

Instructor: K.A. Plank
 Chambers 2007
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M; 1:30-4:20
 Eu Hall

REL 449: THE SPIRITUAL IMAGINATION IN CONTEMPORARY POETRY

A study of how contemporary poets have imagined transcendence and the life of the spirit; more broadly, the affinity between poetry and religion.

Required Texts

Anne Carson, *Decreation*
 Katie Ford, *Deposition*
 Ellen Hinsey, *The White Fire of Time*
 Fanny Howe, *The Lives of a Spirit*
 Mary Karr, *Sinners Welcome*
 Karl Plank, *A Field, Part Arable*
 Spencer Reece, *Road to Emmaus*
 Mary Szybist, *Incarnadine*
 Christian Wiman, *Every Riven Thing*
 _____, *My Bright Abyss*
 Franz Wright, *Walking to Martha's Vineyard*
 Mark Wunderlich, *The Earth Avails*

Seminar Requirements

1. Students will prepare assigned texts so as to participate fully in class sessions. Attendance is obligatory. Two or more unexcused absences may result in automatic failure of the course.
2. Students will write three interpretive essays (3-4 pages each) each of which analyzes and offers a close reading of a selected poem from the particular unit of study. The syllabus identifies choices for poems to analyze each week ("focal poems"); we will establish a weekly rotation of these at the beginning of the seminar, the essays to fall due accordingly. Typically, a seminar session will take up close readings of 2-3 poems for the first two hours of its meeting and then focus on larger aspects of the assigned collection in the third hour.
3. Students will write a critical review (3-4 pages) of some one poetry collection studied in the course. In contrast to the close readings of particular poems, this essay should consider how the various poems of a collection interact with each other and function as a whole. Due: April 11
4. Each student will undertake a final project that may take one of two forms: a) the writing of a spiritual autobiography chapter (8-10 pages) that is informed by at least two works studied in the course. How does the poetry enable one to express one's own understanding of spiritual experience or challenge the language by which one otherwise would speak of that experience? Where and how do these works resonate in one's self-

understanding? Or, b) the writing of a paper (8-10 pages) that sets forth an understanding of “theo-poetics” by interpreting the works of at least two poets in relation to some theological or literary-theoretical perspective. Students may negotiate other options with the instructor. Projects due: April 29

5. Students will submit all written work as a Word document via email (kaplank@davidson.edu) and contain a statement that indicates they have proofread their work and reviewed the checklist of writing comments in the syllabus.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course students should be well able to do the following: interpret works of contemporary poetry through various strategies of close reading; discern the religious or theological significance of such literature, by relating it to issues of spiritual autobiography, and various theological and theoretical conversations; and, write in various genres appropriate to the topic—the analytical essay, the critical review, the sustained paper of personal reflection or critical research.

Excused Absences: Religious Holidays and Illness

First, should there be a conflict between any class session and a religious holiday or observance, the student should let the instructor know of his or her personal need. Religious observance warrants a legitimately excused absence. Second, health matters and takes priority over the syllabus schedule. Should a student need to miss class because of sickness, the absence is excused. This means: in the case of illness, first do what you need to do to get well; and, as a courtesy to others, avoid coming to class when you are contagious. Practice self-care.

Grade Distribution

Essays 30% (10% each) Critical Review 15% Project 40% Class 15%

Schedule of Classes

January 11

Introduction and Trial Run

Assignment: Jean Valentine, “Icebergs, Illulisa”

(http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/20/t-magazine/a-picture-and-a-poem-julie-mehretu-jean-valentine.html?_r=0)

Jane Hirshfield, “It Was Like This: You Were Happy”

(<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poems/it-was-you-were-happy>)

Mary Karr, “The Voice of God”

(<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/voice-god-poem>)

Franz Wright, "To"

(<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/238250>)

January 25

The Poet as Believer

Assignment: Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*

Interview with Krista Tippet:

<http://www.onbeing.org/program/a-call-to-doubt-and-faith-christian-wiman-on-remembering-god/4535>

February 1

"Hammer is the Prayer"

Assignment: Christian Wiman, *Every Riven Thing*

Focal Poems: "After the Diagnosis," "All Good Conductors," "Every Riven Thing," "From a Window," "And I Said To My Soul," "Hammer is the Prayer," "Lord Is Not A Word," "Lord of Having," "Gone for the Day"

February 8

"The more he loved me, the more I loved the world"

Assignment: Spencer Reece, *The Road to Emmaus*

Focal Poems: "ICU," "The Manhattan Project," "Gilgamesh," "Margaret," "The Road to Emmaus," "12:20 in New York"

February 15

"The Only Animal"

Assignment: Franz Wright, *Walking to Martha's Vineyard*

Focal Poems: "Year One," "On Earth," "One Heart," "The First Supper," "Fathers," "Flight," "Antipsychotic," "Cloudless Snowfall," "Letter," "Baptism," "April Orchard," "The Word 'I'," "The New Jerusalem," "The Only Animal"

February 22

"You are loved, someone said. Take that / and eat it"

