

Fall/Winter 2018-2019

AP/EN 4163 6.0A (Y)

Visionary Literature: From Dante to Bob Dylan

Course Director:

B.W. Powe
352 Stong College
Extension 33775
bpowe@yorku.ca
www.media-studies.ca/articles/powe.htm
bwpowe.net
Wikipedia: B.W. Powe

Delivery Format:

Seminar

Time:

Wednesdays 4-7:00pm

Description:

This course explores the visionary tradition in selected poets, prose writers, memoirists, and songwriters. The visionary element in literature is a tradition of ineffable experiences, trauma, trance, transcendental and metaphysical awareness, engagement, inspiration and speculation. Writers often must develop innovative techniques to express the apocalyptic or Beatrician moment. (Note: See the appendix of essential terms.) Searching for forms of breakthrough to higher states of consciousness the poets and prose writers may explore alternative imaginative conditions through gnosticism, alchemy, hermetism, and kabbalah. These modes of consciousness form a counter-tradition to official modes of academic study and to official religions. Writers register a sense of transcendental pressures on their minds and sensibilities; this affects their forms and expressions. The prophetic streak in writers can lead to proclamation and denunciation. We'll also engage the nature of inspiration and what Hildegard von Bingen calls "greening".

It is a thematic centre that by studying visionaries we'll discover keys to imaginative literature. Prophetic traditions underscore the mythic, imaginative traditions of literature. Some literary artists may rest more comfortably in the spiritual expressions of their day. Others proceed to reinvent the contexts of inwardness and inspiration, exploding poetics and religious dogma, the social structures and repressive political and cultural systems, that they engaged.

Writers driven towards finding ways of expressing the ineffable will often not fit into anything other than what they invent for themselves.

What are the words that identify the prophetic tradition? Trust, passion, wisdom, vision, stamina, eloquence, and the sparks of inspiration...

However, these words are open to many levels of interpretation. The visionary tradition moves from Hildegard, Rumi, and Teresa of Avila, Dante through to Blake, Emily 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; sometimes in ironic or desperate states. We are likely to find that the visionary-prophetic stream is filled with artists exploring highly unorthodox and sometimes enigmatic codes.

This course begins with Hildegard's chants, visionary notes, letters, and poems. She initiates the stream of poet, musician, seer, doctor of psyche. Teresa of Avila complements Hildegard's sense of the visionary call and offers a step-by-step process on how to achieve a condition of meditative receptivity. We'll read selections by Rumi, to engage the Islamic traditions. Then we will read Dante and his pioneering *Vita Nuova*. 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 poetry, and on to Whitman, Dickinson, Rimbaud. Already we will see in the latter three that there is a breakdown in the trust in their visionary moments, those dimensions and tonalities of irony, nihilism, evasion, skepticism and alienation that we call Modernist. We'll examine exemplary modernists, HD, Yeats and Eliot, and their radically different comprehensions and expressions of ecstasy and aesthetic splendor, of the terror and awe of Beatrician moments and spiritual liberty.

Kafka subverts the esoteric traditions in ways that mark him as an eerie prophet of the totalitarian political state. With the Beats, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, we find perhaps the last cohesive expression of the beatific nature of literature—before we slip into the ambiguous, tortured stances of Plath and Celan. The visionary tradition appears reborn, however, without irony, in Paulo Coelho's *The Witch of Portobello*. Then we will examine the manifestations of the troubadour tradition in Patti Smith, Joni Mitchell and Bob Dylan, in memoirs and song lyrics.

Many writers travel the edges between conditions of light and darker, threatened states. This is what we find especially in Hildegard, 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".

