HZ9201/HZ201 Creative Writing: Poetry

Division of English, Nanyang Technological University
Semester 2, AY 2015/2016
Seminar Leader: Associate Professor Boey Kim Cheng
Pre-requisite: HZ9101

In "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" William Carlos Williams says that poetry has no news to deliver, nothing sensational or glamorous to advertise, "yet men die miserably everyday/ for lack/ of what is found there." Poetry doesn't make things happen, to paraphrase Auden. It doesn't stop wars, feed the hungry or stop the earth from being abused. Yet it is perhaps precisely of its non-utilitarian value that we need it so much, every crust, every scrap of it. In a world where everything is measured in economic terms, poetry is essential because it resists being calibrated, reminding us that the seemingly most useless things are the most vital to our being alive.

That is what poets do each day, paying attention to what seems insignificant and worthless. Being attentive, observing Pound's imperative to making it new again and again, and making connections, wiring the different parts within themselves and also awakening hidden connections to the rest of the world. Images, events, thoughts are inexplicably related, brought together in a significant but not immediately comprehensible conjunction. As Robert Frost says, "Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words."

We will learn the art of paying attention and of discovering poetry in the everyday. We will track the poetic process, from the initial inspiration and first draft to the finished product, and appreciate poetry as an act of making and shaping. Poetry is not something abstract but has a visceral presence that is made possible by elements of sound, rhythm, imagery and form. In the first half of each session, we will explore techniques of poetic making through close readings of exemplary poems, and examine some of the poetics or poetic ideas that have sustained poets in life and writing. As good poets devour poetry all the time, we will embark on an intensive reading program, reading poetry from a variety of periods. We will study traditional forms as well as explore postmodern and contemporary trends to learn to be more experimental in poem-making. The reading will also develop critical skills necessary in workshop critique, which happens in the second half of each session, when we provide constructive feedback to help bring the workshop drafts closer to their final form.

Course Outline

Week	Topic*	Reading*
1	What is Poetry?	Course Notes and Readings posted on Blackboard
2	Only Connect/ Paying Attention	Course Notes and Readings posted on Blackboard
3	Conversing with Traditions/ Poetic Forms 1	Course Notes and Readings posted on Blackboard

4	The Work of Memory	Course Notes and Readings posted on Blackboard
5	Poetry of Place	Course Notes and Readings posted on Blackboard
6	Stretching the Line - the Prose Poem	Course Notes and Readings posted on Blackboard
7	Conversing with Traditions/ Poetic Forms 2	Course Notes and Readings posted on Blackboard
8	**RECESS WEEK**	
9	Poetry of the Self	Course Notes and Readings posted on Blackboard
10	Who's Talking? The Dramatic Monologue	Course Notes and Readings posted on Blackboard
11	Poetry in Translation	Course Notes and Readings posted on Blackboard
12	Thinking Imagery	Course Notes and Readings posted on Blackboard
13	The Elegy	Course Notes and Readings posted on Blackboard
14	Final Workshop	Course Notes and Readings posted on Blackboard
TBA	**Final Assessment Due**	

*Course Outline: Please note that the outline is indicative. Topics covered from week to week will vary in order and emphasis depending on the direction provided by the course participants.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

1. Demonstrate an understanding of the various forms of poetry.

2. Demonstrate a detailed understanding of the techniques involved in shaping a poem.

3. Demonstrate a detailed understanding of the poetic ideas and theories which inform particular kinds of poetry.

4. Demonstrate core skills in written communication, in textual analysis and in creative practice.

5. Demonstrate exposure to an array of poetic voices from the local to the global and have started to develop their own voice.

