

## Reading Assignments

### Lecture 1

Texts: Plath, Sylvia. *Metaphors*.

Voigt, Ellen. *Sweet Everlasting*.

Dickinson, Emily. *My Life had Stood*.

1. Who is the "I" in Plath's "I am a riddle"? Is it the poem or its speaker? What is the answer to the riddle?
2. How does the form of Plath's poem reflect the answer to the riddle? What elements would you say constitute the "form" of this poem? Of any poem?
3. How valid is it to think of a poem as a riddle? Why should a poem be puzzling? Is there some way to convey straightforwardly what the poem means? What does the resort to these metaphors add to the straightforward meaning?
4. What contrast is implied in Voigt's poem between "naming something by the book" and naming it by the poem's title? What is the significance of the magnifying glasses carried by the students? Does magnification distort? What role is played by the speaker? Is she the teacher in the poem or an external observer? Does the answer make a difference to the meaning of the poem? What in the light of the poem's conclusion is the force of the word "residual"?
5. Interpret the phrase, "The punishment for doubt is doubt". What strikes you as curious or odd about this phrase?
6. The alternative to the magnifying glass is a telescope. What knowledge about the observed light of the stars is assumed by the poem? Is the comparison of starlight to memories of the dead an analogy or a metaphor? What would you say is the difference between these two figures of speech?
7. Dickinson's poem reads as though it were a riddle-what do you think the answer might be? No agreement has ever been reached among literary scholars about the meaning of the last stanza of Dickinson's poem. What do you think it means? As it stands, it expresses a paradox. How can the paradox be resolved? What value does the form of paradox add to a straightforward declaration of its meaning?

### Lecture 2

Shakespeare, William. Selected sonnets.

### Lecture 3

Shakespeare, William. Selected sonnets.

Reading: Aristotle. *Poetics*. (Excerpt)

Richards, I. A. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. (Excerpt)

1. How does Aristotle regard the relation between metaphors and similes in ordinary speech and in works of poetic art?
2. Aristotle insists that metaphor and simile are identical but for the words "like" or "as" which mark the figurative use of language as a comparison. Do any of Shakespeare's metaphors challenge this view?
3. How useful is Aristotle's cataloguing of metaphors? What difference would he allow between metaphor and analogy? What is the point of his rule of proportion (A is to B as C is to D)? How does it apply to Shakespeare's *That time of year thou may'st in me behold*?
4. Aristotle seems to advance a notion that the value of a metaphor can be judged by some standard of appropriateness, of moderation in comparison. How is this notion

- connection with his views of the nature and the value of metaphor or figurative language?
5. Are any of the metaphors inappropriate or far-fetched in Shakespeare's sonnets? Taking Spenser's sonnet as an instance, one might say that the poem worries about the appropriateness of two metaphors and then resolves the issue by justifying both comparisons. Does this observation contribute to understanding the character of the sonnet?
  6. How does the view of figurative language proposed by Richards differ from Aristotle's? What does Richards mean by *tenor* and *vehicle* and how useful are these terms in understanding the nature of metaphor?
  7. So far as rhyme-scheme is concerned, Shakespeare's sonnets divide up like Spenser's into three four-line units (called *quatrains*) and a concluding couplet. But they also carry overtones of a different division, between the first eight lines (the *octet*) and the last six (the *sestet*). In which of the sonnets does one or the other division predominate? Does the possibility of two divisions add anything to the meaning of the poems?
  8. How would you paraphrase the concluding couplet of Shakespeare's sonnet I? the line "A man in hue all hues in his controlling" of sonnet XX? of the fourth line of sonnet LIII? of the fourth line in sonnet CXVI? Find three other lines that are particularly difficult to work out grammatically and comment on their place in the poem? Is difficulty in grammar a benefit to these poems? What view do you think Aristotle might take of this issue?
  9. Note the metaphors in any sonnet and track their relationship. Is there some underlying metaphor (i.e., *Life is a journey*-I hasten to add that none of the sonnets in our selection offer developments of this underlying metaphor) that unites them or do they each count as a different view of one subject?
  10. Find some sonnets that propose a metaphor and then, apparently, quarrel with it or insist upon its inappropriateness and compare two of them.

#### Lecture 4

Shakespeare, William. Selected sonnets.

Donne, John. Selected poems.

#### Lecture 5

Donne, John. Selected poems.

