

EN 5314 Contemporary Literature: aspects of fiction and poetry

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This unit aims to be an advanced introduction to aspects of contemporary literature in prose and poetry. It does not aim to be comprehensive, but rather to give detailed insight into two contemporary movements, one in prose, the other developing from (and critiquing) poetry.

Part 1: Fiction after the postmodern

The French Russian experimental writer Nathalie Sarraute compared literature to a relay race, with a “baton of innovation passing from one generation to another” (and the experimental British writer B. S. Johnson added rather unkindly that the problem was that the “vast majority of British novelists had dropped the baton, stood still, turned back or not even realized that there is a race”). So it’s fair to ask: where is the baton now? What is the next big thing, the next big movement? If postmodernism was the dominant mode in which realism was challenged in the novel in the 1980s and 90s, how has itself been challenged or developed by writers in contemporary fiction? Of course, writers have explored different topics, or taken different angles but the question here is about change in the form of the novel. It may be that in the huge range of contemporary fiction, it’s now impossible to draw out a movement. However, I think it’s possible to identify some trends. This will be the aim of this section of the course.

Warning: students taking the course will be expected to have read all four novels *before* the course begins. Further critical reading will be provided for each week.

Part 2: Conceptual Writing

“With the rise of the web, writing has met its photography,” (Kenny Goldsmith)
Conceptual writing sets itself against one of key concepts underwriting artistic production of the modern period: originality. This is writing that does not want to ‘make it new’ (Ezra Pound’s declared aim for contemporary art). Instead it redeploys material from existing texts in new ways in order to ask questions of the activity of writing. It takes a cue from the 1960s Conceptual Art movement, which, building on the legacy of Duchamp, sought to place ideas rather than objects at the centre of artistic practice. Literature of this kind is not interested in literary genius, or even in literary talent. Some works of conceptual writing are unashamedly boring, unreadable even. It styles itself as ‘uncreative writing’ and as anti-expressive. The movement has a complex

relationship to experimental poetry. It is indebted to dialogues and networks within the US poetry scene. Yet it is against many values that are commonly considered 'poetic'. It is not interested in modernist fragmentation and, as Craig Dworkin puts it in his introduction to the anthology of conceptual writing he edited with Kenny Goldsmith: "some of the presumed hallmarks of poetry—the use of metaphor and imagery, a soigné edited craft, the sincere emotional expression of especially sensitive individuals—might be radically reconsidered, and poetry might be reclaimed as a venue for intellect rather than sentiment".

By the end of the ten-week unit, the student should:

- have a specific knowledge about a range of key texts and contexts relating to writing in these two movements.
- have a knowledge and critical understanding of how that work relates to practical and theoretical debates in a variety of modernist, late modernist and postmodernist and contemporary practices.

Course Schedule

Week 2: Introduction: Postmodernism and after

Dr Will Montgomery and Professor Robert Eaglestone

- Jennifer Hodgson, Patricia Waugh, 'On the exaggerated reports of the decline of British fiction', *The White Review* (7: 2013), 69-86
- Brian Richardson, 'Remapping the Present: the master narrative of Modern Literary History and the lost forms of Twentieth Century Fiction' *Twentieth Century Literature* 43: 3 (1997) pp. 291-309.
- Craig Dworkin, 'The Fate of Echo' in Dworkin and Goldsmith, eds., pp. xxiii-liv. (<http://www.ubu.com/concept/AgainstExpressionTOC-Essays.pdf>)
- Marjorie Perloff, *Introduction to Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means* (Chicago, Chicago UP, 2010), pp. 1-23.

Week 3: Pastiche or not?

Professor Robert Eaglestone

- Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith* (London: Virago, 2002)

Week 4: The world?

Professor Robert Eaglestone

- Teju Cole *Open City* (London: Faber and Faber: 2011)

Week 5: Memory, history and trauma?

Professor Robert Eaglestone

- Aleksander Hemon, *The Lazarus Project* (London: Picador, 2008)

Week 6: Meta-modernism?

Professor Robert Eaglestone

- Ali Smith, *The Accidental* (London: Penguin, 2006).

