaves of Grass*" (pp. 616-636)
Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (pp. 710-751)
- 10.9 T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (pp. 99-108)

³ Note: Additional readings or handouts may be assigned when appropriate. For ease with citation, bibliographic endnotes to the additional readings can be found below.

T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (pp. 3-7)
T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land" (pp. 38-56)

10.16 **Essay 1 Due**

Mary Karr, "How to Read 'The Waste Land' So It Alters Your Soul Rather Than Just Addling Your Head" (pp. ix-xxviii)
Re-read T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land" (pp. 38-56)

10.23 Robert Lowell, *Life Studies* (pp. 7-12, 65-94) and *For the Union Dead* (pp. 7-63)

10.30 Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* (pp. 1-90)

11.6 **Essay 2 Due**

John Ashbery, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (pp. 1-83)

11.13 Amiri Baraka, *Transbluesency* (pp. 5-147, 197-210)
Amiri Baraka, "Somebody Blew Up America"²³

11.20 Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* (pp. 1-100)

11.27 Thanksgiving

12.4 **Short Paper 4 Due Monday (12.2) by 9pm**

Mark Edmundson, "Poetry Slam"²⁴
TBD

12.11—**Final Papers due in my mailbox, CL 501 by 4:00 pm**

Endnotes

¹ Ezra Pound, "In a Station of the Metro," in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 5th ed., eds. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), 1297. Hereafter citations from this edition will appear as: *Norton*.

² Lynn Emanuel, *Then, Suddenly* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), 16-19.

³ Langston Hughes, "Theme for English B," in *Norton*, 1434-5.

⁴ Frank O'Hara, "Why I am Not a Painter," in *Norton*, 1730-1.

⁵ M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 3-29.

⁶ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt 1947), 3-21, 67-80.

⁷ John Donne, "The Canonization," in Brooks, 267-8.

⁸ Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress," in *Norton*, 478-9.

⁹ Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach," in *Norton*, 1101.

¹⁰ Anthony Hecht, "The Dover Bitch," in *Norton*, 1668-9.

¹¹ William Carlos Williams, "This is Just to Say," in *Norton*, 1274.

¹² Kenneth Koch, "Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams," in *Norton*, 1693.

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. and ed. Ronald Speirs, ed. Raymond Geuss (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 139-53.

¹⁴ William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 130," in *Norton*, 267-8.

¹⁵ Anne Bradstreet, "The Author to Her Book," in *Norton*, 465.

¹⁶ W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming," "Sailing to Byzantium," and "Among School Children," in *Norton*, 1196, 1199-1202.

¹⁷ Denis Johnson, *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly: Poems Collected and New* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 93-5.

¹⁸ Jon Stallworthy, "Versification," in *Norton*, 2027-52.

¹⁹ John Donne, "Holy Sonnet 10" and "Holy Sonnet 14," in *Norton*, 320.

²⁰ Elizabeth Bishop, "The Fish," "Filling Station," "Sandpiper," "The Armadillo," and "Sestina," in *Norton*, 1517-21.

²¹ Harryette Mullen, *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 12-13, 20, 46-47, 75.

²² Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet" (1844), in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 287-306.

²³ Amiri Baraka, "Somebody Blew Up America," *Counterpunch* (3 October 2002), <http://www.counterpunch.org/2002/10/03/somebody-blew-up-america/>.

²⁴ Mark Edmundson, "Poetry Slam: Or, The Decline of American Verse," *Harper's* 327, no. 1958 (July 2013): 61-68.