Reading: Todorov, Tzvetan. "The End of Rhetoric." In *Theories of the Symbol*. (Excerpt)

1. The list of figures is, after all, just a list. Going through such a list and trying to analyze a text by showing that the elements of its sentences may be identified as one or another kind of figure may give rise to familiarity with the terms in the list, but what other use does it have? Does the observation that Shakespeare's sonnet XVIII is a form of litotes help in understanding it?
2. Subsequent theories of poetry have not discredited the distinctions in the list but they have tried to reduce the list to a system-that is, they have tried to establish relations among the kinds of figures which admit of seeing them as versions of two or three or four basic kinds, related in some way expressive of the nature of language. (Roman Jakobson's essay on metonymy and metaphor, which we will read later on, is a good instance of this tendency.) But the theorists mentioned by Todorov are comfortable with the idea of a list; they are also comfortable with the notion that their enterprise and Aristotle's are much the same. In what way does this reflect a general view of the nature of poetry and of figurative language? How does Todorov account for the subsequent extinction of this view?
3. When Shakespeare alludes to a bit of specialized knowledge that his audience is expected to possess-as Sonnet CVI expects them to know that the events of the Old Testament "prefigure" events in the New-that knowledge underlies a substantial

- portion of the text, if not the whole of it. (Much the same might be said of Voigt's allusions to starlight in *Sweet Everlasting*.) But Donne's allusions to knowledge are rapid-fire; brought in suddenly, they are quickly abandoned for another. Discuss the quatrains of the sonnet *Batter my heart* from the standpoint of the predominating metaphor in each quatrain. Are they related? Do they form a progression? Like Shakespeare's sonnets, the division into three quatrains and a concluding couplet in this sonnet is rivaled by a division into octet and sestet. How does the doubleness of division work here?
4. The couplet closing that sonnet offers two paradoxes. Explain them.
  5. In the century following Donne, his metaphors were considered in violation of Aristotelian notions of propriety or moderation—they were too far-fetched, intellectually, to make for the kind of pleasure that Aristotle proposed as the function of metaphor. In contrast, the early modernists, like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, valued Donne precisely because of this quality. What do you think of these views? Are the comparisons far-fetched? Are they a source of value or of dis-value?
  6. Track the course of metaphor throughout one poem—the equation suggested between money and tears in *A Valediction of Weeping* or between mapping the world and describing an illness in *A Hymn to God, my God*. How unusual are the connections? The latter poem ends in something akin to a paradox—it deliberately describes God's action as if they were perverse. How is the paradox to be resolved? How close are Donne's metaphors, in general, to the point of paradox?
  7. Brooks is developing some of the ideas in Richards's essays about the "interanimation" of words. What does he mean by paradox? As Brooks speaks of it, paradoxes defy resolution. Does this mean that they express logical contradictions and therefore make no assertions? Can you analyze another poem in the manner that Brooks employs in analyzing this one?

## Lecture 6

Donne, John. Selected poems.

Reading: Brooks, Cleanth. "The Language of Paradox." In *The Well-Wrought Urn*. (Excerpt)

## Lecture 7

Campion, Thomas. *My Sweetest Lesbia*.

Johnson, Ben. *To Penshurst*.

———. *Two Songs to Celia*.

———. *Inviting a Friend to Supper*.

———. *Still to be Neat*.

Herrick, Robert. *Delight in Disorder*.

———. *Corinna's Going A-Maying*.

———. *To the Virgins*.

———. *A Night Piece to Julia*.

———. *Julia's Clothes*.

———. *The White Island*.

Herbert, George. *The Collar*.

———. *The Pulley*.

———. *The Forerunners*.

Carew, Thomas. *A Song*.

Waller, Edmund. *Go Lovely Rose*.

Larkin, Philip. *Vers de Societé*.

Reading: Empson, William. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. (Excerpt)

