

4881F “Words are Victims”: Poetry, Decreation, and the Ruins of Language

Prof. Allan Pero

Office: UC 3418

Office Hours: Wednesdays 1:00-3:00, or by appointment

Phone: 519-661-2111 x 85816

Email: apero@uwo.ca

Class Times: Thursdays 1:30-4:30

Location: UC 4401

“Allegory is in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things”—Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*

“Of poetry, I will now say that it is, I believe, the sacrifice in which words are victims”—Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*

“We participate in the creation of the world by decreating ourselves”—Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

This course will explore the poetic and theoretical ways in which several poets grapple with what Wallace Stevens calls “metaphor as degeneration.” What does it mean to think of poetry as an allegorical space in which language is fragmented, broken, or lying in ruins? How might poets “decreate” language? How does poetry express or conjure such spaces into being—or conversely, mourn their collapse? How do poetic obsessions with precision and concentration victimize language in the guises of suspicion and skepticism, of nostalgia or novelty, to rescue concepts like truth or beauty? Or are they beyond rescue? How are such fraught spaces--of memory, the city, the body, the interior, the metaphoric and metonymic, even death itself--examples of what Maurice Blanchot describes as the fragmentation which “denounces thought as experience...no less than thought as the realization of the whole”? We will work to situate these questions in the work of Wallace Stevens, Mina Loy, T. S. Eliot, Li-Young Lee, and Anne Carson. We will read the works of these poets together with such thinkers as Maurice Blanchot, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Georges Bataille, Simone Weil, Alain Badiou, and Cathy Caruth.

Required Texts:

The Space of Literature--Maurice Blanchot (Nebraska)

Poetry, Language, Thought--Martin Heidegger (Harper Perennial)

The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play--Wallace Stevens (Vintage)

Lost Lunar Baedeker--Mina Loy (Noonday)

Collected Poems: 1909-1962--T. S. Eliot (Faber)

Book of My Nights--Li-Young Lee (BOA Editions)

Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera--Anne Carson (Vintage)

All other texts/readings are available online (or will be made available to you through OWL one week in advance).

Format: Seminar and Discussion.

1 Seminar, (30%)

1 Seminar Respondent, (10%)

2 Response Papers, each 500 words maximum (10% x 2 = 20%) – Response #1 Due October 18th; Response #2 Due November 1st

Class Contribution – (10%)

1 Major Paper, 4500 words (30%) - Due December 7th

Method of Evaluation:

Seminar Presentation (20 minutes of prepared material) - (30%)

The seminar presentation will consist of a broader critique, assessment, or analysis of the issues that emerge from the readings that week. You should think of the seminar as a kind of lecture in which you are attempting to teach the rest of us something about the theory, as well as exploring your own position on it. Further, you should be working toward developing useful or provocative questions that will help lead the subsequent class discussion.

Respondent to the Seminar (10%)

The seminar presenter is not alone in teasing out useful lines of discussion; the respondent's role is to take up some of the issues or problematics raised by the presenter and work them in turn into fruitful questions that will be addressed not only to the presenter, but to the class as a whole.

The purpose of this role is to encourage and generate class discussion; in larger terms, it is also meant to prompt you to start thinking like teachers - to take up issues and make them the basis of exciting and dynamic debate and conversation.

Major Research Paper - (4500 words) (30%)

The research paper is to give you the opportunity to synthesize in more depth one or more aspects of the theory opened up by the course material. The topic is fairly open, but should be determined in consultation with me. That said, I would prefer that your paper engage with the thinkers, material, or concepts explored in the course. Feel free to come and consult me about anything you're puzzling over - let it be a case of "analysis terminable" rather than "interminable."

The purpose of the paper is to help you begin to articulate, in written form, some of your own thoughts on the material. I hope that you'll use the paper to help solidify your grasp of the poetry and the theory so that you make it your own.

2 Response Papers (2 x 10%) = 20%

Length: 500 words (maximum) each (Due October 18th; November 1st)

The response papers are open: you may write a response to the any of the readings - theoretical, literary, or otherwise. They are meant to give you the chance to be creative with the poetry, work out a position on a text or point that uncannily haunts you, or will help you work toward a thesis for your major paper. Have fun with them!