Assessment

Course grades will be determined by the following:

Written Assignments:

Short Portfolio of poems, 3-5 poems, depending on length of each poem (20%)

Reflective Essay, 1000 words (20%)

Reading Journal, 1000 words (10%)

Portfolio: Final Portfolio of poems, 6-10 poems, depending on length of each poem (35%)

Participation: Seminar and Workshop participation (15% - includes attendance, workshop contributions, performance of work)

Required Reading

Seminar Notes and Readings will be posted on Blackboard

SEMINAR NOTES:

- Please be present, and please be on time. If you enter late, there's no need to apologise, but settle into the class with the minimum disruption. If you are more than 20 minutes late to class, this will count as an absence.
- Use of the Internet during class time is not allowed.
- Eating is not allowed during class time.
- Please turn your phones off in class.
- The group needs your thoughts. Your comments, questions and contributions are invited, welcome, and absolutely necessary to productive creative discussion – however basic or as-yet-unformed those thoughts may be. However, make sure you listen as well as speak, and that you respect writing time as silent time, unless otherwise advised.
- Please let your seminar leader know as soon as possible if you have any disability or other issue that requires special accommodation in class (examples: you need to sit in a special position so you can see or hear well; you need to leave your phone on in case of a family emergency; you need to leave class early to attend a medical appointment, etc.).

BEYOND THE SEMINARS:

Writing time

Your participation in this course needs to be supported by substantial time spent writing outside of class. This is necessary for basic completion of the assignments.

For those of you who wish to have creative writing (or any creative practice) as an active part of your lives in the future, success in this course will not be measured by grades, but by how effectively you set up the physical and intellectual habits of writing, reading and engaging with new ideas. Dedication to these habits will show results in your grades, but also in the richness of your writing, and in the quality of your broader life experience. Please make the most of this rare opportunity.

Writing sources
Language is shared; texts always bear the traces of the texts that surround and precede them. You are encouraged to make conscious and creative use of source texts of many kinds and in many ways. You might, for example, re-situate in a poem the fragments of a conversation you've overheard, or use the narrative structure of a song you know as the basis for a story. Be aware of (and avoid) the problems of plagiarism, but also partake of the great storehouse of language around you. You can use a writing journal as a place to collect source material if you wish, or keep other notebooks.

Revision
Even though publishing writers occasionally (very occasionally) write work that achieves all its aims on the first draft, this is not a skill that can be learned in a semester. More often published work has gone through many phases of revision – and learning to revise is central to the aims of this class. Keep early drafts of your work, and take risks as you make new versions. Not everything you try will work, but if you are only willing to change the odd word or punctuation mark, you will miss at least half of the adventure of writing.

***ASSESSMENT NOTES*:**

- For the purposes of participation assessment, any unexcused lateness beyond 20 minutes of class start time will be marked as an absence.
- Please contact your lecturer immediately if you think you will have difficulty completing any of the requirements or submitting your work on time. Extensions are only granted in exceptional circumstances (for example, for medical reasons or in cases of family emergency), and documentation is required. However, support or resources may also be available to help you manage more minor difficulties, so please don't hesitate to contact me for an appointment to discuss anything that comes up.
- Late assignment submissions will be penalized by three percentage points per day. No work will be accepted more than seven days after the due date, unless an extension has been pre-arranged.

- Assignments should be printed in a plain, legible 12 or 14 point font, except where your creative intentions demand otherwise.
- Please detach the assignment assessment sheet from this syllabus and attach it to the front of each assignment.
- Assignments should be 1.5x spaced.
- Please include a word count at the end of each assignment.
- Assignments should be stapled, or secured in a closed manila folder. Please do not submit your work in clear-files.
- Assignments should be submitted to your seminar leader's assignment box at the English Division office.

APPENDIX 1: Workshop Learning Agreement and Feedback Guide

Workshops are an integral part of any creative writing class. At least twice during the semester you will present written work to your colleagues for discussion and critique. Use this workshop time to help you prepare for assessment. A schedule of allocated dates for these workshops will be drawn up within the first few classes. If you forget to bring in work to class, you will be responsible for distributing this work by email. Ensure you have your class's email addresses at the start of the semester.

