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Chambers 2164  
 MWF 9:30 – 10:20

## **REL 243: THE SPIRITUAL IMAGINATION IN CONTEMPORARY POETRY**

A study of how contemporary poets have imagined the divine-human relation or the experience of transcendence and, more broadly, the affinity between poetry and religion.

### Class Requirements

1. Students will prepare assigned texts so as to participate fully in class sessions. Attendance is obligatory. Four or more 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. Due dates will be assigned according to a rotating schedule that is indicated in the syllabus.
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.
4. Each student will undertake a final project that may take one of two forms: a) the writing of a spiritual autobiography (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.
5. Each student will memorize one poem from the assigned readings to be recited at the class symposium on December 5 (credit).
6. Students will submit all written work as a Word document via email ([kaplank@davidson.edu](mailto:kaplank@davidson.edu)) and contain a statement that indicates they have proofread their work and reviewed the checklist of writing comments in the syllabus. All written work should be submitted by classtime on the due date.

### Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course students should be able to: 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.

### Required Texts

Sophie Cabot Black, *The Descent*  
 Jennifer Browne, *The Second Reason*  
 Katie Ford, *Deposition*  
 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*

### Grade Distribution

Essays 45% (10% each) Critical Review 15% Project 30% Class 10%

### Schedule of Classes

August 22

Introduction and Comments on Poetry and Faith

August 24

Trial Run: Jean Valentine and Mary Karr

Assignment: Jean Valentine, "Icebergs, Illuliat,"

[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/20/t-magazine/a-picture-and-a-poem-julie-mehretu-jean-valentine.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/20/t-magazine/a-picture-and-a-poem-julie-mehretu-jean-valentine.html?_r=0); and Mary Karr, "The Voice of God,"

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

August 26, 29, 31

The Poet as Believer

Assignment: Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*

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

September 2, 5, 7 and 9

"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"

Due: September 9, Interpretive Essay #1 (Group A)

September 12, 14, 16, 19

"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"

Due: September 19, Interpretive Essay #1 (Group B)

September 21, 23, 26, 28

"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"

Due: September 28, Interpretive Essay #2 (Group A)

September 30, October 3, 5, 7

"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"  
Essay: "Facing Altars: Poetry and Prayer" (69-93)

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

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OE2un1KRjM>

Due: September 28, Interpretive Essay #2 (Group B)

October 12, 14, 17

"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](http://www.blackbird.vcu.edu/v8n2/features/ford_k/conversation_page.shtml)

October 19, 21, 24, 26

"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>

Due: October 26, Interpretive Essay #3 (Group A)

October 28, 31, November 2

"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=F0kJAvFfSLU>

Due: November 2, Interpretive Essay #3 (Group B)

November 4, 7, 9

"So if house is to barefoot / as God is to laughter / what's rocking chair to orange?"

Assignment: Jenny Browne, *The Second Reason*

Focal Poems: "Multiple Choice," "The Cheap Seats," "The Body Before It Is A Body," "Jon Rueger," "Poetry," "Her Own Shadow," "Like the Universe," "The Greatest Love Offerings In The History Of The World," "Lullaby," "The Season When Some People Will Say," "The Odds"

November 11, 14, 16

"Heaven is only / What it cannot be"

Assignment: Sophie Cabot Black, *The Descent*

Focal Poems: "And Then," "The Tooth," "Lost," "Gun," "When It Was Time," "Heaven, Which Is," "In Case of Rapture," "Birthday," "The Guest," "Triage," "The Embrace," "Where We Cross," "The Offering," "In Light Of All," "And Morning Star"

November 18

Due: Critical Review

November 21, 28, 30

"I knew another garden"

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

Focal Poems: "Hedgerow," "Gravity," "After Eden," "Gift From A Mountain Field," "Tarblooder," "If This Night God Were You Or I," "The Sound Of One Poem Tapping," "Tibhirine Vows," "Bonhoeffer, 1939," "Genuflection," "Tools of the Trade," "Beyond The Hedgerow,"

December 2

Due: Final Project

December 5

Symposium and Recital

December 7

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.

