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483-01 683-01 Modern American Poetry: rupture and Continuity

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Modern American Poetry: Rupture and Continuity

Texts:
Modern American Poetry website: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets.htm

The first half of the 20th century, especially the years around World War I, witnessed unprecedented changes in literature, as well as in the other arts. These changes, many of them as abrupt and violent as the times in which they occurred, can be seen perhaps more clearly in the genre of poetry than in any other. Our course will explore American poetry of this era, considering its formal and thematic transformations as a chapter in the cultural narrative to which we now give the name modernism. Although this term is often used to indicate a particular span of historical time (as in “the modernist period”), modernism also denotes a large set of occasionally contradictory aesthetic and cultural qualities; hence our anthology’s use of the plural term modernisms. Modernism in turn may be understood as part of an ongoing historical dialectic, as indicated by our inevitable recourse to terms like modernity and modernization as well. As we shall see, modernism takes many forms, and at the outset, it may be best not to think of it as a uniform or monological phenomenon.

Modernism, then, may be synonymous with change, and even though American poets were often exponents of change, they take on this role with greater or less misgivings. In the arts, revolutionary change also implies (and sometimes explicitly articulates) connections with pre-existing traditions, which may have been eclipsed by more recent developments. As modern American poets forge their various aesthetic ideologies and position themselves in relation to contemporary historical movements and events, we will see them coming to terms with older traditions, judging them and using them as sources of strength or as artistic constraints against which they must struggle. Likewise, we will see how their poetry draws them into various alliances with other writers, artists, intellectuals, and cultural figures, all of whom recognize the need to articulate a vision of the new social, political, economic, and technological conditions of the 20th century.

Because our subject is poetic modernism, and not simply individual modernists, we will read a relatively large selection of poets. At the same time, however, we must acknowledge the sustaining and convincing power of the modernist canon, and so we will give more time to the study of some major figures whose influence has extended from the period in which they wrote up until the present day.
Course Format and Assignments:

The course is taught through a combination of lecture and class discussion. Students are expected to keep up with assigned readings (both readings assigned for class discussion and supplementary texts), to arrive promptly and to attend class regularly, and to be prepared with questions and comments about our current work. Given the difficult, even obscure aspects of modernist poetry, Q & A time will be a regular feature of the course. Remember: if you have a question about a particular poem or author, chances are that others in class have a similar question. Therefore, asking your question will probably further everyone’s understanding of the work. Don’t be shy!

Assignments for ENGL 483:

- Take-home mid-term (25%)
- In-class final (25%)
- Research paper, including a written proposal and annotated bibliography (25%)
- Comparative paper (15%)
- Class participation, including attendance, quality and consistency of questions and comments throughout the semester (10%)

Assignments for ENGL 683:

- Take-home mid-term (25%)
- In-class final (25%)
- Research paper, including a written proposal and annotated bibliography (25%)
- Class presentation and leading class discussion (15%)
- Class participation, including attendance, quality and consistency of questions and comments throughout the semester (10%)

Calendar

Note: Read the entire selection of each poet in the anthology unless otherwise indicated. There may be additional readings for some poets; I will let you know in advance. Also, look at each poet’s web page at the MAPS website for background prior to the day we discuss the poet in class.

August 27  Introduction / Frost, pp. 44-49, 58-70

Sept. 3  Eliot

Sept. 10  Eliot / Stevens

Sept. 17  Stevens

Sept. 24  Pound
Oct. 1  Stein  **Comparative paper due (483)**

Oct. 8  Williams

Oct. 15  H.D.  **Take-home mid-term due**

Oct. 22  Millay

Oct. 29  Reznikoff

Nov. 5  McKay / Toomer **Proposal & Annotated Bibliography due**

Nov. 12  Crane

Nov. 19  Hughes

Nov. 26  NO CLASS—THANKSGIVING BREAK

Dec. 3  Zukofsky

Dec. 10  Niedecker **Research paper due**

Dec. 17  **FINAL EXAM**