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 redeploy 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


**Week 3: Pastiche or not?**
Professor Robert Eaglestone


**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


**Week 6:** Meta-modernism?  
Professor Robert Eaglestone


**Week 7:** Uncreative writing  
Dr Will Montgomery

  [http://archives.chbooks.com/online_books/fidget/text.html](http://archives.chbooks.com/online_books/fidget/text.html)
- _______________ from *Day* (2003)
  [http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/goldsmith_winter.html](http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/goldsmith_winter.html) – and following three hyperlinked seasons
  [http://www.ubu.com/concept/AgainstExpressionTOC-Essays.pdf](http://www.ubu.com/concept/AgainstExpressionTOC-Essays.pdf)

**Week 8:** Re-writing the canon  
Dr Will Montgomery

- Caroline Bergvall *Via (36 Dante Translations)* (2005)
- Jen Bervin, from *Nets* (2004)
- Rob Fitterman, from *The Sun Also Rises* (2009)
- Judith Goldman, from *dicktée* (2001)
- Peter Manson *English in Mallarmé* (2006)  
- Tomoko Minami, from *38: The New Shakespeare* (2011)
- K Silem Mohammed, from *Sonnagrams* (2009)

**Week 9:** Testimony and détournement  
Dr Will Montgomery

- Rob Fitterman *This Window Makes Me Feel* (Ubu Editions, 2004)  
- 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**
Dr Will Montgomery

• 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**

Nick Bentley, *Contemporary British Fiction* (Edinburgh University Press, 2008)
Peter Childs, *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction since 1970* (Palgrave 2005
David James *Modernist Futures* (Cambridge University Press, 2012),
Randall Stevenson, Brian McHale, editors, *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Literatures in English* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006)

**Conceptual Writing**

**Anthologies**

**Secondary reading**
Craig Dworkin, *No Medium* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2013)