Learning Agreement
The purpose of creative writing workshops is not only to provide your work with an audience, though this is important. It is always useful to test the success of your writing on a community of readers in order to gain an idea of what works (what communicates or "carries") and what doesn't. You can then think about *why* some things succeed and others don't. This process of workshop-generated reflection is key to good revision and to informing the critical self-commentaries that form part of all assessed assignments.

But there is more to it than that. In submitting your work for discussion you are providing us – the group – with an opportunity to think about some of the key issues in creating stories, poems, novels, and scripts. These issues may be technical, ethical, perceptual, philosophical… And it isn't just you – the author – who benefits. In analysing your work, we are all pressed in to thinking about the issues your work raises.

The workshop provides us all with an opportunity to learn, regardless of whose writing is under discussion. For this reason it is crucial that you participate in every session. Your participation will benefit you as much as the person whose work is being discussed.

Although undertaking studies in creative writing demonstrates willingness to engage in the workshop process, not everyone enjoys having their work discussed, let alone dissected; not everyone feels comfortable in the spotlight. It *can* be a trying experience. It can also seem quite at odds with the day-to-day reality of writing, which usually involves silence and solitude. Even

those of us who do feel at ease may struggle to cope with certain kinds – and levels – of criticism. It is therefore important that your criticism be constructive.

In order for your criticism to be constructive, you should endeavor to identify and praise what does succeed before you go on to talk about what might not. And in discussing what works less well, you should try always to think about solutions, remedies, the ways in which a difficulty might be resolved. What is the problem exactly? How do you think it might be fixed? Bear in mind that the improvement of technique and structure – insofar as these can be separated from theme and from one's personal philosophy – is our primary focus.

Needless to say, whatever your feelings about the writer, it is the work you should be focused upon. The workshop is not a place to air personal grievances and the work itself should never become a pretext for other kinds of criticism. This guideline for conduct should, naturally, apply to correspondence outside the classroom as well. Moreover, the confidentiality of someone else's written work must be respected; that which is meant for discussion in the workshop should not be shared elsewhere.

Feedback guide

The writing workshop is an opportunity for you to share your creative writing in progress with the group, but also an opportunity for you to aid in the development of others' work. There are a few guidelines for giving and receiving feedback which will make the sessions as productive and useful as possible, so please bear them in mind. Refer to this list if you get stuck when giving feedback.

Giving Feedback:

- Give an overall response at the end that is positive and supportive and balances criticism with praise. Think 'critical sandwich' – a positive comment, followed by a more critical, questioning comment, followed by another positive comment.
- Everyone is expected to contribute in class, bear in mind the above when making comments in class.
- Avoid psycho-analysing the writer, assuming their work is biographical, or giving comments that are personal in any way.
- It is useful to write comments or mark/underline your copy, then give this copy to the person presenting

Things to consider when giving feedback:

Initial impressions:

- What's your 'gut feeling' about the piece, what first impressions do you have?
- When you have read it, what remains, are there certain images or ideas that linger in your consciousness?
- What are the most significant aspects of the piece?
- What were the strongest images or ideas?
- Did it feel fresh, original or distinctive?

- Was it hard to put down?
- What are its strong points? Its weaker areas?
- Does it feel complete?
- Are you left with a sense of satisfying mystery, or confusion?
- What do you think the piece is about?
- Did the piece provoke thought?
- Does the piece feel complete, rounded, or like a fragment?