1. Brooks describes the functioning of words in poetry in a way that suggests identifying *ambiguity* as characteristic of poetic language. Yet Brooks prefers *paradox*. As Empson demonstrates the aptness of ambiguity to designate the functioning of words in poetry, does he offer any grounds for connecting ambiguity with paradox?
2. Ambiguity is generally considered a deficiency in prose. Why does Empson consider it a valuable quality in poetry? Empson offers a brief account of how poetry works in discussing the formal characteristics of poetry-meter, rhyme, rhythm and figuration. How does he think it works? He seems to encourage the reader to push hard to think of alternative meanings, and even speaks of "inventing" them. Does poetry, in your view, provoke a kind of creative activity in the reader? Take the final couplet from Shakespeare's sonnet CXXX: *And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare / As any she belied with false compare*. Can the "she" refer to the poet's beloved? or does "any she" simply mean "any woman"? How can one tell?
3. Campion's *My Sweetest Lesbia* and Jonson's first song to Celia are both, in part, versions of a Latin poem by Catullus. Which do you prefer? What does it mean to "sever" a good? What is the difference between the "suns that may rise again" and "this light"? Why does the line say "But if once we lose this light" and not simply "But once we lose this light"? Are not they bound to lose it? Why is "fame" associated with "rumour"?
4. Consider the lines from the second song to Celia: *But might I of Jove's nectar sup / I would not change for thine*. Doesn't it mean the opposite of what the poet should be saying at this moment? Is there an ambiguity in the line with the wrong meaning uppermost? How does being mindful of it alter the meaning of the poem? *Drink to me only with thine eyes*-is there an ambiguity in "only"? How would you elucidate the metaphor at work in the first eight lines of the poem?
5. Compare Jonson's *Still to be Neat* with Herrick's *Delight in Disorder*. Are clothes the tenor or the vehicle in either of these poems? Are both about the same thing?
6. Who are "the" Virgins in Herrick's poem, *To the Virgins*? How differently is the sun regarded here from the way it is regarded in Campion or the first Celia poem? How does the word "spent" work in the third stanza? What is the difference between "spending" and "using" time? What does the last word of the poem mean? Why gather rosebuds rather than roses?
7. *Corinna's Going a-Maying* depends upon the reader knowing about the May-ritual of Herrick's day, during which young people gathered May-sprigs (sprigs of white hawthorn) in celebration of the advent of luxuriant Spring growth and decorated streets and houses with them; Charles I had declared ("the proclamation made for May") that such pagan country rituals should be practiced, because they anticipated, it was generally believed, some of the rituals of Christianity. Trace the religious character of the images, which are resolutely pagan. Why is "the god unshorn" Why do the flowers weep and bow? *Rise and put on your foliage*-is this a metaphor? What is its effect? Apollo is the god of the sun in the first stanza; the second refers to Titan, the sun itself. Is this a duplication? The second and third stanzas together seem to say (among other things) that it is a sin to spend much time in praying; is this a paradox? By the end of the poem, we have returned to Catullus again and are drowned in endless night. Where does this transition begin to occur? What prompted it?
8. What is the presiding metaphor of *The White Island*? What is the White Island? How does it relate to our present location? How do the present participles that end each stanza work? What is the difference between the fifth participle and the four preceding it? What is the difference between the last participle and all the others?

## Lecture 8

Campion, Johnson, Herrick, Herbert, Carew, Waller and Larkin (continued)

## Lecture 9

Marvell, Andrew. *The Coronet*.

———. *Bermudas*.

———. *Body and Soul*.

———. *Coy Mistress*.

———. *The Gallery*.

———. *Definition of Love*.

———. *The Mower Against Gardens*.

———. *The Garden*.

———. *On Appleton House*.

Reading: Davidson, Donald. "What Metaphors Mean."

Gibbs, R. W., Jr. *The Poetics of Mind*. Chap. 1 (Excerpt)

1. It is difficult to write or speak about figurative language without using language figuratively; and the manner in which one does so incorporates a host of assumptions. (My description of *tropes* in the hand-out on Figurative Language is rife with these assumptions and it makes me uncomfortable, but one has to begin *somewhere*.) Philosophy attempts to make evident some of the assumptions and to clear up possible confusions that result from them. Unavoidably, it carries assumptions of its own, only some of which are made explicit. Davidson is arguing about linguistic *meaning*-the general range of what is known as semantics. His view is that metaphor uses words differently from literal speech but that the words so used are not endowed thereby with alternative linguistic meanings. How does this view compare in this regard with those of Richards and Brooks? How does it compare with Empson's?
2. In one respect, Davidson shares a view common to many philosophers who have turned their attention to figurative language. (One of them, John Searle, is mentioned by George Lakoff later in our readings; from this standpoint, our reading of Davidson will have to do duty as the target of Lakoff's objections.) The view in question is that much confusion enters philosophy of language by way of a mix-up between the meaning of a sentence, taken as a semantic unit of language, and the meaning it acquires in utterance or use. The first sort of meaning, in this view, derives from the capacity of sentences to express propositions that are either true or false; the general point here is that the second sort of meaning depends upon the first and perhaps should not be called "meaning" at all. (A characteristic example: Uttering the sentence, *Now that was really a smart thing to do!* when the action in question was particularly stupid does not change the meanings of the word "smart".) How does this viewpoint influence Davidson's account of the distinction between learning about the world and learning about language? How does it affect his view of paraphrase? Early in the essay, Davidson says that a poem cannot be paraphrased; later he says that its paraphrase is endless. Is this a contradiction?
3. Davidson offers a brief account of T.S. Eliot's *Hippopotamus*. Does he paraphrase anything? How would you apply his sort of account to the analysis of Marvell's *Dialogue between Soul and Body?* or to *The Gallery?*
4. Gibbs's argument is one of many in cognitive linguistics which argues against the notion that the semantics of language are based upon a hard core of literal meanings; it is therefore, by implication, an attack upon Davidson's view. How compelling is Gibbs's case? How would Davidson reply to it?
5. Some of the poetry we have been reading has been about itself, in the sense that it declares the adequacy or inadequacy of its metaphors. Shakespeare's *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?* was the first of these. Another was Herbert's *The Forerunners*. How would Davidson's argument apply to such cases?
6. Marvell's *The Coronet* is also an instance of this kind: the poet is, in effect, denouncing his own poem. Or is he? Comparison reveals that this poem is unusual in Marvell's oeuvre-it is syntactically difficult to make out. What is the point of the difficulties that it poses to a first reading? Can it be easily paraphrased-that is, are the difficulties

