English 348 - American Poetry & Poetics Since 1850

Poetry is like a swoon, with this difference:
it brings you to your senses.
- Charles Bernstein

The Basics:

Meeting time & place: MWF 12:30-1:20, ML212
Instructor contact: office: HH 263; phone: x2419; email: kmcguirk@uwaterloo.ca
Office hours: MW 1:30-2:30 and by appointment or when you find me free. I can sometimes be found in HH 253.
Preferred method of contact: office hours

The Course:

We’re going to read a number of American poets—and one Jamaican poet—for answers to the question what is poetry? This makes sense in a course on American poetry because in the absence of a native literary tradition, American poetry has of necessity been theoretical and experimental. It has also been formally adventurous, discursively eclectic, and socially alert. If American answers to the question what is poetry? have been diverse so must be our methods of approach. We will consider poems as formal and material objects; as expressions of biographical and cultural meaning; as investigations of “method”; and as personal, social, and rhetorical events. Your “journal” assignments (see below) will be accordingly diverse as well.

The syllabus is divided into three sections. First, we’ll look at the challenging, intense, almost hermetic poetry of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath, which demands close textual analysis and yet invites biographical speculation. Then we’ll look at some poets in the main stream of the American tradition, poets looking for generalizing ways of forming an American imagination of persons and place. Finally, we’ll investigate the significance of performance and broader questions about poetry’s potential for cultural work.

What I want you to get from the course:

- an enriched sense of what poetry is as a material and social phenomenon
- the ability to respond with increased understanding to the formal and rhetorical dimensions of poems
- increased comfort with difficulty and opacity—that is, with not-knowing—along with the ability to ask clarifying questions
- knowledge of and appreciation for the basic tendencies and themes of American poetry in its cultural and historical contexts
- the ability to theorize poetry; in other words, to articulate a complex, interesting answer to the question what is poetry?
- and the ability to write more effectively and imaginatively about literature in general

What I want you to do in the course:

- write about and discuss poetry frequently; formally, in a journal for the course
- ask questions in class: participate; listen to your peers
- read poetry out loud
- take notes and make sure you grasp the major concerns of the course as well as of the distinctive work of each poem and poet; write an exam demonstrating this grasp
- write an extended essay based on careful reflection, analysis, and revision
Texts:

Emily Dickinson, Poems, Shambhala
Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass, Bantam
Sylvia Plath, Ariel, Faber
Wallace Stevens, Stevens: Poems, ed. Helen Vendler, Vintage
Elizabeth Bishop, Geography III, FSG
A.R. Ammons, Tape for the Turn of the Year, Norton
Linton Kwesi Johnson, Mi Revalueshanary Fren, Penguin
courscpack ("C" on the schedule)

Note: the Stevens, Bishop and Johnson texts are also on one-hour reserve at Porter Library

Assignments:

journal: 30% : weekly (at least) writing on poetry
essay: 30% : 1500-2000 words : topics will be assigned : due Monday November 28.
exam: 30% : two hours : two essay questions
participation: 10%

Journal: The reading for the course is relatively small in volume; on the other hand, some of it is difficult. To complement your reading, I will ask you at least once every week to write on poetry in some form or other. The idea is that this writing will be part of the reading process rather than separate from it. This should assist with the difficulty of some of the poetry.
Keep your writings loose but in a folder that you can hand in to me. At the halfway point of the term, I will give you a provisional mark for journal work completed to that point.
Your “assignments” will take many forms: these may be as simple as paraphrasing a poem, writing a summary of a piece of theory on the syllabus, writing a poem in imitation of a poet on the syllabus, comparing several poems in terms of one theme, explaining a poem in the form of a letter to a specific person, writing the first paragraph of a projected essay, summarizing a critical article. Of course you may write freely in excess of particular assignments. I also welcome suggestions for assignments from the class. Each assignment will receive a check, a check-minus, or a check-plus (or a simple minus). In the end I will assess 10 pieces, of your choice, to come up with a final mark out of 30. Note: these assignments must be completed as they are assigned. You cannot make up assignments At the end of the term, you will lose 3 marks for each assignment short of the required ten.

Essay: I will assign topics, but you can bend those topics in consultation with me, or develop your own also in consultation with me. (Your essay may build on work in your journal) The essay is not particularly long (1500-2000 words). I expect rather that it will be well written, thoughtful, and based on a thorough analysis of the relevant texts and a thorough consideration of your topic. 10% of the mark will be set aside for grammar, punctuation, and typos. You will lose one mark out of ten for each mistake in grammar and punctuation, and one for every three typos. The rest of the essay will be marked holistically, taking into account organization, rhetorical skill, written style, use of evidence, validity and interest of your argument. I will expect all essays by the due date. Late papers may not receive comments or be returned before the exam.

