

LI626 American Poetry and the Self

Professor Raphael Allison
MAT Program in Literature
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Time: Saturdays, 9:00-12:00

Place: BGIA, located at 36 West 44th Street, New York City

When John Stuart Mill wrote that “eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*,” he was contributing to an established understanding of lyric as personal voice—individual utterance issuing from the mind, mouth, or heart of a reflective consciousness. While lyric poetry emphasizes identity and subjectivity by definition, American poetic history is particularly rife with such investigations into the nature of “I,” from Walt Whitman’s epic of identity formation *Song of Myself* to John Ashbery’s refracted “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”; from Gertrude Stein’s recursive “Identity A Poem” to Lyn Hejinian’s open-form autobiography *My Life*. And while Mill’s image of private speech assumes a fully formed and self-knowing speaker, American lyric has often served as a site for questioning the integrity of the self. What does it mean to speak as an individual? How does a solitary speaker correspond to society at large? How do racial and ethnic affiliations give rise to, or limit, self-expression? What role does language itself play in describing or constructing subjectivity? To what extent are poems “performances” rather than authentic utterances? How do literary form, genre, tradition, and intertextuality impinge upon the solitary speaker? And is there, after all, even such a thing as a unified consciousness to express in the first place? A provisional claim might be advanced: modern American poets address such questions with unusual ferocity.

In this class, we read some key texts in this literary history, investigating how American poets of the 20th century interrogated the self through poems that often push self-examination in powerful and innovative directions. Readings include works by the modernists Gertrude Stein, T.S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens; major poets of the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts movements, focusing in particular on Gwendolyn Brooks; the so-called “confessional” poets Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath; New York School figures, including John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara; and professed postmodern or experimental poets, including Lyn Hejinian. We’ll end by watching clips of poetry in performance by Patricia Smith, Larry Eigner, and Tracie Morris among others. Along the way, we’ll consider relevant theoretical and critical writings by William Wordsworth, William James, William K. Wimsatt & Monroe C. Beardsley, Theodor Adorno, Roland Barthes, Andrew Epstein, Lesley Wheeler, and Ron Silliman.

Required Texts

Please try to find these editions. You may use editions you already have as well. Other readings will be in PDF form on the course Moodle site (see below).

T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Writings* (Modern Library Classics; Intr. Mary Karr)

Wallace Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind* (Vintage)

Robert Lowell, *Life Studies and For the Union Dead* (FSG Classics)

Frank O'Hara, *Selected Poems* (Knopf; edited by Mark Ford)

Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* (Green Integer Book, 39)

Moodle

Moodle hosts our course's Website. There, you'll find PDFs of readings and you'll upload your writing assignments to folders. If you have questions about Moodle or how to operate it, please feel free to contact me. I've found it pretty simple to use. I'll be emailing you a link to the Moodle site about a week prior to our first class.

Course Requirements

Presentation

Each of you will prepare a 15-minute presentation once during the course (depending on enrollment, we may do this exercise in pairs). The presentation should concern the relationship between one of the essays for that week's reading and one (or more, if you like) of the poems. Whether the essay is theoretical (e.g., Wimsatt & Beardsley, Adorno, Barthes) or critical (e.g., Epstein, Wheeler, New), you might "test out" the writer's ideas in relationship to the poetry for that week. The idea is to begin making connections between what has said about poetry and the poetry itself.

To begin preparing your thoughts, you might look for places where the essayist seems to be successfully describing an element of the poetry under consideration; then, locate places where the writer's ideas are less successful, or simply run into complications. Your job is to begin framing the essayist's ideas and sketching out a relationship between them and the poetry. Your presentation may take any form you wish—talking, working with handouts, etc.—though it should last about 15 minutes.

The presentation will serve as the beginning of a larger class discussion as the floor will be open to responses and questions directly afterward. For this reason, each presenter is also responsible for playing a leading role in the ensuing discussion.

Short Assignment 1: Close Reading ~3 Pages

Your close reading should focus on just one poem from our reading list and should advance a claim about its representation of the self. The strongest close readings will consist of careful and specific description, though they will also make a *claim* about the poem. The strongest claims, in turn, will be made in recognition of some counterclaim. This means that your analysis should take into account various possibilities of meaning and navigate among them. ~3 pages (750-word maximum).

Short Assignment 2: Imitation ~1 page

Write a poem in the style or voice of one of the poets on our syllabus that we've read so far. An "imitation" can go about imitating in any way you see fit—though I'll ask that you don't parody a writer's voice but seriously engage in finding some way to get "inside" it.

Short Assignment 3: Mash-up ~1 page

This is similar to the previous assignment's imitation exercise, but here I'd like you to mash up two poets in terms of style and content. You might, for example, imitate Stevens's ponderous line in a poem about Black tenement life as described by Brooks; or you could address the high seriousness of a contemporary wasteland (Detroit? New Orleans? Kabul?) in the buoyant language of Frank O'Hara. The idea is to synthesize two poetic registers.

