

ENGL 393 – *Poetry and Theory: High Modernism, Postmodernism, Late Modernism*
Spring 2012/ Wed and Fri 12:30am—1:50pm/Webster 219
Patrick Pritchett
Office phone: 542-5482/ Email: ppritchett@amherst.edu
Office hours: Fridays 2:00—3:00pm

Revolutions of the Word: Making It New in American Poetry, 1910-1990

“The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”
— Karl Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852)

“Tching prayed on the mountain/wrote MAKE IT NEW/on his bath tub/Day by day make it
new/cut underbrush,/pile the logs/keep it growing.”
— Ezra Pound, Canto LIII (1940)

Why do poets feel the recurring need to revolutionize their art by making radical breaks from tradition and how have these breaks been codified in manifestos and movements? The 20th Century in American poetry was a time of radical aesthetic change. From the heady days of Imagism and the Harlem Renaissance to the breakout of the New American Poetry and the controversies attending Language Poetry, the air was thick with the smoke of revolutions and counter-revolutions. In this course, we will examine how poets theorize poetic revolution by looking at the theory and practice of the American avant-garde, beginning with the high modernists and tracing their legacy through the still-murky terrain of postmodernism.

This course is both a survey of modernist genealogies and a constellation of radical poetics and its apologists. Combining intellectual history and aesthetic theory, we will attend to the social dynamics that govern the emergence of the New, from the new image & the new object to The New Woman and The New Negro; from the New Critics to the new materiality of the Language Poets. We will track how each of these movements fought to overturn prevailing poetic practice by reading the poems and manifestos they produced, as well as contemporary philosophers who were also shaping the moment. In the process, we will locate the cultural stakes driving aesthetic innovation in the 20th Century. Concurrent with this effort, we will also ask questions about periodization. What was high modernism and how did it fall apart? Did it carry over into postmodernism? Why is it important that we make these distinctions? Can we ever not make them?

Along the way we will try to unsettle a few cherished orthodoxies and shibboleths. Why, for instance, does Imagism rely so heavily on Orientalist and Hellenist tropes and what does this reveal about its concept of tradition? How can we understand the New Negro as an expression of vernacular modernism and what significance does it carry for the Black Arts movement? How does Freud enable the New American Poetries which contested the Cold War’s cultural hegemony? What political crises do both second-wave feminist poets and Language Poets respond to? We will give special attention to the tensions between symbolist and constructionist models of poetry, while exercising care not to fall into the bind of binary thinking. Some other important questions we will consider include: what is the avant-garde and is it still a viable position? What is at stake culturally in suppressing the modernist tradition? Does the idea of the new describe a category of continual revolution, or continual obsolescence? How can poets still charge language with a force equal to the lived experience of modernity?

Required Texts

All texts are on reserve, but you should purchase the Norton if you can.

- *Norton Anthology of Modern & Contemporary Poetry vol. 1 & 2*, edited by Jahan Ramanzani
- *Course Reader* (e-reserve, online links, handouts)
- *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology, 1900-2000*, edited by Jon Cook (RESERVE)
- *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, edited by Vassiliki Kolocotroni et al. (RESERVE)

Course Assignments

Each week we will combine close reading of specific poems with key critical writings by poets and theorists. Many of the poems may challenge your customary sense of how a poem is supposed to behave. But since the controversies surrounding modernist poetry arise from arguments about the limits of form this will be a primary area of focus: how cultural shifts impact poetic form? And do poems in turn shape cultural change?

Part of learning how to read poetry is learning how to locate a tolerable degree of what John Keats called “negative capability,” that is the suspension of closure with regard to how a text means. We will strive to cultivate this throughout the semester. Come ready to read the poems out loud. Poetry is living language; we will put this cliché to the test each week.

Although I will lecture briefly in each class, this is primarily a discussion-based course. You will be graded on your class participation, attendance, one oral presentation, and four short essays.

In the first essay (3-4 pages) you will identify the defining characteristics of modernism as defined by Pound, Eliot, and Williams. How do they use the image, myth, and the object to promote their ideas of the modern? This assignment calls for some close reading.

The second essay (4-5 pages) will ask you to compare modes of the new as they are articulated in at least two groups of poets: the New Woman, the New Negro, and the New Symbolists. You will answer the question: what is at stake culturally in their respective ideas of newness?