After the initial impressions, you need to focus on more technical areas:

- Does the piece locate the reader?
- Do you know whose point of view the piece is written from? Is this the right choice for the story?
- What is the narrative voice like – distinctive and clear, or confusing or vague?
- Is the setting well-evoked? Is it appropriate for the story?
- Does it begin well, or could it lose its first paragraph?
- Does it end well, or could it lose its last paragraph? Is the ending resonant, leaving you thinking about the story? Is it satisfying? Does it 'tie' everything up too well, or does it leave frustrating questions?
- Does the writer ask the reader to connect emotionally and physically?
- Does the writer make good use of silence and absence, as well as description?
- Are the characters convincing? Do they have complexity, motivation and feel like real people, or are they stereotyped and one-dimensional?
- Are character actions plausible and interesting?
- Are there too many characters?
- Is the dialogue effective? – do voices feel distinctive from one another, as though they belong to characters? Does the dialogue 'do' anything in terms of moving the plot along? It's worth checking the dialogue to see that it does at least 2 things, e.g. forward the plot, illustrate motivation.
- Use of metaphor and simile – are these clichéd, or do they feel fresh and appropriate, or are they too oblique?
- Is there a good use of the senses, or do certain senses dominate?
- Is the piece overwritten – too much density of description?
- Are there moments of particularity and specificity, or moments of generalisation? Are these appropriate?
- Does the piece have a sense of rhythm?
- Is it well-paced?
- Does the piece use the same 'mode' too much (dialogue, description, action) or switch between them appropriately to inject energy?
- What is the form of the piece, how does this work with its content?
- Think about overall structure – is it coherent? How does the piece handle forward and backward movement in time?
- Does the piece give away too much or too little – how does it ask the reader to participate?

Please make sure you read all the work that is due to be workshopped that week, make notes on the work to help you participate in discussion, and bring your copies of the work back to class.

Receiving Feedback

- Remember you are in the privileged position of having a cross-section of your potential readership spending lots of time looking at your work in detail.
- During feedback in class it's useful to stay silent for the initial feedback. This avoids leading the reader towards a particular interpretation of your work, and means you will get an outside view of your writing.
- Be open to feedback and see it as a positive way to improve and develop your work.
- Don't take more critical comments personally, instead think constructively about how you can use that information to improve your work.

APPENDIX 2: HSS English Division: Definition and Penalties for Plagiarism

Definition

Plagiarism (from the Latin word for 'kidnapper') is the deliberate or accidental presentation of someone else's ideas or words as your own. This includes:

• The unacknowledged use of words, images, diagrams, graphs, or ideas derived from any source such as books, journals, magazines, the visual media, and the internet. Note: cutting and pasting words from the internet into your own essay, even if you reword them, is still plagiarism.

• Copying the work of a fellow student, having another student write one's assignments, or allowing another student to borrow one's work.

• Buying and/or copying essays, assignments, projects etc from the internet or any other source and handing them in as your own.

Please bear in mind that your lecturers know the subject and have read widely. They therefore can spot unreferenced quotations, and can tell the difference between university level writing and that of published scholars.

Penalties

• If a first year student is caught plagiarizing, and it is the student's first offense, the student will have the opportunity to rewrite the paper with one grade reduction.

• After the first year of studies, it is expected that a student thoroughly understands the implications of plagiarism. Thus, after the first year, or if a student is caught plagiarizing a second time, the student will receive an F for the assignment.

Why plagiarism is academically dishonest

• The unacknowledged borrowing of another's work is theft.

• Independent and creative thinking, as well as intellectual responsibility, are fundamental to a humanities education, and cannot be developed if one simply borrows the work of another.

How to avoid academic dishonesty

Plagiarism

• If you use an author's exact words, you must put them in quotation marks. If you paraphrase another's ideas, you again must indicate the source to your reader.

• Facts and statistics that are not "common knowledge" must be referenced.

• Be sure to use the method of citation recommended by your professor.

• If in doubt, it is always best to reference your material.

• Remember that your lecturer wants to see your ideas and interpretations. Avoid excessively quoting secondary sources and show your reader your thinking.

Collusion and complicity

• Ask your lecturer if you are allowed to work on assignments in groups.

• Get the approval of your professor if you want to hand in material that you have already submitted for another course.

• Do not allow students to copy your work (including work from previous semesters).

• Follow the examination rules set out by the university.

