

ENGLISH 656-01:
CONTEMPORARY BRITISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE (3.0 CR.)
Postmodern Narrative and Cultural Memory

Instructor: Christian Moraru
Spring 2000

McIver 227, T 3:30-6:20
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“I write by using other written texts, rather than by expressing ‘reality,’ which is what most novelists do” (Kathy Acker).

“Contemporary fiction seems marked by the imperative of the eternal return . . . in contemporary fiction, telling becomes compulsorily belated, inextricably bound up with retelling” (Steven Connor).

“What I am proposing . . . is a critical practice that will turn re-reading into (re)writing, into self-conscious critical performances focused on the text’s modes of signification, but also on their own interpretive and articulatory moves” (Marcel Cornis-Pope).

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND GOALS: This graduate seminar focuses on a core feature of postmodernism: its appetite for “remaking” former cultural artifacts. So far, this phenomenon has been seized primarily as a symptom of our time’s inability to “invent” its own stories, which has allegedly resulted in “simulacral” repetitions (Jean Baudrillard) of the past. But a reexamination of the growing number of fictional retellings and rewritings may lead to a more nuanced verdict. In this class, we will read and write about emblematic narrative “rewrites” by contemporary American prose authors. We will see how these authors refashion prestigious texts and why. We will also read criticism and theory by Roland Barthes, Harold Bloom, Matei Calinescu, Jim Collins, Marcel Cornis-Pope, Gérard Genette, and Fredric Jameson, among others. The emphasis, though, will be laid on primary texts.

FOCUS AND APPROACH: We will study, by and large, the intertextual response of contemporary American fiction to nineteenth-century literature, chiefly American. We will place this dialogue in theoretical, historical, and transnational contexts since postmodernism is a crosscultural phenomenon. Likewise, while emphasizing literature--fiction rather than poetry or drama--, we will see how the recirculation of former works occurs in other

forms of cultural discourse, from architecture to painting to film to fashion to automotive design. We will also tease out the sociocultural implications of rewriting to note how this act is inflected by--and, in its turn, bears on--identity formations such as sex, gender, class, race, ethnicity, or belief. Thus, our class could be seized as an attempt to work out a cultural critique of former/formal(ist) notions of intertextuality, imitation, adaptation, parody, pastiche, etc.

METHODOLOGY: We will usually spend a class on a novel or a few shorter texts. Normally, we will read some theory or criticism alongside the primary materials. While individual presentations may incorporate the former substantially, we will devote most of our time to the “rewrites” themselves, analyzing how they process their “models.” For instance, we will use Samuel R. Delany’s novel *Neveryóna* and its strategic (re)deployment of *The Scarlet Letter* to discuss how late twentieth-century notions (“discourse formations”) of race, gender, and sexuality are brought to bear on Hawthorne’s text, “rewriting” and “reencoding” it as fantasy (one of Delany’s stylistic marks) rather than romance. Also, we will examine the collapse of various boundaries including those separating fiction and nonfiction (theory), aesthetics and politics, “major” (high-brow) and “minor” (“low-brow” or “popular”) literature, and so on.

CLASS FORMAT: This is a seminar combining lecture, student presentations, and extensive discussion. Usually, our meetings will open with a lecture by the instructor providing historical and theoretical background and placing the readings for the day in the culturally appropriate context. Following this introduction, students give 20-minute individual presentations on specific aspects of the readings for the day, and then we will move on to collective discussion.

REQUIREMENTS:

1. Writing Assignments. Options: either

a midterm (**10** double-spaced pp. including notes and bibliography) and a final paper (**25** pp. plus notes and bibliography), or

a midterm (**10** pp.) and final paper (**10** pp.), plus a final exam (**5** pp.).

Students are responsible for submitting to the instructor, duplicating and circulating among class members a 1-2-p., single-spaced proposal for their final paper no matter the paper’s size. The proposal will be presented and discussed in class towards the end of the semester.