The third essay will (4-5) survey two of the major postwar poetic movements – the Projectivists, the New York School, the Beats – in order to map their common points of reference and their divergences, using specific examples from poems.

In the final paper (6-8 pages) you will make an argument about postmodernism as either a rupture from modernism or a continuation of it by tracking the continuities and discontinuities between the two periods. What joins – or divides – the Black Arts Movement with the Harlem Renaissance, for example? Do second-wave feminist poets claim or reject the model of the New Woman? How does Language Poetry appropriate Stein and the Objectivists?

Oral Presentations. The timetable for these will be determined upon verifying final enrollment. Each of you will be responsible for giving one informal ten-minute presentation to the class on some aspect of the week’s reading.

Schedule of Readings

Week 1— Introduction: Toward a Theory of Poetic Revolution

Wed, Jan 25

- Eugene Jolas, “Revolution of the Word” manifesto
- Poems by Whitman, Lanier, Bridges, Hopkins

Fri, Jan 27

- William James, “The Stream of Consciousness”
- Marshall Berman, from *All That is Solid Melts into Air*
- Ezra Pound, “In A Station of the Metro,” Preface to *The Spirit of Romance*, “A Retrospect” (PT) http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/pound/retrospect.htm

Week 2—The New Image

Wed, Feb 1

- Ezra Pound, “Portrait d’une Femme,” “Canto I”
<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15425>
- Ernest Fenollosa, “The Chinese Written Character as Medium for Poetry” (PT)

Fri, Feb 3:

- H.D., “Oread,” “Sea Violet,” “Helen,” “Notes on Thought and Vision” (M)
- Henri Bergson, from *Creative Evolution* (M)

Week 3—The New Myth

Wed, Feb 8

- T.S. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” “*Ulysses*, Order, Myth” (M)
- Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life”(M)
- Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*; Jesse Weston, *From Legend to Romance*

Fri, Feb 10

- Eliot, “The Waste Land” continued
- Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (M)
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/poetics-essay.html?id=237868>

Week 4—The New Object

Wed, Feb 15

- William Carlos Williams, *Spring & All*, Prologue to *Kora in Hell*
- Gertrude Stein, from *Tender Buttons*, “A Transatlantic Interview”

Fri, Feb 17

- Louis Zukofsky: “To My Wash Stand”
- George Oppen: “Thus hide the parts,” from *Discrete Series*
- Karl Marx, “The Fetishism of the Commodity”
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S4>

Paper 1 – Modernist Aesthetics

Week 5—The New Woman

Wed, Feb 22

- H.D., “Eurydice”
<http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/webtexts/eurydice/>
- Mina Loy, “Songs for Johannes,” “Feminist Manifesto”
- Simone Du Beauvoir, Introduction to *The Second Sex*
<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/de-beauvoir/2nd-sex/introduction.htm>

Fri, Feb 24

- Lorine Niedecker, “What horror to awake”
- Muriel Rukesyer, “Night Feeding”
- Pritchett, “How to Do Things with Nothing: Lorine Niedecker Sings the Blues”

Week 6—The New Negro

Wed, Feb 29

- Langston Hughes, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” “The Weary Blues,” “Theme for English B,” “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”
- W.E.B. Dubois, from *The Souls of Black Folk*

Fri, Mar 2

- Countee Cullen, “Yet Do I Marvel”
- Sterling Brown, “Ma Rainey”
- Alain Locke, “The New Negro”

Week 7 – The New Symbol

Wed, Mar 7

- Wallace Stevens, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” “Of Mere Being”
- George Santayana, “The Sense of Beauty”
- Simon Critchley, from “Things Merely Are”

Fri, Mar 9

- Hart Crane, “At Melville’s Tomb,” “To Brooklyn Bridge”
- Stephane Mallarme, “Crisis in Poetry”

Paper 2 – Ideas of Newness

SPRING BREAK—March 12 to March 16

Week 8 – The New Critics

Wed, Mar 21

- Robert Lowell, “The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket”
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=178941>
- T.S. Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets”
<http://personal.centenary.edu/~dhavird/TSEMetaPoets.html>
- Randall Jarrell, “From the Kingdom of Necessity”

