

Fall/Winter 2015-2016

AP/EN 4163 6.0A (Y)

Visionary Literature: From Dante to Bob Dylan

Course Director:

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Office Hours: TBA

Delivery Format:

Seminar

Time:

F 11:30-2:30

Description:

This course examines and explores the visionary prophetic tradition in selected representative poets and prose writers. The visionary element in literature is an often heretical tradition of ineffable experiences, trauma, trance, transcendental and metaphysical awareness, engagement, inspiration and speculation. Innovative techniques are often developed to express the apocalyptic or Beatrician moment. Searching for forms of breakthrough to other states of consciousness the poets and prose writers may explore alternative imaginative conditions through Gnosticism, alchemy, hermeticism, and kabbalah. These modes of consciousness often form a counter-tradition to official religions. Writers often articulate a sense of transcendental pressures on their minds and sensibilities, and on their literary form and articulations. The prophetic streak or spirit in writers can lead to proclamation and denunciation. We will be examining the nature of inspiration and what Hildegard von Bingen calls "greening". It is one of the thematic centres of this course that by studying and exploring these visionary traditions we will discover keys to all imaginative literature. The spiritual traditions may in fact underscore the mythic, imaginative traditions of literature.

Some literary artists may rest more comfortably in the dominant spiritual traditions of their day; but others proceed to reinvent the contexts of inwardness and inspiration, often exploding both the poetics and the religious dogma, the inauthentic social structures and repressive political and cultural systems, that they encountered. Writers driven towards finding ways of expressing the ineffable will often not fit into any tradition other than the one they invent for themselves. What are the words we may identify with the prophetic tradition? Trust, passion, belief, confidence (rather than certainty), vision, stamina, eloquence, and the sparks of inspiration... However, these words are open to many levels of interpretation. The visionary tradition moves from Hildegard von Bingen, Dante through to Blake, Bronte, Whitman, and Dickinson, and exists in fragmented inklings in Eliot, in occult twists in the ironic Yeats. It becomes masked, or deflected by ironies, in Kafka or Plath, and in Dylan and Joni Mitchell. It resurfaces reinvented in the Beats; but sometimes in an ironic or desperate context. The visionary tradition nevertheless persists in altered states.

Thus we are likely to find that the visionary-prophetic stream is often filled with artists exploring highly unorthodox and sometimes enigmatic codes. This course begins with Hildegard von Bingen's chants, visionary notes, letters, and poems. She initiates the stream of poet, musician, seer, doctor of psyche. Then we will look at Dante and his *Vita Nuova*. They are parents of the apocalyptic-prophetic stream in western literature. Dante's work gave us much of the terminology we use to describe visionary moments. The mixed modes of the *Vita Nuova* also give us ironic structures for perceiving the "inutterable." We move on to Blake and his apocalyptic satire, then Emily Bronte's strange, enigmatic, almost unclassifiable novel *Wuthering Heights*, and then Whitman, Dickinson, Rimbaud. Already we will see in the latter three that there is a breakdown in the trust and faith in their visionary moments, those levels of irony and disconnection that we call modernist. We will examine exemplary modernists, Yeats and Eliot, and their radically different comprehensions and expressions of ecstasy and aesthetic splendour, and of the terror and awe of Beatrician moments and spiritual liberty. With the Beats, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg we find the last complete expression of the beatific nature of literature—before we slip into the ambiguous and tortured stances of Plath and Celan. The visionary tradition appears reborn, without irony, in the best-selling fable *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. Then we will examine the manifestations of the troubadour-visionary tradition in Patti Smith, Joni Mitchell and Bob Dylan, in memoirs, song lyrics and in Dylan's candid *Chronicles*. We may speculate at the end of the course on the condition of this tradition in contemporary literature and art.

Many writers travel the edges between conditions of light and darker, threatened states. They move between awe and awe-fulness. This is what we find especially in Hildegard von Bingen, and in the prophetic poems and satires of William Blake, in the meditations of *Four Quartets*, in the explosive mythic reinventions and allusions of Sylvia's Plath's "Daddy". The spiritual independence of these poets often brands them as heretics, or Gnostics. But poetry and imaginative prose may in fact represent for these artists in this tradition a form of what we may call natural mysticism; their poetics become ways of pursuing and achieving epiphany.