Assignment: Mary Karr, *Sinners Welcome*

Focal Poems: "Pathetic Fallacy," "Oratorio for the Unbecoming," "Disgraceland," "Descending Theology: The Nativity," "Waiting for God," "At the Sound of the Gunshot Leave a Message," "Descending Theology: Christ Human," "For a Dying Tomcat," "Sinners Welcome," "Delinquent Missive," "Who the Meek are Not," "Hypertrophied Football Star as Serial Killer," "Overdue Pardon of Mother With Knife"

Reading: "Literature and Spirituality with Mary Karr" (Yale ISM, 2015):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OE2un1KRjFM>

March 7

"You talked to the doctor like there was no emergency, / and that's what I think this is"

Assignment: Katie Ford, *Deposition*

Reading: "A Conversation with Katie Ford," *Blackbird* 8/2 (2009).

http://www.blackbird.vcu.edu/v8n2/features/ford_k/conversation_page.shtml

March 13-14 Christian Wiman, Otts-Maloney Lectures

March 14 (tentative): Conversation with Christian Wiman (2:00-3:30)

March 21

"My wonderful and less than"

Assignment: Mary Szybist, *Incarnadine*

Focal Poems: "The Troubadours, Etc.," "Annunciation (from the grass beneath them)," "Conversion Figure," "Annunciation in *Nabokov* and *Starr*," "Update on Mary," "To Gabriela at the Donkey Sanctuary," "So-and-So Descending from the Bridge," "On a Spring Day in Baltimore," "Holy," "To You Again"

Interview: "The Life of a Poet: Conversation with Mary Szybist"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hhn5PcfvIRQ>

Reading: 2013 NBA finalist presentation:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dhQTd30W-KI>

April 4

"To touch that bloody muscle in your chest"

Assignment: Mark Wunderlich, *The Earth Avails*

Focal Poems: "Once I Walked Out," "Heaven-Letter," "Coyote with Mange," "Dwell in My House," "Driftless Elegy," "A Servant's Prayer," "Prayer for a Journey by Sea," "Raccoon in a Trap," "A Husband's Prayer"

Reading: Heaven-Letter: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FOkJAvFfSLU>

April 11

"Little word, who said me?"

Assignment: Fanny Howe, *The Lives of a Spirit*

April 18

"How women . . . tell God"

Assignment: Anne Carson, *Decreation*, 43-56 and 155-183

April 25

“The body, impatient, tires of its limits”

Assignment: Ellen Hinsey, *The White Fire of Time*

Focal Poems: “Meditation: On the Uncountable Nature of Things,”

“Meditation: On the Unique Cosmology of Passion,” “Commentary: On the Weight of Dailiness,” “Intermezzo: From the Book on the Nature of Things,” “Commentary: On the Story of Cain and Abel,” “Commentary: Thirteen Aphorisms on the Nature of Evil”

May 2

“The way we complete our sentences”

Assignment: Karl Plank, *A Field, Part Arable*

Concluding Business

A Writing Checklist: A Random Series of Comments
Too Often Repeated

1. Number your pages.
2. Get to the point. Do not construct elaborate artifices for a short paper.
3. Be neat. Sloppiness, like errors of any sort, distracts from even well-made points. Take yourself seriously as a writer and respect your readers in this as in all ways.
4. Be concrete and specific in your writing. Stay away from generalizations and statements of the obvious.
5. Write with self-critical perspective. Avoid chauvinism. Use sex-inclusive language. Be aware of the dangers of assuming the experience of a particular gender, race, or religion to be normative.
6. Proof read your paper. Proof read it again.
7. Read your paper aloud. Listen to how it sounds and to hear if it makes sense. If it does not make sense to you, then others will have little chance to understand it.
8. Revise your paper. Make sure you have used active voice, strong verbs, and no empty modifiers. Take care with pronoun / antecedent agreement (e.g., you cannot use “their” with a singular antecedent).
9. Write as a reader. When discussing literature, make concrete references to the text and specify them appropriately. Do not simply allude to the text or deal with it

generally. Remind your reader where you are in the text; if you do not know, find out.

10. When asked to respond to a given question, do so.

11. Use conventional forms of citation when discussing a biblical text (e.g., write “Exodus 3:14” instead of “the fourteenth verse of the third chapter of Exodus”). Usually you will be able to make your citation with parentheses at the end of your sentence.

12. Do not make nouns of verbs (e.g., “quotes” for “quotations”) or verbs of nouns (e.g., “references” for “refers to”).

13. Take care with pronoun and antecedent agreement. You should not use “their” with a singular antecedent.

14. Place punctuation marks correctly. Commas and periods go inside quotation marks. All punctuation precedes a footnote number.

Close Reading Essay Schedule:

February 1 (Wiman): Aziz, Bush, Deal, Duda

February 8 (Reece): O’Keefe, Slawson, Welliver, Woodbury

February 15 (Wright): Aziz, Bush, Deal, Duda

February 22 (Karr): O’Keefe, Slawson, Welliver, Woodbury

March 21 (Szybist): Aziz, Bush, Deal, Duda

April 4 (Wunderlich): O’Keefe, Slawson, Welliver, Woodbury