Fri, Mar 23

- Richard Wilbur, “The Death of a Toad”
- Elizabeth Bishop, “Visit to St. Elizabeth’s”

<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15210>

- Ezra Pound, Libretto to Canto LXXXI and The Bollingen Controversy
- Robert van Hallberg, “The Place of Poetry in The Culture, 1945-1950”

Week 9 – The New Field

Wed, Mar 28

- Charles Olson, “I, Maximus, To You,” “Letter 27,” “Projective Verse”
- Alfred North Whitehead, “Forms of Process”
- Norbert Wiener, “The Human Use of Human Beings”

Fri, Mar 30

- Denise Levertov, “Pleasures,” “The Ache of Marriage,” “Some Notes on Organic Form”
- Robert Duncan, “Often I am Permitted”

Week 10 – The New New York

Wed, Apr 4

- Frank O’Hara, “The Day Lady Died,” “Personism”
 - Kenneth Koch, “Mending Sump,” “Variations on WCW”
 - Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”
- <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/kitsch.html>

Fri, Apr 6

- John Ashbery, “As One Put Drunk into the Packet Boat,” “The Invisible Avant-Garde”
- Abstract Expressionism

Week 11 – The New Beat

Wed, Apr 11

- Allen Ginsberg, “*Howl*, I,” “America,” “Notes on *Howl*”
- Herbert Marcuse, excerpts from *Eros and Civilization*

Fri, Apr 13

- Robert Lowell, “Skunk Hour”
- Robert Creeley, “I Know a Man”
- Norman O. Brown, from *Life Against Death: A Psychoanalytic Meaning of History*

Paper 3 – Postwar Poetics

Week 12 – The New Black

Wed, Apr 18

- Amiri Baraka, “As Agony. As Now,” “A Poem for Black Hearts”
- Audre Lorde, “Coal”
- Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement”

Fri, Apr 20

- Melvin Tolson, “Lambda,” from *Harlem Gallery*
- Nathaniel Mackey, “Black Snake Visitation,” “John Coltrane Arrived with an Egyptian Lady”

Week 13 – The New Feminism

Wed, Apr 25

- Adrienne Rich: “Diving into the Wreck,” “Planetarium,” “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”
- Sylvia Plath, “Ariel”

Fri, Apr 27

- Anne Waldman, “Make-up on Empty Space”
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171774>
- Alice Notley, “The Descent of Alette” (excerpts)
- Rachel Blau DuPlessis, “Otherhow”
- Helene Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”

Week 14 – The New Materiality

Wed, May 2

- Charles Bernstein, “The Artifice of Absorption,” “The Kiwi Bird in the Kiwi Tree”
- Lyn Hejinian, “My Life,” “The Rejection of Closure”

Fri, May 4

- Michael Palmer, “Sun”
- Susan Howe, “Thorow,” “Ruckenfigur”
- Gerald Bruns, “Poetry as an Event of Language”
- Maurice Blanchot, “Mallarme’s Experience”

Final Paper – due at end of reading period

Grading Standards

Excellent (A) papers have clear theses and soundly organized arguments that reflect detailed, nuanced understanding of the text. They are precisely and concisely written and have few if any mechanical problems—even minor ones. They weave quotations into their arguments smoothly and forcefully. A vital, graceful voice animates such essays; they say something compelling in a compelling way.

Good (B) papers have clear theses and are thoughtfully and reasonably organized. They may be marred by a few infelicities of style, but they will have no major mechanical problems—and not many minor ones either. These are solid, disciplined papers that make a definite point in a logical, coherent manner to a definite audience.

Satisfactory (C) papers have a thesis supported by evidence. The writing is clean and properly proofed, but not always compelling; it may be marred by some minor mechanical problems and one or two major ones (like fragments or run-ons). While their arguments may not be particularly cogent, these papers do say something interesting, and they say it in a comprehensible and responsible way.

Poor (D) papers, while giving evidence of effort on the part of the writer, lack a thesis, have major mechanical problems, poor organization, betray serious misreadings of the text, and show little sense of subject or audience.

Failing (F) papers have weaknesses even graver than those indicated for poor papers. They usually betray a lack of effort on the part of the writer. *Any evidence of plagiarism (intentional or otherwise) will result in a failing grade—and referral to the Academic Conduct Committee.*