All assignments and exams are due in class on the day indicated in the syllabus. Also, under certain circumstances and after consultation with the instructor, the 10-p. paper may be expanded into the 25-p. paper. Details to be dealt with in class and individually.

2. Individual Presentations. Students sign up for their final project proposal and oral presentations right away so that we can spread out the presentations over the course of the semester. Each student will give a 20-min. talk on the scheduled readings. The presentations need not be written. But if they are, you should probably aim for 9-9.5, double-spaced pages.

Presentations cover a relevant aspect or material for the day. I do not expect you to fully analyze or explain the day's assignments. But I do ask you to a) briefly outline the readings you intend to talk about, and then b) identify, possibly in light of our course's focus, one major problem in these works, which should help us open up our conversation. In any event, you could be truly helpful to us if you presented briefly the literary "precursor" of the postmodern rewrite e.g., Henry Adams's autobiographic work (The Education of Henry Adams, 1907) in the case of Pynchon's V.

3. "The Question for the Day." Each student will write up, before the class, at least one question on the scheduled readings. You need not have the answer to the question; nor does the question have to be fully formulated--you may, occasionally, phrase it more as a problem than a full-blown query. I request that you e-mail your question to me by 2:00 PM each Tuesday. Individual presenters need not contribute questions on the day they present.

4. Attendance and Participation. Both are expected and will factor in the final grade (see below under course policies).

CONFERENCES: Please meet with me during my regular office hours or make an appointment to discuss your specific interests, goals, or any aspect of this class. I ask you to make a first, "formal" appointment early on in the semester. I will schedule these meetings immediately. I will also hold a second round of formal conferences, before the semester ends, to discuss your 1-2-p. proposals and your progress in our class.

* NOTE ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: Students are encouraged to use this seminar to place their work in the larger, more demanding and competitive context of professionalism and academic performance. The course is geared towards graduate reading and writing carrying notable potential for presentation and publication outside UNCG. While fulfilling the course's requirements is your major goal, I urge you to think of these requirements as an opportunity to think about yourselves as part of the academic community, with its specific standards, language, methods, tools, and venues.

Here are some of the questions you may want to ask: where do I stand as a scholar, as a teacher, critic and writer--and which are my goals? In what kind of scholarly conversation do I wish to intervene based on what I learn in this class? What steps do I have to take to do that? What are the resources? Which are the outlets for my work? What do I have to do, for example, to turn my seminar presentation/paper into a conference paper/journal article/dissertation chapter/writing sample? More details to be discussed in class and individually.

COURSE POLICIES:

1. Late Papers: No late papers--and any other kind of work for that matter--accepted. However, if you foresee any deadline-related problems, please come to see me ahead of time. We shall work together to find a solution.

2. Absences: You are allowed no more than 2 (two) absences during the semester for illnesses (which you must document afterwards), religious holidays, or any emergencies

preventing you from attending. No undocumented absences allowed. Should they occur, they will affect your final grade. I will subtract 5% from the latter for any undocumented absence. Since we meet once a week, attendance is particularly critical to the success of our work in this class. If you are the victim of an emergency, please stay in touch with me by e-mail or phone.

GRADING: As a general rule, no incompletes (but, again, come to see me if you anticipate any problems). The quality of your work will be reflected in the final grade as follows:

1. Papers and exams: 80%
 - a) 25-p. paper: 55%; 10-p. paper: 25%
 - b) 10-p. papers: 30% each; final exam: 20%
2. Oral participation (including presentations and questions): 20%

REQUIRED READINGS (PRIMARY TEXTS):