- merely syntactical or do the lines puzzle in another way? The ending is a paradox, or at least, an oxymoron: you cannot literally crown a foot. How would you resolve it?
7. Compare *To His Coy Mistress* with Herrick's *To the Virgins or Corinna*. How odd is the phrase "World enough, and time"? How much time is there in the world? The poem is divided into three paragraphs. What is the point of this division? What is the meaning of the phrase *Worms shall try / That long-preserved virginity*? What is the force of *worms trying* and *long-preserved* in this context? Has the tone of the poem altered at this point or earlier? What is the effect of the poet calling himself and his mistress *amorous birds of prey*? Why is the sun *our sun*? There seems to be a confusion about the *iron gates of life*. What are they? How can you tear pleasures through them? Since the lovers are racing against Time, what is the good of making the sun run here? What has happened to the lack of *world enough* at the end of the poem, which seems to be only about time?
  8. *The Mower against Gardens* and *The Garden* seem to be on opposite sides of a fence. Considering the distinction between vehicle and tenor, how can the opposition be reduced? The word "garden" in the poem does not appear until the eighth stanza—is there a point to the delay? Stanza's five, six, and seven are about the body, mind, and soul, respectively. Are they differently treated? How are they each related to the general theme and to each other? Does this mark a progression or do we have to do merely with a series? What is a "green thought"? How can you "annihilate something to"? (Is the line simply ungrammatical?) How can anything be created by annihilating "everything that's made"? The poem seems to say in the eighth stanza that Adam was happier to be alone than to have a helpmate. How serious is the poem about this?
  9. There would seem to be a pointed contrast between Marvell's *The Definition of Love* and Donne's *A Valediction forbidding Mourning*. How would you draw the contrast?
  10. Compare Jonson's *To Penshurst* and Marvell's *On Appleton House*. Both are humorous texts, with fanciful or fairy-tale elements which modulate into moments of seriousness from time to time. How would you define the nature of the fancies? How would you identify the points of seriousness? *Appleton* is by far the more ambitious poem—it encompasses a journey through the estate and over the course of one day which is worthy of comparison with the journey of Dorothy through Oz. Describe the course of the journey—does it mark a progression or merely a survey? Jonson's poem has a defined conclusion in its last line—Other lords have *built* but Penshurst's lord *dwells*. What is the point of this opposition? *Appleton* does not have such a defined conclusion and its presiding spirit is not "the Lord" but "Maria"—that is, Mary, which hints also at a religious connection. How would you elaborate upon this connection?

## Lecture 10

Marvell (continued)

## Lecture 11

Milton, John. *Lycidas*.

———. *How Soon Hath Time*.

———. *When I consider how my light is spent*.

———. *Methought I Saw My Late Espoused Saint*.

Reading (Copyright Material Freely Accessible On the Web): Lakoff, George. "The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor." Website:

[http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~market/semiotic/lkof\\_met.html](http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~market/semiotic/lkof_met.html)

1. Lakoff's theory of metaphor is distinguished from others that we have encountered so far in that it offers itself as a theory about concepts rather than a theory about words and meanings. How does this affect the argument in general? Lakoff is critical of the view that figurative language is deviant and literal speech provides a norm. Does he believe that literal speech can be identified? Pick three issues in Lakoff's theory that

are differently understood from the way in which they are understood by those whom he criticizes and explain the differences.

2. Milton's *Lycidas* was condemned by Samuel Johnson as insincere. "Where there is leisure for fiction there is little grief. When Cowley [a poet contemporary with Milton] tells of Hervey that they studied together, it is easy to suppose how much he must miss the companion of his labors, and the partner of his discoveries; but what image of tenderness can be excited by these lines? [Johnson then quotes ll. 26-29.] We know that they never drove (sheep) a-field, and that they had no flocks to batten; and though it be allowed that the representation may be symbolic of something, the true meaning is so uncertain and remote that it is never sought because it cannot be known when found."