We will be looking for affinities between these poets and prose artists. Many recurrent metaphors and correspondences cross from language to language and from culture to culture, cutting across time, in an imaginative simultaneity. The Beats recreate the Beatrician moment that Dante evoked in *Vita Nuova*. Celan imploded language and punctuation in ways reminiscent of Dickinson's untitled pieces (some of which he translated). Dickinson attentively read Brontë. We will move from the searing songs and visions of Hildegard and Teresa's recommendations of how to follow a visionary path, Rumi's poems that are like teachings, 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 Blake, to the ellipses and self-mythologizing annunciations of Whitman, to HD, and Yeats, their interests in the occult. We will examine the often stark, dark metaphysical terrors of Kafka and Celan, the intensities and outrages of Plath. We will read of the renaissance of interest in the ancient wisdom in Coelho's work. We'll look at how renegade ecstatic lines of expression serve as sparks for radical critiques of the social order. We explore the haunted longings, sometimes tragic, for a glimpsed harmony of being.

Students are expected to come to class prepared for vigorous in discussions; and to be prepared to entertain challenging strands of reflection.

Category:

B

Historical Requirement:

N/A

Requirements:

- *On Visionary Experience: Hazardous Definitions. We will discuss the ideas in the first weeks. A preliminary essay. (10%)
- **Research Essay. The Beatrician moment; Apocalyptic Satire and Epiphany in Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*; or Whitman's *Symbol of the Leaf of Grass*, among other possibilities. (20%)
- ***Second Essay, second term research paper (topics to be handed out). (20%)
- ****Journal of Readings and Responses to all the works in the Course, due at end of Second Term. There's a creative component to the Journals. One half of the work can be poetry, stories, songs or paintings and drawings. (20%)
- *****Final Exam. Examination covering both terms of the course in Examination Period of April 2016; special creative approach of exam to be discussed with the class in the second term. (20%)
- *****Class Engagement. Preparation for Readings and Discussions, Oral Skills and Interpretative Ability with Class Debates. (10%)

Reading List:

- **The following is the sequence in which the works will be read or heard
- 1. Hildegard von Bingen, *Selected Writings*, Penguin Classics
- 2. Rumi, *Selected Poetry*, Harper-Perennial. Translator: Coleman Banks
- 3. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, Riverhead
- 4. Dante, *La Vita Nuova*, Penguin
- 5. William Blake, selections from Poems, chosen by Patti Smith, in particular, excerpts from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *Auguries of Innocence*, and *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Vintage
- 6. Emily Bronte, selections from *Complete Poems*, Penguin Classics
- 7. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1855 edition, Penguin Classics
- 8. Emily Dickinson, *Envelope Poems*, New Directions; and three poems, "The Soul selects her own Society," "Because I Could Not Stop for Death," and "Safe in Alabaster Chambers" (available on-line: also on handouts in class)
- 9. Arthur Rimbaud, *Illuminations*, Knopf. Translator: John Ashbury
- 10. HD (Hilda Doolittle) *Notes on Thought and Vision*, City Lights Books, and "Oread" (handout)
- 11. William Butler Yeats, three poems, "Sailing to Byzantium," "Byzantium", and "The Second Coming" (available on-line, also on handouts in class)
- 12. T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, Faber & Faber
- 13. Franz Kafka, "Before the Law", "The Hunger Artist" (stories available on-line). Also *The Zulu Aphorisms*, Schocken. Translator: Roberto Calasso. If available
- 14. Allen Ginsberg, selected poems from *Howl*, City Lights
- 15. Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, Penguin
- 16. Sylvia Plath, "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" in *Ariel*, Faber & Faber

17. Paul Celan, "Psalm", and selected poems and prose in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* Norton. Translator: John Felstiner
18. Paulo Coelho, *The Witch of Portobello* , Harper-Perennial
19. Bob Dylan, *Chronicles, Volume 1*, Simon & Schuster. Selected songs, "Like a Rolling Stone", "Desolation Row", "I Shall be Released"
20. Patti Smith, "Rimbaud" (poem available on handout) and *M Train* , Knopf
21. Joni Mitchell, two songs, "Woodstock" and "Hejira" (lyrics available on line)

Open To:

Yr 4 Honours