1. Paula Geyh, et al., Postmodern American Fiction. A Norton Anthology (selections). Norton, ISBN: 039331698X (PAF)
2. Kathy Acker, Great Expectations. Grove, ISBN: 0802131557
3. Paul Auster, The New York Trilogy. Penguin, ISBN: 0140131558
4. Donald Barthelme, Snow-White. Simon & Schuster, ISBN: 0684824795
5. Samuel R. Delany, Neveryóna, or, The Tale of Signs and Cities. UP of New England, ISBN: 0819562718
6. Louise Erdrich, Love Medicine. HarperCollins, ISBN: 0060975547
7. William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, The Difference Engine. Bantam Books, ISBN: 055329461X
8. Maxine Hong Kingston, Tripmaster Monkey. Vintage Books, ISBN: 0679727892
9. Tim O'Brien, Going After Cacciato. Bantam Books, ISBN: 0767904427
10. Thomas Pynchon, V. HarperCollins, ISBN: 0060930217

11. Philip Roth, The Ghost Writer. Vintage Books, ISBN: 0679748989

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS (REQUIRED/RECOMMENDED--see syllabus): Selections of theory and criticism on reserve in the Jackson Library:

1. Kathy Acker, Bodies of Work. Essays. London, England. New York: Serpent's Tail, 1997.

2. M. M. Bakhtin/P. N. Medvedev, The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship. A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics. Trans. Albert J. Wehrle. Foreword by Wlad Godzich. Cambridge, Mass. London, England: Harvard UP, 1985. (Ordered)

3. Roland Barthes, Image. Music. Text. 1977 Essays selected and trans. by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, 1984.

4. Harold Bloom, Agon. Towards a Theory of Revisionism. New York: Oxford UP, 1982.

5. Jorge Luis Borges, Ficciones. Ed. and with an Introduction by Anthony Kerrigan. New York: Grove P, 1962.

6. Matei Calinescu, "Rewriting." Bertens, Hans and Fokkema, Douwe. International Postmodernism. Theory and Literary Practice. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1997. 243-248.

7. Jim Collins, Uncommon Cultures. Popular Culture and Post-Modernism. New York. London: Routledge, 1989.

8. Marcel Cornis-Pope, Hermeneutic Desire & Critical Rewriting. Narrative Interpretation in the Wake of Poststructuralism. New York: St. Martin's P, 1992.

9. ---. "Narrative Innovation and Cultural Rewriting: The Pynchon-Morrison-Sukenick Connection." Janice Carlisle and Daniel R. Schwarz, eds. Athens, GA: Georgia UP, 1994. 216- 237.

10. ---. "Self-Referentiality." Bertens and Fokkema 257-264 (under 6 above)

11. Samuel R. Delany, Silent Interviews: On Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction, and Some Comics: A Collection of Written Interviews. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP; Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1994.

12. Raymond Federman, Critifiction. Postmodern Essays. Albany: SUNY P, 1993.

13. John Frow, "Intertextuality." Marxism and Literary History. London: Basil Blackwell, 1986. 125-169.

14. Gérard Genette, Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree. Trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Foreword by Gerald Prince. Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 1997. (Ordered)
15. Stephen Greenblatt, Shakespearean Negotiations. The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988.
16. Linda Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction. New York and London: Routledge, 1995.
17. Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Durham: Duke UP, 1991.
18. Julia Kristeva, Desire in Language. A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art. Ed. Leon S. Roudiez. Trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1980.
19. Paul Maltby, Dissident Postmodernists. Barthelme, Coover, Pynchon. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1991.
20. Christian Moraru, “‘Differential’ Anxieties: Traveling Narratives in a Global Culture.” SCLA Conference presentation, Oct. 1999.
21. Patrick O’Donnell and Robert Con Davis, eds. Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1989.
22. Cornel West, “Black Culture and Postmodernism.” Barbara Kruger and phil Mariani, eds. Remaking History. Seattle: Bay P, 1989. 87-96.

Note: I may add, as we go along, further items (primarily xeroxed excerpts) to the course holdings on reserve in the Jackson Library. Also, whenever we spend two classes on a single text, make sure you have the entire text read before the first class.

COURSE SYLLABUS:

Week 1

Tue Jan. 11 Introduction: goals, expectations, policies. The weekly syllabus: presentation followed by discussion.

