First Year Seminar - FYSEM-UA 746

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:

- Bertolt Brecht, *War Primer*, Verso
- Siegfried Sassoon, *The War Poems*, Faber and Faber

All other poems and secondary literature will be available on NYU Classes.

**Assignments: Readings will be 60-80 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:

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Two 5-page papers: 1st Paper 15%
2nd Paper 30%

Final Paper (due December 20th)

Oral Presentations are based on the reading you will have for the week assigned. You will be asked to present a specific poet, or specific poems or themes from a poet, or a comparison between two poets. You will be assessed on your knowledge of the texts, your ability to substantiate your argument with textual evidence (quotes, passages, etc.) to form a well-rounded and successful argument, and your ability to captivate your audience and create a fruitful discussion in class.

Specific paper guidelines will vary with each assignment. You will meet with me individually to discuss prospective paper topics and the texts you will use in your paper. I will also review a draft of your papers, and provide feedback and commentary before you submit your final version of each paper.