Right or wrong in his judgment, Johnson raises important points. The death of Edward King is the occasion of the poem, but is the loss of King to Milton its real subject? The poem is a form of pastoral elegy, in which, in ancient Greek and Roman examples poet-shepherds spent their time while watching over their sheep by singing about his loves and the landscape, and their songs also involved serious subjects—the nature of leadership, politics, the course of empire, as well as the seasonal character of life, the inevitability of death. In the early Italian renaissance and in much of the English poetry that took its works for models, the shepherds stuck to love and landscape, whiling away time as the sheep browsed. (Perhaps you can see why such a form was congenial to courtiers, whose real trade—the fighting of wars—was an intermittent occupation.) What use does Milton make of the Shepherd metaphor? What is the relation of the apparently degressive passages (concerning Apollo and St Peter, ll 64-84 and ll. 103-131) to the theme? An important feature of pastoral was its commitment as a form of fiction to the idea that simple people, like shepherds, had a purer relationship to Nature than more complicated types and that Nature was a beneficial power. Note that in *Lycidas* the speaker acknowledges difficulty in maintaining the pastoral note, which is interrupted by verses about Apollo and St Peter; when the note is finally resumed (l. 132) it leads to a suggestion that the pastoral fiction of Nature in mourning for the dead shepherd as "false surmise." For all Johnson's criticism, then, Milton seems himself to be quarreling with his pastoral machinery. Again, what is the role of Nature in the poem? Some of the poem is about premature endings; a lot of it is about water. What can the image of "drowning" stand for, besides drowning? The poem is divided into something like paragraphs; how does this division function? Discuss the shifts in tone in this poem. How are they marked? What do the last eight lines do for the tone of the whole? Another difficulty—careful reading will show that it is not always clear who is speaking. Various mythological figures appear who speak of King in the third person, but one voice (e.g., ll 100-102: *It was that fatal and perfidious bark . . .*) addresses King directly. Whose voice is it? Note that we have a third-person ending, though the poem begins in the first person, with the shepherd speaking. How do you account for this lack of symmetry? Johnson also objected to the mixture of pagan and Christian materials in this poem. Is there evidence that the poet mixed them consciously and for a purpose?

3. *On his blindness*, if properly punctuated, turns out to be one sentence. Does this matter to the understanding of the poem? What is the parable of the talents to which it refers? How can Patience *prevent* a murmur that has already been murmured? Or has it? What is the force of the final word, *wait*? How does it fit in with the parable of the talents alluded to earlier in the poem?
4. The sonnet *Methought I saw* has the familiar ambiguity of dividing up into both quatrains / couplet and octet / sestet. What is the force of the division with regard to the content of the units in either case? What is the meaning of "fancied sight"? (We must recall that Milton was blind at the time.) Does "fancied" refer to the fact that in the dream, his wife is veiled and he cannot see her face or to the fact that he has been given sight in the dream and can see her face? Are there problems with either interpretation? What difference does the issue here make to the meaning of the poem?

Milton (continued)

### Lecture 13

Wordsworth. *Tintern Abbey*.

Coleridge. *Frost at Midnight*.

Reading: Lakoff and Turner. "The Power of Poetic Metaphor." (Excerpt)

1. Since Lakoff and Turner reject the distinction between metaphor and literal statement, they must distinguish the nature of figurative language in poetry from the nature of figurative language in everyday speech, or reject this distinction too. They account for the distinction by employing four categories designating four operations upon conventional metaphor which are distinctive to its creative use and which are formalized in our idea of poetry. What are the categories? Give two examples of each operation in poems that we have read so far and discuss whether the categories help illuminate the poem. Earlier, we noted that the conventional list of tropes was a mere catalogue and did not have a systematic base-or so it might appear-so that (a) each might be further divided up, and (b) we could not be sure that the enumeration of types is complete. Is this the case here? or (perhaps with some improvements) could the list here make some claim to the character of a system?
2. One problem in interpretation (already encountered in our discussion of ambiguity), is the problem of recognizing the limits of interpretation. How does Davidson legitimate his reading of Eliot's *Hippopotamus*? If the poem is not rooted in a meaning of the words alternate to the literal, what is to stop the reader from deciding that it is about something other than the Church? What would Lakoff and Turner have to say about the constraints governing the interpretation of poetry?
3. *Tintern Abbey* and *Frost at Midnight* were the result of a friendly competition in which each poet was to produce a work written to a common prescription. What do you think the prescription was? The poems, nonetheless, are rather different. What differences do you see that are salient for understanding each poem?
4. *Tintern Abbey* is written as a meditative argument leading to a blessing. What is a blessing? What confers the power to bless in this case? Is the course of the argument clear? Is it straightforward or does it proceed by fits and starts? Is there any characteristic use of metaphor in the poem? Locate five important metaphors and explain their importance in the poem. Does the poem rely importantly on metonyms as well?
5. Explain the function of "frost" in *Frost at Midnight*. Explain the function of silence and of the "stranger" that hovers in the grate. The poet compares himself to the "stranger". What is the point of the comparison? What comment does it make upon the poetic imagination that informs the poem itself?
6. Comment on the phrase *But how could I forget thee?* in the sonnet *Surprised by Joy*. Does it evince an ambiguity and if so, how does the ambiguity work? What comment does the poem seem to make upon the place of guilt in grief?
7. The second stanza of *The Solitary Reaper* might well be omitted and the result would still hold the appearance of a complete poem. What does it contribute to the poem as it stands. Reaping was normally a communal activity and a solitary reaper in a "Vale profound" was a conventional image of death. In the poem, her song is inaudible, but the poet surmises that its theme is loss and sorrow. Is the poet, then, lucky to carry the song in his heart or unfortunate?
8. A paradox haunts Wordsworth's poetry: Many poems seem to say that Nature has blessings to confer and that we miss them by being out of touch with Nature; at the same time, others seem to say that contiguity with Nature can be deadly. How do you resolve the paradox?
9. *A Slumber Did my Spirit Seal* seems at first glance a remarkably simple poem but upon examination reveals a number of complexities. How would you account for