We will be looking for affinities and analogies between these poets and prose artists. Visionary poetics may have a thematic core; many recurrent metaphors and correspondences cross from language to language and from culture to culture, cutting across time, in an imaginative simultaneity. The Beats (Kerouac and Ginsberg, primarily) recreate the Beatrician moment which Dante evokes in *Vita Nuova*. Celan implodes metaphors and language and punctuation in ways eerily reminiscent of Emily Dickinson untitled pieces (many of which he translated). Dickinson attentively reads Emily Bronte. We will move from the searing songs and visions of von Bingen and the troubadour lyric cycle in Dante—and his celebration of the cult of the eternal feminine—through the visionary claims of beatitude and dreams, on to the satiric parables and metaphysical polemics of William Blake, to the private ellipses and self-mythologizing annunciations of Whitman, to Yeats' interests in the occult. We will examine the often stark, dark metaphysical terrors of Kafka and Celan, the intensities and outrages of Sylvia Plath. We will read of the renaissance of interest in the ancient wisdom traditions in Paulo Coelho's popular novel.

Thus we will look at how often renegade ecstatic lines of expression serve as sparks for radical critiques of the social order. We will explore the haunted longings, sometimes tragic, for a glimpsed harmony of being. And we will look closely at those writers who may use the language and mythic allusiveness, the emotional charge and audacious metaphysics of the prophetic stream, but whose stances towards these are radically conflicted, indeed ambivalent, if not skeptical. Are Mysticism and Nihilism mirrors of one another?

Students will be expected to come to each class prepared for vigorous in-class discussions; and to be prepared to entertain challenging, often unusual strands of metaphysical reflection.

Category:	B
Area:	6
Period:	N/A
Historical Requirement:	N/A

Requirements:

Course Requirements:

*“What is visionary experience?” Four page description, for third class. This is to be a succinct, sharp piece, tight and compressed, meant to open your mind to the course material, and prepare you for the discussions. We will discuss the ideas in the first weeks. It will be due as a finished piece precisely three weeks after we start. (10%)

**First Major Research Essay, first term. The Beatrician moment in Dante’s *Vita Nuova*; or Apocalyptic Satire and Epiphany in Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*; or Whitman’s *Symbol of the Leaf of Grass*, among other thematic possibilities. (20%)

***Second Essay, Second Term Research Paper (topics to be handed out). (20%)

****Journal of Readings and Response to ALL (repeat: all) works in the Course, due at end of Second Term. (20%)

*****Final Exam. Examination covering both terms of the course in Examination Period of April 2009; possibly set up as a take-home work. (20%)

*****Class Engagement. Preparation for Readings and Discussions, Oral Skills and Interpretative Ability with Class Debates. (10%)

Reading List:

1. Hildegard von Bingen, *Selected Writings* (Penguin Classics)
2. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, selections (Riverside)
3. Rumi, *Essential Rumi*
4. Dante, *Vita Nuova* (Penguin)
5. William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Oxford)
6. Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights* (Oxford World’s Classics)
7. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855 edition, in reprint)
8. Emily Dickinson, *Essential Dickinson* (Harper-Collins)
9. Arthur Rimbaud, *Season in Hell* (Intro. by Patti Smith)
10. William Butler Yeats, “*The Second Coming*”, “*Byzantium*”
11. T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (Faber & Faber)
12. Franz Kafka, *The Great Wall of China* (Penguin)
13. Allen Ginsberg, *Howl* (City Lights)
14. Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (Penguin)
15. Sylvia Plath, “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” in *Ariel* (Faber & Faber)
16. Paul Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose* (Norton)
17. Paulo Coelho, *Eleven Minutes* (Harper-Perennial)
18. Bob Dylan, *Chronicles*, Volume 1 (Simon & Schuster); lyrics, “Like a Rolling Stone”, “Desolation Row”, “Shelter from the Storm”, “I Shall be Released”
19. Patti Smith, *Just Kids* (Harper-Collins)
20. Joni Mitchell, “Woodstock” (and Van Morrison’s “Rave on, John Donne”)

Open To:

Year 4