

## New World Poetics Professor Matthew Garrett

### Course Overview

God and money, love and beauty, slavery and freedom, war and death, nation and empire: the themes of early American poetry will carry us from London coffee-houses to Quaker meeting-houses, from Massachusetts drawing rooms to Jamaican slave-whipping rooms. Our texts will range from pristine salon couplets to mud-bespattered street ballads, from sweetest love poems to bitterest satire. Digging deeply into the English-language poetry written, read, and circulated after the first English settlement in North America, we will trace the sometimes secret connections between history and poetic form, and we will listen to what these links can tell us about poetry and politics, life and literature, in our own time. Our poets ignored false divisions between art and society, and so will we.

This is a course about the relationship between poetry and history, about the ways literary culture both reflects and participates in changes in social life. It is about why poetry matters: why it mattered to writers and readers between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, and why it matters to us. We will read for pleasure and for form: for what is specifically poetic about poetry, for what spurs us to read further and what tempts us to put our books down. And we will read for history. Imagine a historian whose only sources (or just about) were the poems on this syllabus. What kind of history would s/he write? What kind of history do these sources reveal that others might conceal? We are reading chronologically backwards. Why? Because we will be provoked to think not just about influence, but also about innovation. And because our reading of the poems will be energized not by the fact that we are moving forward in time, but rather by our efforts to see patterns and discontinuities in poetic tradition.

### TEXTS (available at Broad Street Books)

Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Back Bay Books) - DCP

John Gilmore, *The Poetics of Empire: A Study of James Grainger's The Sugar-Cane*  
(Athlone; also available electronically through Olin Library) - PE

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Selected Poems* (Penguin) - LSP

John Milton, *The Major Works* (Oxford UP) - JM

David S. Shields, ed. *American Poetry: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Library of America) - AP

Phillis Wheatley, *Complete Writings* (Penguin) - WCW

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings* (W.W. Norton) - LG

A course reader with additional poems (marked below with an asterisk [\*]).

## ASSIGNMENTS

*Reading.* Read and reread. Then read again. Makes notes in the margins, underline and circle words and phrases: be an active reader. Do this with each text in advance of our session, and arrive with at least one *point* to contribute to our discussion. You should pay special attention to the form of the poems: you should arrive ready to *describe* the poem in terms of features such as meter, rhyme scheme, the length or variety of the line, etc. -- all of which we will discuss together in class.

*Writing.* A) *Two essays.* You will write two shorter essays, of 5-7pp. and 10-12pp., respectively, on either a topic I provide or one that you have discussed with me.

B) *Exercises.* You will complete four short exercises in which you will mark up a poem to provide an account of its formal properties and provide a short commentary on what you notice.

C) *Archival presentations.* Each member of the seminar will pair up with another to give a 10- to 15-minute presentation (with a write-up you will turn in) on a text that the two of you have located in one of the online archival databases accessible through the Wesleyan Library.

*Foundation option.* This course offers a foundation option. If you choose the foundation option, you will write an additional longer essay on a topic you have discussed with me, and you will turn in components of the project -- outline, annotated bibliography, and final draft -- during the term. We will also meet throughout the term to discuss your project, and your writing in general.

## GRADES

The final grade breaks down like this:

60%: Two essays (5-7pp., 20%; 10-12pp., 40%)

20%: Archival presentation, including write-up

20%: Written exercises

Students who take the foundation option will have an adjusted grade breakdown, which we will establish at the start of the course.

## SCHEDULE

Introduction: Poetry and History

### Week 1: **Whitman: Appetite, Pleasure, Heroism 1**

*Leaves of Grass* (1855 ed., LG 662-751), 1855 Preface (616-36)

### Week 2 – **Whitman: Appetite, Pleasure, Heroism 2**

“Children of Adam” (LG 78-96), “Calamus” (LG 96-116), “Salut au Monde!” (117-126), “Song of the Open Road” (126-135), “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” (135-140), “Song of the Answerer” (141-144), “Our Old Feuillage” (145-149), “A Song of Joys” (149-155), “Song of the Broad-Axe” (155-164), “Song of the Exposition” (165-173), “Song of the Redwood-Tree” (173-177), “A Song for Occupations” (177-183), “A Song of the Rolling Earth” (184-189), “Youth, Day, Old Age and Night” (189)

Whitman’s comments on his poems (783-788)