- them? The first stanza is rife with metaphor, the second arguably devoid of metaphor. How does this fact contribute to the meaning of the poem? We are all, living and dead, whirled round with rocks and trees; why does the line carry an especial poignancy?
- Coleridge claimed that *Khubla Khan* was a fragment, a work written in haste after a vivid dream. His work was interrupted and after the interruption, he had lost all sense of the dream and its inspiration. Does the work seem like a fragment or a complete poem to you? What relationships obtain among the features of the imaginary landscape in which the "pleasure-dome" is situated? Can a "pleasure-dome" be "stately"? What effect does the Damsel with the dulcimer have upon the poet, and why should anyone be terrified by his appearance after hearing the song?

## Lecture 14

Wordsworth and Coleridge (continued)

## Lecture 15

Wordsworth and Coleridge (continued)

Reading: Lakoff and Turner. "Image Schemas in Poetry."

## Lecture 16

Keats, John. *In Drear-Nighted December*.

———. *What the Thrush Said*. (Both in e-mail distribution)

———. *When I Have Fears*.

———. *La Belle Dame sans Merci*.

———. *Ode to a Nightingale*.

———. *Ode on Melancholy*.

———. *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

———. *To Autumn*.

———. *Bright Star*.

- There is a significant ambiguity about the striking phrase "the feel of not to feel it" in *In Drear-Nighted December*. It could refer to the existence of the tree and brook or the anguish of the boy and girl. To which do you think it refers and why? The line is reminiscent of the line ascribed to the soul in Marvell's *Dialogue*: "I feel, that cannot feel, the pain." Both engage paradox. How do they differ and why?
- In *Ode to a Nightingale*, what is the meaning of "numbness pains my sense"? Can numbness be painful? What figure of speech is "drowsy numbness"? Is the numbness sleepy? Envy, we know, is a bad thing, but why is its alternative "too much happiness" and what is it too much for? What is the progression of thought in the stanzas? What is the force of the exclamation "Already with thee!" Is the poet with the bird or does it just mark excitement at the possibility, recalling the exclamation point in Donne's *Elegy XIX*, "Full nakedness!", where the mistress is not yet naked. Why is the bird "Immortal"? Surely, Nightingales die. How do you interpret the feeling inspired by the bird's song, "Now more than ever seems it rich to die . . ."? In the bible Ruth did not stand in tears amid the alien corn but chose and bravely endured to forsake her idolatrous people. Why has Keats invoked her, only to change the story? Why is "alien corn" [corn = grain in British English] a better choice than, say, "alien land" (leaving considerations of rhyme out of account).
- From something offered by a creature of nature, the poet turns in *Ode on a Grecian Urn* to a work of human artifice. Is he after the same thing as before? Why is the urn likened to an "unravished" bride? Are brides ravished? Who or what will eventually ravish the urn? Not silence or slow time; the urn has been adopted by them. What the urn depicts is not allied to slow time; it is removed from time altogether. How important is this in the development of the poem? In what sense is the urn a sylvan historian? Why can a work of visual art tell a tale more sweetly than a work of verbal art? The figures on the urn escape time, slow or rapid, by escaping life and warmth

- altogether; are they to be envied for avoiding disappointments and having no need to grieve? The town is not on the urn but surmised by the poet. It is "desolate", even as the magic casements surmised by the poet in response to the nightingale's song were "forlorn". Do the two poems share a pattern of development, then? What is the force of "peaceful citadel" and "cold pastoral"-akin to the nightingale's "plaintive anthem", each an oxymoron? The poem introduces its conclusion with the notion that eternity "teases us out of thought as does eternity". It is a good thing to be teased out of thought or not? Is the famous motto, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" teasing us? The quotation marks in some editions extend only around the motto; in other editions, on equally good authority, they extend to the end of the poem. Where would you place them and why?
4. *To Autumn* relies predominantly on visual images in the first two stanzas and upon auditory images in the last. Why do you think the shift occurs? Is the ambiguity of the phrase "the maturing sun" (it may be maturing, it may be maturing other things) of value to the poem? The bees have been deluded in the last lines of stanza one; are they the better for their delusion? The harvest in stanza two does not simply destroy what is ripe; it creates a "store", even as mankind creates a store, and carelessly "spares" the life of flowers. Are these images just or are we meant to share the bee's illusion? The gathering swallows of the last line are in preparation to fly away, abandoning the cold for southern warmth. What comment does this imply upon the value of Autumn's music?

