

English 9139B

“Words are Victims”: Modernist Poetry and the Ruins of Language

Prof. Allan Pero

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Office Hours: Tuesdays 12:30-2:30, or by appointment

Class Times/Location: Wednesdays 3:30-6:30/ Lawson Hall 2210

“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*

This course will explore the poetic and theoretical ways in which several modernist 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 does poetry express or conjure such spaces into being—or conversely, mourn their collapse? How do the modernist 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 modern spaces-- of 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 Stevens, Mina Loy, T. S. Eliot, Hope Mirrlees, and H. D. We will read the works of these poets together with such thinkers as Maurice Blanchot, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Georges Bataille, Paul de Man, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, and Alain Badiou.

Syllabus:

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)

Collected Poems: Hope Mirrlees (Carcanet Press)

Trilogy: H. D. (New Directions)

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

Format: Seminar and Discussion.

1 Seminar, (35%)

2 Seminar Respondents, (20%)

1 Response Paper, (10%) - Due March 1st

1 Major Paper, (35%) - Due April 19th (Two weeks after the course ends)

Method of Evaluation:

Seminar Presentation (30 minutes of prepared material) - (35%)

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 (2 x 10%) = (20%)

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 - (5000-6000) (35%)

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.

1 Response Paper (10%)

Length: 300-500 words each (Due March 1st)

The response papers are open: you may write a response to 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 it!

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

N. B. Major Paper Due Wednesday April 19th

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

Class Schedule:

January

Wednesday 11th

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

Wednesday 18th

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

Wednesday 25th

Martin Heidegger “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” “The Thing,” “Poetically, Man Dwells...” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*

February (Seminars Begin)

Wednesday 1st

T. S. Eliot From *The Collected Poems* - “Gerontion,” “The Hollow Men,” “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service,” “The Waste Land”; “Tradition and the Individual Talent”; Maurice Blanchot - Chapters I and II of *The Space of Literature*; Paul de Man from *Blindness and Insight* “Impersonality in the Criticism of Maurice Blanchot”

Wednesday 8th

T. S. Eliot *Four Quartets*; Maurice Blanchot - Chapter IV of *The Space of Literature*; Nicolas Abraham, “Psychoanalytic Aesthetics: Time, Rhythm, and the Unconscious” from *Rhythms*; John Paul Riquelme - “Writing as Heraclitean Process - *Four Quartets* and the Fragments of the Past” from *Harmony of Dissonances*

Wednesday 15th

Wallace Stevens from *The Palm at the End of the Mind* “The Snow Man,” “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 essays “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” “Imagination As Value”; Alain Badiou - “What is a Poem? Or, Philosophy and Poetry at the Point of the Unnamable” from *Handbook of Inaesthetics*; Maurice Blanchot - Chapter V of *The Space of Literature*

Wednesday 22nd –NO CLASS!

March

Wednesday 1st (RESPONSE PAPER DUE)

Wallace Stevens “Asides on the Oboe,” “The Pure Good of Theory,” “Description without Place,” “The Bed of Old John Zeller,” “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” “The Rock,” “Of Mere Being”; J. Hillis Miller from *Topographies* - “The Ethics of Topography: Stevens”

Wednesday 8th

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”; Essays: “Modern Poetry,” “Aphorisms on Futurism”; Janet Lyon from *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet*, “Mina Loy’s Pregnant Pauses: The Space of Possibility in the Florence Writings”

Wednesday 15th

Mina Loy from *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*: “Lunar Baedeker,” “Marble,” “Photo after Pogrom,” “Time-Bomb,” “Letters of the Unliving” and the essays “The Logos in Art” and “Mi and Lo”; Georges Bataille from *Inner Experience*, pp. 130-57.

Wednesday 22nd

Hope Mirrlees – from *Collected Poems*: “Paris” Commentary on Paris, by Julia Briggs; Walter Benjamin from *Illuminations*, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”

Wednesday 29th

H. D. – from *Trilogy*, “The Walls Do Not Fall”; *Tribute to Freud* pp. 69-111. Walter Benjamin from *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, “Allegory and Trauerspiel,” pp. 159-95; Cathy Caruth from *Unclaimed Experience* pp. 1-9; pp. 91-112.

April**Wednesday 5th**

H. D. – from *Trilogy*, “Tribute of the Angels,” “The Flowering of the Rod”; Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick, from *Modernist Women Writers and War*, “Validating Female War Experience through Literary Witnessing: The Poetics of the Poet-Prophet and the Politics of Trauma and Healing in H.D.’s *Trilogy*”; Walter Benjamin from *Illuminations*, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”