If you still have questions, please ask your professors, or consult the website: http://www.plagiarism.org.

Sources for this document:

The Little, Brown Essential Handbook. Ed. Jane E. Aaron. New York: Pearson Longman, 2006.

ADDITIONAL NOTES FOR CREATIVE WRITERS:

The conventions for acknowledgement in creative writing are somewhat different to those for acknowledgement in academic writing, but NO form of intellectual dishonesty is acceptable. It is acceptable to appropriate material from source texts, AS LONG AS your use of these texts is acknowledged, is within reason, and demonstrates substantial independent and creative thinking of your own.

There are a number of ways to acknowledge the use of source texts in creative writing, and these vary according to your stylistic imperatives, the level of dependence on the source text and the level of familiarity your audience is likely to have with the source text. For the purposes of this course, you need not always use quotation marks for quoted material if this interferes with your stylistic imperatives (they may be intrusive in a poem, for example). You MUST, however, acknowledge any source texts you use through reference integrated into the work itself, through footnotes or through endnotes. Do not "borrow" work from friends, books, the internet, song lyrics or any other source without acknowledgement, as this counts as plagiarism.

APPENDIX 3: Critical Self-Commentary Guide

All creative work relies to some extent on instinct. As a writer you need a feel for the rhythms and textures of the language, for the shape of a phrase, the weight of a word. You need to be responsive to the promptings of your imagination. You need to be sensitive to the subtleties of human behaviour.

Instinct, however, will only take you so far. You also require a sound understanding of the conventions of writing. You need a solid grasp of the techniques for creating poems and stories. You need to be capable of careful redrafting and editing, and you need to be attuned to other writing and how you might learn from it: every good writer is first of all a good reader.

In other words, the process of writing is both instinctual and highly self-aware. For this reason all our creative writing courses carry some element of critical self-commentary.

The purpose of the self-commentary is to provide you with an opportunity to consider your own creative processes. Here you might account for the ways in which your reading has influenced or guided your writing, in terms of both theme and technique. You might comment on the technical difficulties you have encountered and the strategies you have employed to overcome them. You might attempt to place your creative work in the context of your wider critical

studies.

Among the questions you might seek to answer in your self-commentary are these: How are you a writer of a particular cultural/historical context? What problems did you run into, and what steps did you take to overcome them? What techniques have you learned from other writers? What were your thoughts at each stage of composition, and what gains did you make in the process of redrafting? What insights did you gain *as a writer* from your reading? And what do you think you have learnt in producing this work, both as a writer and as a reader of other writings?

To help guide your reflections it might be useful to keep a writer's journal over the course of the semester. Here you can chart the journey you make from conception to completion. You can divide the process of composition into stages and make notes on each stage. You can analyse the issues that arise, and set down your anxieties, and explore some potential solutions. You can register your responses to class exercises and workshops. You can keep a detailed log of your reading.

Such a journal would not be submitted for assessment. However, you could draw upon it when writing your self-commentary. You could quote from it directly.

When you submit work for assessment I do not expect you to demonstrate your progress by including earlier drafts of your poems or stories. You may however quote from these earlier drafts in your self-commentary, giving a considered account of how your writing has developed.

What I am looking for is self-awareness, an ability to comment in a writerly way on your writerly processes and perhaps make a literary-theoretical critique of the end product.

You should be reflecting intelligently on your experience of writing and showing a genuine understanding of the issues raised in class. I will be looking for you to demonstrate an ability to examine your own work in the light of these issues and to refer to any set reading as appropriate. You may also draw on your knowledge of critical theories and theories of creative writing, using the appropriate critical vocabulary. I will also be looking for evidence of an ability to place your own work within larger critical and cultural contexts. You should be able to demonstrate a critical awareness of some key issues of literary production - such as, for instance, questions of authorial control and intentionality – and be able to employ theoretical perspectives when analysing your own processes. You should, in other words, have a sophisticated take on what it is you're up to.