## Lecture 17

Keats (continued)

## Lecture 18

Yeats, William Butler. *The Coat*.

———. *The Choice*.

———. *Politics*.

———. *Adam's Curse*.

———. *Wild Swans at Coole*.

———. *Easter 1916*.

———. *The Second Coming*.

———. *A Prayer for my Daughter*.

———. *Sailing to Byzantium*.

———. *Leda and the Swan*.

1. Why is Adam's curse not Eve's curse? How does Adam's curse, as described, affect women? Do you think that the poet means what he says when he asserts (indirectly) that scrubbing pavements (woman's work) or breaking stones (for roads) is not so toilsome as writing poetry? By extension, the woman who "labors to be beautiful" is working harder than the kitchen-floor scrubber. Do you think this idea is valid? What do you make of the fact that the poet insults those who think otherwise as "the noisy set / Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen / The martyrs call the world." If you disagree about the labor that goes into beauty are you part of the set? What principle of selection governs Yeats's choice in listing those who are called "the world"? Who are the martyrs who call them so and what are they martyred by? Why was love reckoned among the labors? In the poem's view, is it still to be reckoned among them? Elucidate the metaphor about the moon and the shell and discuss its aptness to this poem.
2. Compare Yeats's swans (in *The Wild Swans at Coole*) with Keats's nightingale. Do you think that these are the same nine-and-fifty swans that Yeats counted nineteen years ago? What is the effect of calling the water in which they swim "cold, companionable streams"? How do they contrast with the man for whom "All's changed"? The contrast between bird and man is complete by the end of the fourth stanza; what does the fifth add to the poem?

3. Yeats was a famous Irish poet when the ill-fated Dublin uprising took place in 1916; many involved were known to him, some intimately, but he did not approve of their action. It would have been ugly to condemn them in their martyrdom for the cause of Irish liberty but Yeats could not exonerate them, either. He might have kept silent, but he chose to write this poem. How well does it answer his dilemma? At the outset, those in the uprising have "vivid" faces-faces filled with life but by the third stanza they have been "enchanted to a stone". The contrast between "vivid" faces and "grey" houses now becomes a contrast between an enduring stone and things that change from minute to minute. Discuss both contrasts and what it means for the poem to turn from one to the other.
4. In alluding to the perennial or the most troubling problems of mankind, poets like Shakespeare and Donne, even when approaching secular subjects, nonetheless depended for their allusions upon a common stock of references to Judeo-Christian belief. References of this kind are muted in later poets, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, or largely absent, as is the case with Keats. Yeats, coming later, took some of these references up again but incorporated them in a self-created system of spiritual understanding which took Judeo-Christian symbolisms to be one-half of a set of contraries, each expressive of the spiritual limits between which human life must run its course.

Yeats believed that Christianity had weakened its hold on the life and imagination of mankind and that this was because it gave a distorted view of things, representing only one side of humanity's two-fold spiritual and imaginative capacities. Prompted by this belief, he developed the notion that the collective spiritual life of humanity moved through a series of phases, in which each age drew spiritual nourishment from both sides, but in differing measures. One side would be virtually all-encompassing, then the other would gradually encroach upon it; the two would enter a phase of relative balance (Yeats located the last balanced phase at the time of the Emperor Justinian who ruled the Empire from Byzantium in the sixth century AD), then move through phases in which the second side is increasingly dominant, until a phase is reached where it becomes virtually all-encompassing, in a reversal of the imaginative and spiritual values of the first phase. The whole process would continue from this new point, moving through phases back to balance and one to recover the initial position.

It does not matter how seriously Yeats took this notion. The point is that he believed it impossible to write important poetry without an extensive system of metaphors and allusions behind it, and the system that he created-using elements from various sources-was a way of getting Judeo-Christianity into his poetry without subscribing to it. The reader of the poetry did not have to grasp all the sources of the allusions and symbols to understand it-anymore than Shakespeare's readers had to know the theological writings that gave authority to the doctrine of "prefiguring" that underlies sonnet CVI.