Historical, theoretical, and critical frameworks for our class: a) modernism vs. postmodernism; b) the contemporary vs. the postmodern; c) postmodernism across cultural discourses; d) postmodernism vs. revisionism; e) revisionism vs. rewriting: the theory and the practice.

Week 2

Tue Jan. 18 RÉCRITURE FEMININE - REWRITING, PLAGIARISM, AND

ENGENDERING GAMES.

Assignments: Acker, Great Expectations

Recommended: Bodies of Work 6-13; 98-105; 158-168. Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," PAF 654-663; Marcel Cornis-Pope, "Narrative Innovation and Cultural Rewriting: The Pynchon-Morrison-Sukenick Connection." Janice Carlisle and Daniel R. Schwarz, eds. Athens, GA: Georgia UP, 1994. 216-237.

Week 3

Tue Jan. 25 THE TEXTUAL "DOUBLE" AND THE SOCIAL "OTHER":
INTERTEXTUALITY AS CRITIQUE

Assignments: Auster, City of Glass and Ghosts (from The New York Trilogy)

Recommended: The Locked Room (from The New York

Trilogy)

Week 4

Tue Feb. 1 "GHOST(S)WRITING": REVISITING TEXTS, RECONSTRUCTING
HISTORY

Assignments: Roth, The Ghost Writer; Joyce Carol

Oates,

"The Turn of the Screw," PAF 396-409

Recommended: Matei Calinescu, "Rewriting." Bertens,

Hans and Fokkema, Douwe. International Postmodernism. Theory and
Literary Practice. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing

Co., 1997. 243-248.

Week 5

Tue Feb. 8 POSTMODERN NARRATIVE AND POPULAR GENRES (I): OUTRAGEOUS
FAIRY TALES

Assignments: Barthelme, Snow-White

Recommended: Barth, Chimera ("Dunyazadiad, PAF 426-

443; Ihab Hassan, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," PAF 586-595.

Week 6

Tue Feb. 15 POSTMODERN NARRATIVE AND POPULAR GENRES (II): RACE AND
SEXUALITY IN DELANY'S "GRAMMATOLOGICAL" FANTASIES

Assignments: Delany, Neveryóna (I)

Recommended: Delany, Silent Interviews, "Sword and
Sorcery." 127-163; hooks, "Postmodern Blackness,"

PAF 624-631.

Week 7

Tue Feb. 22 Neveryóna (II)

Midterm evaluations

Week 8

Tue Feb. 29 No class (Spring Break)

Week 9

Tue Mar. 7 THE POSTMODERN PICARO
Assignments: Pynchon, V (I)
Midterm paper due (in class)

Week 10

Tue Mar. 14 V (II)

Week 11

Tue Mar. 21 NATIVE AMERICAN REVISIONS: REWORKING MELVILLE
Assignments: Erdrich, Love Medicine

Week 12

Tue Mar. 28 ASIAN AMERICAN REVISIONS: REWORKING WHITMAN
Assignments: Kingston, Tripmaster Monkey
Final exam assigned

Week 13

Tue Apr. 4 POSTMODERN "COUNTERIMAGINATION": REWORKING THOREAU
Assignments: O'Brien, Going After Cacciato
Final exam due (in class)

Week 14

Tue Apr. 11 **1-2-p. proposals due (in class).**
Discussion of proposals

Week 15

Tue Apr. 18 "STEAMPUNK" VICTORIANISM
Assignments: Gibson and Sterling, The Difference _____ Engine
(I)

Recommended: "The Difference Dictionary"
(<http://www.sff.net/people/gunn/dd/>); Christian Moraru, "'Differential'
Anxieties: Traveling Narratives in a Global Culture." SCLA Conference
presentation, Oct. 1999.

Week 16

Tue Apr. 25 The Difference Engine (II)

Week 17

Tue May. 2 Last meeting: course overview
Final papers (25-p.or 10-p.) due (in class)
Final evaluations