Exam: You will write a two-hour exam during the exam period consisting of essay questions. You will have a chance to prepare your questions. A selection will be distributed at the last class. Be there.

Participation: 10% of the course mark is set aside for participation. The class has low enrolment. There will be ample opportunity for you to ask questions, share impressions and ideas, respond to other students. Please come to class with questions and observations. From time to time, we will invert the Socratic method and let your questions determine the course of the class.
**Schedule:**

*Always bring your text to class! Read assigned works before and after class.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>READINGS</th>
<th>SPECIFICS</th>
<th>SOME IDEAS</th>
<th>NOTES</th>
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<tr>
<td>September 12, 14</td>
<td>introductions; poems on handout</td>
<td>bring handout on Wednesday</td>
<td>reading on the right hand side of the brain; sound</td>
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<td>September 16</td>
<td>Bernstein, <em>Artifice of Absorption</em></td>
<td>&quot;C&quot; pp 1-6</td>
<td>difficulty, realism, transparency, artifice</td>
<td>try to summarize his argument in a sentence</td>
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<td>September 19-26</td>
<td>Dickinson's poems &amp; letters</td>
<td>poems TBA; letters in &quot;C&quot; pp7-8</td>
<td>lyric, artifice, soul, editions, subjectivity, nature</td>
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<td>September 28-Oct</td>
<td>Plath, <em>Ariel</em></td>
<td>read pp13-41 (two classes), then 42-81</td>
<td>psychodrama; ambition; metaphor; death, biography</td>
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<td>October 7-17</td>
<td>Whitman poems &amp; &quot;preface&quot;</td>
<td>poems TBA; preface in &quot;C&quot; p 9</td>
<td>&quot;I&quot;; the line; America; the body</td>
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<td>October 19-28</td>
<td>Stevens poems &amp; &quot;Adagia&quot;</td>
<td>poems TBA; &quot;Adagia&quot; in &quot;C&quot; pp 10-11</td>
<td>sound; imagination &amp; the physical world</td>
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<td>October 31-Nov 4</td>
<td>Bishop, <em>Geography III</em></td>
<td>read all</td>
<td>perception; restraint; otherness; things</td>
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<td>November 7-11</td>
<td>Ammons, <em>Tape for the Turn of the Year</em></td>
<td>read all</td>
<td>arbitrariness; diary; particulars, ecology, composition</td>
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<td>November 14-16</td>
<td>essays on performance</td>
<td>Rothenberg, Bernstein, hooks: &quot;C&quot; pp 12-22</td>
<td>orality; performance; politics; audience</td>
<td><strong>FILM:</strong> <em>Poetry in Motion</em>, screening TBA</td>
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<td>November 18-23</td>
<td>Gary Snyder &amp; cowboy poetics–essays and poems</td>
<td>&quot;C&quot; pp 22-40 + <a href="http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/cowboy-poets.html">www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/cowboy-poets.html</a></td>
<td>culture; politics; community; ideas of form</td>
<td>borrow my cowboy poetry CD; essay is due next Monday!</td>
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<td>November 25-Dec 2</td>
<td>Linton Kwesi Johnson, <em>Mi Revalueshanary Fren</em></td>
<td>pp1-41, then 45-61; also read Bennett and Brathwaite in &quot;C&quot; pp 41-44</td>
<td>performance, politics, dialect, resistance; orthography</td>
<td>borrow my LKJ CD; <strong>FILM:</strong> Monday Nov. 25 in class: <em>Dread Beat an' Blood</em>; essay due**</td>
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<td>December 5</td>
<td>essays returned; review for exam</td>
<td>exam questions distributed!</td>
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<td>Be there.</td>
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Department of English Contacts and Resources

Contacts:

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<thead>
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THE FACULTY OF ARTS REQUIRES THAT WE NOTIFY YOU OF THE FOLLOWING:

"Note on avoidance of academic offenses: All students registered in the courses of the Faculty of Arts are expected to know what constitutes an academic offense, to avoid committing academic offenses, and to take responsibility for their academic actions. When the commission of an offense is established, disciplinary penalties will be imposed in accord with Policy #71 (Student Academic Discipline). For information on categories of offenses and types of penalties, students are directed to consult the summary of Policy #71 (Student Academic Discipline) which is supplied in the Undergraduate Calendar (p. 1:11). If you need help in learning how to avoid offenses such as plagiarism, cheating, and double submission, or if you need clarification of aspects of the discipline policy, ask your course instructor for guidance. Other resources regarding the discipline policy are your academic advisor and the Undergraduate Associate Dean."

Dean of Arts:
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Associate Dean of Arts, Undergraduate Affairs
Sheila Ager
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