Week 7: Uncreative writing

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- Kenneth Goldsmith *Fidget* (2000)
(http://archives.chbooks.com/online_books/fidget/text.html)
- _____ from *Day* (2003)
- _____ *The Weather* (2005)
(http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/goldsmith_winter.html – and following three hyperlinked seasons)
- *Traffic* (2007) (<http://eclipsearchive.org/projects/TRAFFIC/traffic.html>)
- _____ ‘Why Conceptual Writing Now?’, *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, eds., Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern UP, 2010), pp. xvii-xxii.
(<http://www.ubu.com/concept/AgainstExpressionTOC-Essays.pdf>)

Week 8: Re-writing the canon

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- Caroline Bergvall *Via (36 Dante Translations)* (2005)
- Jen Bervin, from *Nets* (2004)
- John Cage, *Writing Through the Cantos* (1987)
- Rob Fitterman, from *The Sun Also Rises* (2009)
- Judith Goldman, from *dicktée* (2001)
- Peter Manson *English in Mallarmé* (2006)
(http://www.ubu.com/ubu/unpub/Unpub_010_Manson_Mallarme.pdf)
- Tomoko Minami, from *38: The New Shakespeare* (2011)
- K Silem Mohammed, from *Sonnagrams* (2009)

Week 9: Testimony and détournement

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- Rob Fitterman *This Window Makes Me Feel* (Ubu Editions, 2004)
(http://www.ubu.com/ubu/fitterman_window.html)
- Judith Goldman from *r'ture/CENTaur* (2009)

- Brian Kim Stefans Vaneigem Series (2002?) (<http://www.arras.net/vaneigem/>)
- Vanessa Place *Full Audio Transcripts* (audio) (<http://www.radio-break.com/vanessa-place/>)
- Charles Reznikoff, from *Testimony* (1965)
- M. NourbeSe Philip, from *Zong* (2008)

Week 10: The self spoken

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- Charles Bernstein *from I and The* (1987)
- David Buuck *Follow* (2011)
- Craig Dworkin *from Legion* (2011)
- Dan Farrell *Avail* (1999) and excerpt from *The Inkblot Record* (2000)
- Simon Morris *from Rewriting Freud* (2005)
- Kim Rosenfield *from The Other Me* (2011)
- Juliana Spahr *from Thrashing Seems Crazy* (1996)

Week 11: Summing up

Dr Will Montgomery and Professor Robert Eaglestone

Course overview and discussion. Essay preparation.

Further Reading

Fiction

- Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago University Press and KwaZulu-Natal University Press, 2004).
- Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (Routledge, 2004)
- Nick Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction* (Edinburgh University Press, 2008)
- Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate, *The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic after 9/11* (Continuum, 2010)
- Peter Childs, *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction since 1970* (Palgrave 2005)
- Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History* (Routledge 1996)
- Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007)
- Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel* (Wiley-Blackwell 2008)
- Dominic Head, *Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge University Press 2002)
- David James ed, *The Legacies of Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 2011),
- David James *Modernist Futures* (Cambridge University Press, 2012),

Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford University Press, 1966)
Kay Mitchell, *Intention and Text* (Continuum, 2008)
Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, *Literatures of Memory: History, time and Space in Postwar Writing* (Manchester University Press, 2000)
Jago Morrison, *Contemporary Fiction* (Routledge 2003)
Randall Stevenson, Brian McHale, editors, *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Literatures in English* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006)
Patricia Waugh, *Blackwell History of British Fiction: 1945-present.* (Blackwell, 2009)
Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: the Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (Routledge, 2009)

Conceptual Writing

Anthologies

Caroline Bergvall et al, eds., *I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women* (Los Angeles: Les Figues, 2012)
Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, eds., *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern UP, 2010)

Secondary reading

Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press), 1999.
Derek Beaulieu *Seen of the Crime: Essays on Conceptual Writing* (Montreal: Snare, 2011); and online via Ubu Editions, 2012:
(http://www.ubu.com/contemp/beaulieu/Beaulieu-Derek_Seen-of-the-Crime.pdf)
Barbara Cole and Lori Emerson, eds., *Open Letter 7*, Autumn 2005, special issue, 'Kenny Goldsmith and Conceptual Poetics'
(http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/Goldsmith-Open_Letter.pdf)
Craig Dworkin, *No Medium* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2013)
Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley, CA: California UP, 1997).
Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art* (London: Phaidon, 2002).
Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago; London : Chicago UP, 2010).
_____, *21st Century Poetics: the New Modernism* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), especially chapter 3, 'The Conceptual Poetics of Marcel Duchamp', pp. 77-120.
Vanessa Place and Rob Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms* (Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2009).

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