Christopher Grobe

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**Engl 329: The Poetics of Performance**

*(Mondays & Wednesdays, 12:30-1:50pm)*

**Course Description:**

Poetry is not merely a written form; it is an oral art and a prompt to performance. Students in this course will learn to use “close listening,” as well as the embodied experience of performing poetry themselves, in order to access poetic meanings that are unavailable through silent reading alone.

On seminar days, I will bring specimen poems for us to dissect and anatomize with the tools gained from our secondary readings. On rehearsal and performance days, you will breathe life into your own repertoire of poems. All of the assignments ask you, in some measure, to combine embodied and analytic approaches to poetry. No prior performance experience is required.

**Required Texts:** *(All books are available at Amherst Books)*

J.D. McClatchy (ed.), *Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry* (2003)

J.D. McClatchy (ed.), *Vintage Book of Contemporary World Poetry* (1996)

Robert Pinsky, *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide* (1999)

Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (2002)

Course Packet (available through the English Department; required by Sept. 21)

**Course Format & Requirements:**

**Class meetings:** Sometimes this will look like any other seminar: we will sit around dissecting and discussing what we have read for the day, or else we will use what we have read to approach poems or audio-recordings that I bring to class. However, often we will be doing in-class exercises and performances of the sort required in theater or creative writing classrooms. I will warn you whenever physical activity will be required and advise you to dress accordingly.

**Classroom environment:** The limited enrollment of this course allows us to work closely together. We’ll get our hands dirty, exploring the details of poems and poetry criticism more directly than lecture alone allows. We’ll work together to test out different argument and to try unfamiliar approaches on for size. A seminar like this is a place for dynamic dialogue and experimentation. Don’t hesitate to contribute; nobody expects a polished disquisition. This spirit of active engagement and respectful collaboration extends to our in-class rehearsals and performances as well. When other students perform in class, you will be expected to participate by offering feedback and constructive criticism.

**Readings:** I have attempted to reduce the reading load whenever preparations for a paper or performance will likely preoccupy you. In return, I expect that you will come to class prepared to discuss the readings in detail and with some critical distance. Although no poetry is specifically assigned as reading each day, you will find that you need to read quite widely within our two anthologies—and beyond—in order to complete the written assignments and assemble your repertoire. Remember to budget time for this work.

**Writings & Performances:** This course requires three short exercises (one paragraph each), three papers (3-4 pages, 4-6 pages, and 8-10 pages), and four performances. The first three performances involve only a single poem each. The final performance may include any or all of those three poems, but must involve some new material and comprise a cohesive repertoire. The first two papers analyze your first two poem-performances using the critical perspectives we have explored in class, as well as the insight you gained from rehearsing and performing the poem. The final paper is an analysis and justification of your final performed repertoire.

**Course Policies**

**Attendance:** Due to the nature of this course, attendance is vital. Please inform me in cases of emergency, but absent such circumstances your attendance is expected and required.

**Grading:** Your grade for this course depends upon three exercises (10%), three papers (45%), and four performances (45%). All assignments must be completed in order to earn a passing grade.

**Academic Integrity:** Any time you use another person’s words or ideas without giving them credit, that is plagiarism. Plagiarism is not only bad for your personal education; it also fundamentally undermines the process of academic dialogue. Make sure to cite your sources properly, and please ask me if you are unsure whether citation is necessary in a particular circumstance.

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**Course Schedule:** *(An asterisk [\*] indicates a reading from the course packet.)*

9/7 *Introduction: Scripted Sound, Printed Performance*

9/12 *Sonic Repertoire I* (Bring completed exercise on “extinct sounds” to class)

Stewart, Chapter One (especially pgs. 17-38)

**Exercise:** *Extinct Sounds*: We are “losing” certain sounds because of our rapidly changing post-industrial environments. Collect a particular sound that you believe is on “the verge of extinction.” What kinds of cultural and personal meanings have become attached to this sound? What could its impending extinction mean for the world that includes it? How will it be remembered after it is gone? (one paragraph)

9/14 *Rhythm and Meter*

Pinsky, Chapters One & Three

9/19 *Sonic Repertoire II* (Bring completed exercise on “sonic walks”; bring poem title for first performance)

Stewart, Chapter Two (up to pg. 90)

**Exercise:** *Sonic Walk:* Choose a walk with which you’re familiar, one that has entered an almost subconscious part of your everyday existence. Take the walk twice. The first time, try to listen “acousmatically” (wherein one hears the sounds without seeing or judging their sources), with particular attention to underlying rhythms, including the rhythms of speech. Make notes. Take the same walk again. Listen for each rhythm separately and try to identify its source. Describe. (one paragraph)

9/21 *Sound and Sense*

Kenneth Burke, excerpts from *The Philosophy of Literary Form*\*

Stewart, Chapter Two (after pg. 90)

9/26 *Tone and Talk* (in-class rehearsals begin)

A selection of essays by Robert Frost\*

Perrine’s *Sound and Sense* on “Tone”\*

9/28 *Musicality* (in-class rehearsals continue)

Pinksy, Chapters Four & Five

10/3 First Performance (Paper #1 prompt distributed)

10/5 First Performance

10/10 No class (October break)

10/12 *Breathing*

Charles Olson, “Projective Verse”\*

Patsy Rodenburg, excerpts from *The Right to Speak*\*

**10/14 Paper #1 due by 5:00pm (3-4 pages)**

10/17 *Voices I* (bring poem title for second performance)

Stewart, Chapter Three

10/19 *Kinesthesia* (in-class rehearsals begin)

Stewart, Chapter 4 & epilogue

10/24 *Language & Action* (in-class rehearsals continue; Paper #2 prompt distributed)

Kenneth Burke on “symbolic action”\*

R.P. Blackmur, Introduction to *Language as Gesture*\*

J.L. Austin, excerpt from *How to Do Things with Words*\*

10/26 Second Performance

10/31 Second Performance

11/2 *Patterns & Forms* (bring title of poem for third performance)

Perrine’s *Sound and Sense* on “Pattern”\*

**11/4 Paper #2 due (4-6 pages)**

11/7 *The Counterfactual Poem* (Bring completed exercise on paraphrase; in-class exercise on lineation)

Pinsky, Chapter Two

Cleanth Brooks, “The Heresy of Paraphrase”\*

11/9 Third Performance

11/14 Third Performance

11/16 *Voices II* (Final Paper prompt distributed)

Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice”\*

11/21 & 11/23 No class (Thanksgiving break)

11/28 “*Reading” as Performance*

Peter Middleton, excerpt from “A History of the Poetry Reading”\*

Charles Bernstein, Introduction to *Close Listening*\*

11/30 “*Reading” as Social Ritual*

Erving Goffman, “Footing”\*

Mark Rylance, Tony Award Acceptance Speech 2011

(Watch online: <http://youtu.be/20lm7Ow9RSY>)

12/5 “*Reading” as Interpretation*

Geiger, excerpt from *The Sound, Sense, and Performance of Literature*\*

12/7 Group rehearsals

12/12 Final Repertoire Performance

12/14 Final Repertoire Performance

**12/17 Final Paper due by 5:00pm (8-10 pages)**