Statement on Academic Offences

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf

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N. B. Class attendance and participation are not only welcomed, but expected.

Class Schedule:

September

Thursday 6th

First Meeting Introduction; Screening: Jean Cocteau - *The Blood of a Poet*

Thursday 13th

Martin Heidegger "The Origin of the Work of Art," "Language" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*

Thursday 20th

Martin Heidegger "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*

Thursday 27th

T. S. Eliot From *The Collected Poems* -- "The Hollow Men," *Four Quartets*, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"; Maurice Blanchot - Chapters I and II of *The Space of Literature*; Maurice Blanchot - Chapter IV of *The Space of Literature*

October (Seminars Begin)

Thursday 4th

Wallace Stevens from *The Palm at the End of the Mind* -- "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," "Anecdote of the Jar," "The Idea of Order at Key West," "Connoisseur of Chaos"; "Of Modern Poetry," "The Man on the Dump," "Two Versions of the Same Poem," and the essay "Imagination As Value"; Maurice Blanchot - Chapter V of *The Space of Literature*

Thursday 11th – NO CLASS! (Fall Reading Week)

Thursday 18th (RESPONSE PAPER # 1 DUE)

Wallace Stevens "Metaphor as Degeneration," "Asides on the Oboe," "The Pure Good of Theory," "Description without Place," "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," "The Rock," "Of Mere Being"; Stevens' essay "The Relations Between Poetry and Painting"; "Decreation" in Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

Thursday 25th

Mina Loy from *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*: “Three Moments in Paris,” “At the Door of the House,” “Human Cylinders,” “The Dead,” “‘The Starry Sky’ of Wyndham Lewis,” and the essays “Modern Poetry,” “The Logos in Art” and “Mi and Lo”; Georges Bataille from *Inner Experience*, pp. 130-57.

November

Thursday 1st (RESPONSE PAPER # 2 DUE)

Mina Loy from *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*: “Photo after Pogrom,” “Time-Bomb,” “Letters of the Unliving,” “Mass Production on 14th Street”; Alain Badiou - “What is a Poem? Or, Philosophy and Poetry at the Point of the Unnamable” from *Handbook of Inaesthetics*. You may also find this site useful/informative: <https://mina-loy.com/>

Thursday 8th – NO CLASS! (I’m at a conference)

Thursday 15th

Anne Carson from *Decreation* – “Sleepchains,” “No Port Now,” “Some Afternoons,” “Her Beckett,” “Beckett’s Theory of Tragedy,” “Beckett’s Theory of Comedy” “Every Exit Is An Entrance,” “Ode to Sleep”; Maurice Blanchot – Chapter V of *The Space of Literature*, Appendix: “Sleep, Night”

Thursday 22nd

Anne Carson from *Decreation* – “Decreation: How Women like Sappho, Marguerite Porete, and Simone Weil Tell God”; from “Decreation: An Opera,” *Part Three: Fight Cherries*; Simone Weil – *Gravity and Grace*: “Gravity and Grace,” “Void and Compensation,” “To Accept the Void,” “Attention and Will,” “The Impossible,” “Metaxu,” “The Mysticism of Work”; Maurice Blanchot from *The Space of Literature*, Appendices: “The Essential Solitude and Solitude in the World,” “Two Versions of the Imaginary”

Thursday 29th

Li-Young Lee from *Book of My Nights* – “Pillow,” “A Table in the Wilderness,” “From Another Room,” “Nativity,” “Black Petal”; Cathy Caruth, from *Unclaimed Experience* pp. 1-9; pp. 91-112.

December

Thursday 6th

Li-Young Lee from *Book of My Nights* – “Night Mirror,” “Heir to All,” “My Father’s House,” “The Sleepless,” “Our River Now,” “The Bridge,” “Praise Them,” “Fill and Fall,” “Echo and Shadow,” “Out of Hiding,”; Walter Benjamin from *Illuminations*, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”; Heidegger, in *Poetry, Language, Thought* “...Poetically, Man Dwells...”