5. *The Second Coming*, written in 1919 at the conclusion of the First World War, raises the expectation by its title that the one who comes will be Jesus, the Redeemer. Startlingly, the poem fuses the idea of Jesus's coming with the Beast of the Apocalypse, not with the Redeemer. The Beast, in Yeats's view, is a twisted version of the antitype to the Judeo-Christian side of things, twisted because the Book of Revelations was written in opposition to the antitype at the time when that side was virtually all-encompassing; its vision could perceive its alternative only as monstrous. Do you think that knowing why Yeats presents the Redeemer as the Beast makes an important difference to understanding the poem? What is "the ceremony of innocence"? Does it relate to the ceremonious quality of love-as-labor in *Adam's Curse*? What does the "twenty-centuries of stony sleep" refer to? Why is the gaze of the sun "blank and pitiless"? (We might consider comparing it with the sun of Herrick's *To the Virgins* or with Marvell's *sun*, which is ours and which we can make run. The poem has a dramatic movement: the ruminations of the poem are deeply troubling, there is a moment of prophetic inspiration, and the "I" of the poem is left with knowledge. How would you characterize this movement? Is the knowledge beneficial?

6. *Sailing to Byzantium* takes us to the time of Julian and the last "balance-point" in this cycle of history. The city is supposed to exemplify successfully a way of life in which art and nature, the matter of human life and its conceptions of the world around it, are in easy relationship. In Yeats's *Byzantium*, human beings understand that by the activity of their intellect they create the world in which they live. Once again, is it necessary to know Yeats's view of spiritual history to understand the poem? What is "the artifice of eternity"? How does the golden bird of the last stanza compare with Keats's nightingale, Marvell's bird with silver wings (in *The Garden*) or Keats's urn? Is it a "monument of unaging intellect"-the sort of thing neglected in the first stanza? How does such a monument differ from an "unaging monument of intellect"?
7. *Two Songs from a Play* are prologue and epilogue of a play to which they are only loosely connected. They show Yeats at his most allusive. The first song concerns the birth of Jesus and the initiation of the current cycle of the phases of history, which (after twenty centuries) are drawing to their close. Yeats appropriated the term *Magnus Annus*, or Great Year, to each full cycle of phases. The last cycle of phases, in Yeats's view, ended with the all-encompassing antitype of Greco-Roman civilization, and what Yeats has done in the first stanza of the first song is to use the imagery of Dionysus, a resurrection-god of that earlier cycle, to describe the advent of the new, which it sees as a barely penetrable mystery. The second stanza of the first song develops the notion that, for all the difference between the last cycle of phases, which is just closing, and the next cycle (our cycle, which is now closing as well), history in one form or another can only repeat itself. The first stanza of the second song presents the advent of Jesus as an expression of the pity of the god-image for mankind's inescapable lot-to have darkness usurp upon light at the end of every cycle. The last stanza performs much the same function as the last stanza of the first song. How intelligible is it without what precedes it? What is the meaning of the last line?
8. Trace the course of reflection in its details through the stanzas of *Among School Children*. Does the "kind old nun" benefit the children (the scene is an elementary school for girls, which Yeats is visiting) by teaching them "in the best modern way"? What do you make of the description of the school's curriculum? What is the force of the image of the "scarecrow" which figures prominently in two stanzas. What are the birds that these scarecrows are meant to scare away? The poem concerns old men, nuns and mothers? How do the nuns and mothers complement each other in the poem? At the end certain images are addressed as "Presences". What is the purpose in addressing them in this way? What does the poet mean by his last two questions? How do you interpret the last line of the poem?

## Lecture 19

Yeats (continued)

## Lecture 20

Arnold, Matthew. *Dover Beach*.

Stevens, Wallace. *The Snow Man*.

———. *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*.

———. *Sunday Morning*.

———. *Anecdote of the Jar*.

———. *Peter Quince at the Clavier*.

———. *The Idea of Order at Key West*.

———. *The Poems of our Climate*.

———. *Of Mere Being*.

———. *Tea at the Palaz of Hoon*.

———. *On the Manner of Addressing Clouds*.

———. *Of Heaven considered as a Tomb*.

———. *The Death of a Soldier*.  
———. *Poem with Rhythms*.

### **Lecture 21**

Stevens (continued)

### **Lecture 22**

Eliot, T. S. *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*.  
———. *The Waste Land*.

### **Lecture 23**

Frost, Robert. *The Oven Bird*.  
———. *Birches*.  
———. *Stopping by Woods*.  
———. *Acquainted with the Night*.  
———. *Neither Far Out nor In Deep*.  
———. *Design*.  
———. *The Silken Tent*.  
———. *Come In*.  
———. *Never Again Would Birds*.  
———. *The Most of It*.  
———. *Directive*.

### **Lecture 24**

Frost (continued)

Auden, W. H. *As I Walked Out One Evening*.  
———. *Funeral Blues*.  
———. *Lullaby*.  
———. *Musée des Beaux Arts*.  
———. *In Memory of W. B. Yeats*.

### **Lecture 25**

Auden (continued)

### **Lecture 26**

Larkin, Philip. *Church Going*.  
———. *An Arundel Tomb*.  
———. *The Whitsun Weddings*.  
———. *Talking in Bed*.  
———. *Aubade*.  
———. *I Remember*.  
———. *High Windows*.

### **Lecture 27:**