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**ENG 411: Senior Seminar**  
Van Etten-Lacey House  
Block 1: Sept. 1 – Sept. 24, 2014

“While the hemlock was being prepared, Socrates was learning a melody on the flute. ‘What use will that be to you?’ he was asked. ‘At least I will learn this melody before I die’.”

—*Emil Cioran*

**Course Description:**

You are entering the final phase of your English and Creative Writing degree here at Cornell. We have all dedicated much of our lives to the study of literature and writing. And I assume that we have all heard questions similar to the one posed to Socrates above: what use will that be to you? Socrates’ answer suggests that learning is its own end. “Use” is not the reason we learn; we learn for learning’s sake. For us English majors, the answer is an appealing one. But is it the only answer or the right answer? Why do we read? Why do we write? Of what use is the study of literature? And is it of use to anyone other than ourselves?

This block I would like to examine these questions and see if we can come to any answers. To help us in our quest, we will read a range of writer-critics (a breed that some say is unfortunately disappearing from our ranks) to see what answers they have posed along the way. We will pay particular attention to writers who have written what we might call critical autobiographies. In other words, these writers examine not only the work of others but also turn the lens on their own work—writers who tell their own story of how they came to their understanding of literature. These critics will also allow us a particular angle to approach the current “crisis in the humanities” debates. What value do the humanities have in a contemporary, democratic society?

As a lens to explore the question, we will look specifically at the work of several contemporary poets and poetry critics. Of the arts, poetry has perhaps the most divided reception, ranging from a useless art to the most essential component of culture. Our responses to the question of poetry, then, will be a kind of gauge of how we think about the use of art and literature in general.

Your primary writing project for the block will be to do the same as the critics we read—to write an in-depth analysis of your relationship to literature. This block is a chance to tell your story, to answer that question you’ve undoubtedly faced from family and friends: what good is literature?

**Required Texts:**

Alice Fulton, *Feeling as a Foreign Language*, Graywolf  
Moodle handouts

**Objectives:**

This course supports the following educational outcomes of Cornell College:

**Knowledge:**

- Students should be familiar with some of the fundamental theoretical issues concerning contemporary literature and culture.
- Students will integrate and apply knowledge from disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives in the arts, humanities, sciences and social sciences. They will reflect on their course of English studies at Cornell and from a focused area of study within the field.
- Students will develop the means to articulate thoughtful responses to literature and theory.  
Students will consider and prepare for the issues and decisions they will face in writing their senior project.

**Intercultural Literacy:**

- Students will use literature as a means connect with diverse ideas and with people whose experiences differ from their own and that may be separated from them by time, space, or culture.

**Communication:**

- Students will speak and write clearly, listen and read actively, and engage with others in productive dialogue.
- Students will develop and articulate a theory of literature and/or writing.

**Vocation:**

- Students will discover and prepare for the range of opportunities and challenges that await them beyond their college experience.

**Overview:**

There will be several types of assignments during this course. You will notice that all of these overlap substantially. In some ways, you are taking different approaches to respond to one large question: why do we read, write, study literature

- **English Major essay (10%):** You will write an essay (but I will ask for your permission to share this letter with the department as a whole, so you should consider the department as recipients of the letter) that reflects on your major should map out the meaning of doing English studies for you. How did you shape your English career? How did it shape you (think holistically, but consider specific examples of what/how English classes taught you)? What are your best, most risky, most surprising, etc. accomplishments in the field? Are there areas which attracted you, but which you didn't get a chance to explore? Where do you hope to go with your major? Your goal in this essay is to reflect specifically on your experience and

work at Cornell. Because this is a personal essay, the form it takes will be up to you, but it should be a coherent, developed essay.

- **Participation (10%):** This is a senior seminar. You will be the driving force for much of the discussion and learning that takes place. To that end, I expect you to read the assigned work and to come to class prepared for discussion of a high level.
- **Teaching presentation (20%):** You will all be deciding some of the texts that we read this block. By the end of week 2, you will decide on an author that you would like to teach. You will select an excerpt from this author and share it with the class. You then will have a class session to discuss this author with your peers. This will also be an opportunity for you to share the ideas you are developing about the role of literature. You should consider the questions we will be discussing as a whole: why is the work of value? Why would it be worthwhile to teach? Etc.
- **Essay (40%):** The bulk of this block will be spent developing your own theory of aesthetics and literature. You will be using the readings as a kind of model for a personal/academic essay (that is, these essays will be more personal than you are perhaps used to in literature classes but they will still be directed to an academic audience) to write a 10-15 page essay developing your ideas about the role of literature in your life and in contemporary culture.

You will also write a short version of this essay to present to your peers at the end of class. The presentation essay will be for a 10 minute presentation followed by questions and discussion.

- **Prospectus (20%):** One of our primary goals this block is to prepare you for the work you will do in your senior workshop—and beyond. You will develop a prospectus defining your goals for that workshop and a preliminary bibliography for the project you are going to undertake.

