First Year Seminar:

Poetry and War

Fall 2019

Professor Liana Theodoratou
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Tuesdays, 3:30-6:00 p.m.
Office Hours: Wednesdays, 3:00-5:00 & by appointment

Trajectories:

There can be no poetry that is not about destruction and survival, and this is especially the case in the poetry of war. We might even say that the poetry of war tells us what is true of all poetry: that it bears witness to the enigmatic relation between death and survival, loss and life, mourning and courage. It also tells us that what dies, is lost, and mourned within poetry—even as it survives, lives on, and struggles to exist—is poetry itself. This is why the poetry of war so often speaks of the death, if not the impossibility of poetry. It announces the inability of poetry to tell a story: the story of war, for example. Nevertheless, what makes poetry poetry is its capacity to bear the traces of what it cannot say, to go on, in the face of this inability, to suggest its potential for speaking. What is at stake is the emergence and survival of a poetry that bears witness to what history has silenced, to all the vanished that, arising from the darkest nights of memory, haunt us, and encourage us to remember the deaths and losses for which we remain, still today, responsible.

This is the lesson of twentieth century poets who speak of war. Responding to the violence and trauma of war, to the deaths and suffering that result from wartime conflict, these poets—and the list includes, among others, Wilfred Owen, Paul Celan, Ingeborg Bachmann, Anna Akhmatova, Yannis Ritsos, William Butler Yeats, Etel Adnan, Bertolt Brecht, Paul Eluard, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Mahmoud Darwish—seek to offer us a critical genealogy of war. They stage and enact their own troubled understanding of the capacities and incapacities of poetry in the face of disaster and catastrophe, even as they assert the necessity of remembering the uncertain traces and legacies of war, and of doing so without traducing or reducing the experience of war, without betraying the dead.

This is a First-Year Seminar and is intended to encourage students to analyze more challenging texts and to develop oral, research, and writing skills. Students are strongly encouraged to use the University’s resources: Bobst Library, the Writing Center, and the College Advising Center.

Disability Disclosure Statement: Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is www.nyu.edu/csd. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.
**Required Texts:**

Available at NYU Bookstore:

Etel Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse*, The Post-Apollo Press  
Bertolt Brecht, *War Primer*, Verso  
Siegfried Sassoon, *The War Poems*, Faber and Faber  

All other poems will be available on NYU Classes

**Assignments: Readings will be fifty to sixty pages per week (Poetry and Secondary Literature)**

September 3: Introduction. Takis Sinopoulos, *The Survivor*  
September 10: Homer, *The Iliad*  
September 17: Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon  
September 24: W.B. Yeats, Nikiforos Vrettakos  
October 1: T.S. Eliot, Odysseus Elytis  
October 8: Paul Celan, Ingeborg Bachmann  
October 22: Anna Ahmatova, Ilya Ehrenburg  
October 29: Bertolt Brecht, Gwendolyn Brooks  
November 5: Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, L.S. Senghor  
November 12: Nazim Hikmet, Yannis Ritsos  
November 19: Cesar Vallejo, H.D. Auden  
November 26: The poets of the Vietnam War  
December 3: Etel Adnan, Mahmoud Darwish  
December 10: Conclusions. Alice Oswald, *Memorial*
**Musts:**
1. Do all the reading.
2. Come to all the seminars.
3. Talk a lot in class.
4. Give two formal oral presentations.
5. Write two 5-page papers.
6. Write a final paper (10 pages).

Class attendance, preparedness and participation 20%
*(All students are required to speak in class every week about the week’s readings)*

Two oral presentations: 1st Presentation 10%
2nd Presentation 15%

Two 5-page papers: 1st Paper 10%
2nd Paper 15%

Final Paper (due December 20th) 30%