Long Essay 10-12 Pages

The essay should focus on the work of one poet from our syllabus, perhaps even one poem or a small group of poems. Your research into other sources—including critical essays by literary scholars, letters or diaries by the poet, relevant historical texts, archival materials—is expected. There is no minimum number of sources, though I would like you to engage with enough of them to make your essay more than a series of close readings. Since your presentation will begin to make links between a poet and a piece of criticism or theory, you may build your long essay from that assignment, though that is certainly not a requirement. There is no need to use a "theoretical" text as a lens for your argument, unless you would like to.

To facilitate this writing process, we will hold a brief draft workshop during Class 8. We will workshop one or two essays as a group, and then take a look at each others' introductions in pairs. More information regarding this workshop will be provided.

An important note on citation format: all written work for the course should conform to MLA documentation style as outlined in chapter five of the MLA Handbook (6th edition.)

Field Trip and Short Writing Assignment

In lieu of a 10th class session, I'm asking that some time before our final meeting on May 26—and preferably after the session 8 on May 5—you attend at least one poetry reading and write a ~2 page response to what you encounter there. What was the reading like? What struck you most forcefully about the performance? What did you like and not like? The idea is to come to our final class with some pre-writing and forethought on poetry in performance—and to get a sense of the enormously wide range of styles and types of reading. This is "informal" writing and will not be graded. We will discuss various venues and upcoming readings, and you're encouraged to go together and to more than one. I will try to come to at least a few as well.

Grades and Attendance

This course will be graded pass/fail. Your regular attendance, completion of work, and participation in class discussions and activities is expected to receive a passing grade. If you miss more than one class session, you may not pass the course.

Class Schedule

All titles are poems unless otherwise noted

Readings for any week may be modified or supplemented closer to the class date. If this occurs, I will send an email detailing all changes

Class 1 October 8 The “Lyric I”/Romantic Expressivism

William Wordsworth, “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” (essay); John Stuart Mill, “What Is Poetry?” (essay); Virginia Jackson, “Who Reads Poetry?” (essay); Walt Whitman, “I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing”; Robert Frost, “For Once, then, Something”; James Dickey, “The Sheep Child”; Charles Reznikoff, from *Holocaust*; Elizabeth Bishop, “In the Waiting Room”; James Schuyler, “Dining Out with Doug and Frank”; Louise Glück, “Purple Bathing Suit”; Harryette Mullen, “Sleeping with the Dictionary”; Edward Hirsch, “To D.B.”; Patricia Smith, “5 P.M., Tuesday, August 23, 2005.”

Class 2 November 12 Eliot and Formalism

T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (essay) and *The Waste Land*, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” and “Gerontion”; Wimsatt and Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy” (essay).

Class 3 December 3 Gertrude Stein

Short Assignment 1 Due

Gertrude Stein, “Identity A Poem” plus others TBA; William James, “The Stream of Thought” (essay).

Class 4 January 7 Wallace Stevens and Imagination

Wallace Stevens, “The Idea of Order at Key West,” “The Poems of Our Climate,” “The Man on the Dump,” “Of Modern Poetry,” “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” and others TBA; Theodor Adorno, “Lyric and Society” (essay).

Class 5 February 4 I, Too

Short Assignment 2 Due

Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (essay), “I, Too,” and “Theme for English B”; James Weldon Johnson, “O Black and Unknown Bards”; Claude McKay, “America” and “The White City”; Countee Cullen, “Heritage”; Ethridge Knight, “The Idea of Ancestry” and “Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminally Insane”; Ishmael Reed, “I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra”; Bob Kaufman, from *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness*. Selections from *The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks*; Lesley Wheeler, “Heralding the Clear Obscure: Gwendolyn Brooks and Apostrophe” (essay).

Class 6 March 3 Confession

Robert Lowell, *Life Studies*; Sylvia Plath, “The Colossus,” “In Plaster,” “Daddy,” “Fever 103,” “Lady Lazarus”; and others.

Class 7 April 7 The Scene of My Selves: The New York School

Short Assignment 3 Due

John Ashbery, “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”; Frank O’Hara, “Personism: A Manifesto” (manifesto), “Why I Am Not a Painter,” “The Scene of My Selves,” and others; Andrew Epstein, ““My Force Is in Mobility”: Selfhood and Friendship in Frank O’Hara’s Poetry” (essay).

Class 8 May 5 It’s not me, it’s L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E talking

Draft workshop at end of class

Lyn Hejinian, *My Life*; Roland Barthes, “Death of the Author” (essay); Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson, Bob Perelman and Barrett Watten, “Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry: A Manifesto” (essay).

Class 9 May 26 Performing the Self

Final Paper due

Ron Silliman, “Who Speaks? Ventriloquism and the Self in the Poetry Reading” (essay); online clips of performances by Larry Eigner, Patricia Smith, Patrick Rosal, Roger Bonaire-Aggard, and Tracie Morris (these poets subject to change).