**Week 3 – Dickinson: Soul and Form 1**

Read around and arrive with your favorites for discussion. Please also read the following: “There is a word” (DCP 9), “Our lives are Swiss” (DCP 41), “I’ve heard an Organ talk, sometimes” (DCP 87), “I’m ‘wife’ – I’ve finished that” (DCP 94), “I stole them from a Bee” (DCP 94), “Least Rivers – docile to some sea” (DCP 98), “I like a look of Agony” (DCP 110), “Wild Nights – Wild Nights!” (DCP 114), “ ‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers” (DCP 116), “Read – Sweet – how others – strove” (DCP 119), “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (DCP 128), “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” (DCP 133), “The difference between Despair” (DCP 144), “He fumbles at your Soul” (DCP 148), “We grow accustomed to the Dark” (DCP 200), “Knows how to forget!” (DCP 207-208), “Much Madness is divinest Sense” (DCP 209), “Going to Him! Happy letter!” and “Going – to – Her!” (DCP 237-239), “This World is not Conclusion” (DCP 243), “To fill a Gap” (DCP 266), “The Brain, within its Groove” (DCP 270-271), “They shut me up in Prose” (DCP 302), “The Way I read a Letter’s – this” (DCP 314-315), “Pain – has an Element of Blank” (DCP 323), “I dwell in Possibility” (DCP 327), “Wolfe demanded during dying” (DCP 336), “They say that ‘Time assuages’” (DCP 339), “Publication – is the Auction” (DCP 348)

Paul Fussell, from *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*\*

**Week 4 -- Dickinson: Soul and Form 2**

As for week 4, read around and arrive with your favorites for discussion. We will continue where we left off, but you should also read the following: “No Prisoner be” (DCP 353), “Defrauded I a Butterfly” (DCP 358), “It dropped so low – in my Regard” (DCP 366), “From Blank to Blank” (DCP 373), “They have a little Odor – that to me” (DCP 382), “Split the Lark – and you’ll find the Music” (DCP 412), “Crisis is a Hair” (DCP 421), “Faith – is the Pierless Bridge” (DCP 431), “Patience – has a quiet Outer” (DCP 435), “The Chemical conviction” (DCP 446-447), “We meet as Sparks – Diverging Flints” (DCP 448), “There is a Zone whose even Years” (DCP 481), “Perception of an object costs” (DCP 486-487), “Revolution is the Pod” (DCP 490-491), “I am afraid to own a Body” (DCP 493-494), “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant” (DCP 506-507), “Our own possessions – though our own” (DCP 533), “A word is dead” (DCP 534-535), “There is no Frigate like a Book” (DCP 553), “The competitions of the sky” (DCP 629), “All things swept sole away” (DCP 635), “Witchcraft was hung, in History” (DCP 656), “There are two Mays” (DCP 666), “Oh Future! thou secreted place” (DCP 670), “A Word made Flesh is seldom” (DCP 675-676), “The mob within the heart” (DCP 707)

**Week 5 – Longfellow: History/Poetry as Commodity**

Longfellow, *Evangeline*

**Week 6 – Slavery and the Circulation of Poems**

Hannah More, “The Black Slave Trade,” “The Sorrows of Yamba,” “The Feast of Freedom;” selections of children’s anti-slavery verse;\* Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point”\*; blackface minstrel songs\*

**Week 7 – Dawn or Yawn America**

William Blake, “America;”\* “Yankee Doodle” (*AP* 616-620); Hannah Griffitts, all selections (*AP* 558-63); Joel Barlow, “The Hasty-Pudding” (*AP* 799-808); Royall Tyler, “The Origin of Evil: An Elegy” (*AP* 809-12); Philip Freneau, all selections (*AP* 723-57)

**Week 8 – Wheatley: Imagination, Imitation, and Slavery**

Alexander Pope, from *An Essay on Man*; Wheatley, selections (*WCW*); Jupiter Hammon, “An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley” (*AP* 477-80)

**Week 9 – Empire and the Poetry of the Plantation**

Introduction (*PE* 1-85), *The Sugar-Cane* Preface and Books I and II

**Week 10 - Empire and the Poetry of the Plantation**

*The Sugar-Cane* Books III IV; George Berkeley, “Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America” (*AP* 346)

**Week 11 – Puritan Poetics**

Edward Taylor, from *Preparatory Meditations (First Series)* (*AP* 164-178); Edward Taylor, from *Preparatory Meditations (Second Series)* (*AP* 178-191); Benjamin Harris, from the *New England Primer* (*AP* 221-23)

Relevant scriptural passages

**Week 12 – Milton**

*Paradise Lost* Books I (“The Verse,” “The Argument, and ll. 1-49), III (*JM* 355-57, 401-20), IV (*JM* 420-45), IX (*JM* 523-52), XI, and XII (*JM* 580-618)