#### Guidelines for the Prospectus

For students in the creative writing track:

In 2 double-spaced pages, describe the project you wish to complete, addressing the questions below:

What central idea/question do you want to engage with through your creative work? Where did your interest in this project emerge? What reading, or other preparation, do you intend to do? What medium will you use (e.g., a sonnet sequence, a novel, a short story)? What do you expect to gain by completing this project? What do you hope to contribute with this project?

For students in the Literature or Film tracks:

In 2 double-spaced pages, describe the project you wish to complete, address the questions below:

What central idea/question do you plan to explore? Where did your interest in this project emerge? What reading, or other preparation, do you intend to do? What do

you expect to gain by completing this project? What do you hope to contribute with this project?

**Grading:**

Please note that the percentages listed by each assignment are a rubric and are not absolute. As a senior class, my expectations are high. I will grade you holistically for the work you do throughout the block and these percentages represent a rough guide for the relative weight for each component. Do not spend your time counting grade points for the block. Instead, do your very best and talk with me at any point if you want a sense of how things stand, or if you have any questions or concerns.

**Policies and Procedures:**

**Attendance:**

An essential aspect of this course is class discussion. Your input is critical for everyone else in the class. Because of this, you are expected to attend all class sessions, to come prepared, and to participate fully in all activities. Please arrive **on time** for class; late arrivals are disturbing to class and may be considered an absence from class. If you must miss class, you are still responsible for any information, assignments and deadlines.

**Communication:** I primarily use e-mail for communication, so students must check their Cornell *at least* once a day (I'd strongly suggest morning and afternoon or evening).

**Paper Policies:**

Students are required to submit all assignments on the due date; late work is unacceptable. All papers should use a standard 12-point font, double-spaced with one inch margins. All other MLA guidelines should be followed, especially citation rules for in-text citations and works cited pages. Written work will be submitted electronically but should be submitted in the same format as you would submit a hard copy. If you need help, must miss class, or have trouble with a deadline, contact me ASAP!

**Plagiarism:**

Academic honesty requires that all work presented in this class be the student's own work. Evidence of plagiarism (use of another's ideas, data, and statements without acknowledgement and/or extensive use of another's ideas, data and statements with only minimal acknowledgement) will result in serious penalties.

**General Comments:**

Please feel free to talk with me at any time if you have questions about the course, feedback you are receiving, or how you are doing in general. If you find you are having difficulties of any kind, please come to see me as soon as possible so that we can begin to solve any problems before they become insurmountable. The same is true with deadlines: if you have any kind of challenge, be sure to talk with me. I will always try to help, but I need to know the situation before I can do anything.

**Course Schedule:**

Class will meet every day, Monday through Friday, 9:30-11:00 and 1:00 – 3:00. The following is a guideline but is subject to change. If you miss class, you will still be responsible for any assignments and information; be sure to check with me or one of your peers to find out what you missed. Readings are to be done **before** the class session listed. Before the beginning of each week, I will post a more detailed reading list on moodle. Any reading with (moodle) following it will be posted on moodle. I expect you to print these out before class and be ready to discuss them the same as if they were in your textbook. A blank session on the schedule DOES NOT mean we will not meet—I have designed this block with a good deal of flexibility to allow your work to dictate much of our direction.

	WEEK 1
Mon. 9/1	AM: Course Overview and Introductions  PM: No class
Tue. 9/2	AM:  PM: Calvino: “Why Read the Classics” (M); J. Hillis Miller “The Transnational University” (M); Alice Fulton “Preamble,” “Process,” and “Poetics”
Wed. 9/3	AM:  PM: Alice Fulton, “Her Moment of Brocade,” “Praxis”; Emily Dickinson poems (M) Cleanth Brooks; TS Eliot (M)
Thur. 9/4	AM:  PM: Alice Fulton, “Premises”; Shelley Due: rough draft of English Major essay; bring copies to class
Fri. 9/5	AM: Workshop and discuss essays  PM:

	WEEK 2
Mon. 9/8	AM: Conferences  PM: Marjorie Perloff, “Differential Reading,” and “Crisis in the Humanities” (M); Wordsworth; Whitman (M)
Tue. 9/9	AM: Conferences  PM: Rachel Blau Duplessis, part I (M)
Wed. 9/10	AM:  PM: Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Part II (M)

	Due: Draft of Prospectus by 5 PM
Thur. 9/11	AM:  PM: Alicia Ostriker, Jorie Graham, Harryette Mullen, Helene Cixous (M)
Fri. 9/12	AM: Workshop Prospectuses  PM: DUE: Sunday by 5 PM: Draft of longer essays

	WEEK 3
Mon. 9/15	AM: Conferences  PM: Dean Young, Charles Simic, Frank O'Hara (M) Due by 5 PM: selections for teaching presentations; e-mail to your peers
Tue. 9/16	AM: Conferences  PM: Workshop essays
Wed. 9/17	AM:  PM: Workshop essays
Thur. 9/18	AM: Teaching Presentations  PM: Teaching Presentations
Fri. 9/19	AM: Teaching Presentations  PM:

	WEEK 4
Mon. 9/22	AM: Conferences  PM: Conferences
Tue. 9/23	AM:  PM: Presentations
Wed. 9/24	DUE: