

Fall 2017
CRW 6331-7906: Verse Writing
Professor Ange Mlinko

Welcome to “Verse Writing.” Two-thirds of our time will be spent reading and analyzing your drafts; one-third of our time will be spent discussing the assigned texts. An alternate title for this course might be “Style, Irony, and the New York School.” For a definition of style, I offer you Robert Frost:

“Style in prose or verse is that which indicates how the writer takes himself and what he is saying. Let the sound of Stevenson go through your mind empty and you will realize that he never took himself other than as an amusement. Do the same with Swinburne and you will see that he took himself as a wonder. Many sensitive natures have plainly shown by their style that they took themselves lightly in self-defense. They are the ironists. Some fair to good writers have no style and so leave us ignorant of how they take themselves. But that is the one important thing to know.”

Style and self are closely intertwined—just like your physical presentation, your poetic presentation says more about yourself than you are even aware of. Who is speaking? Who is he or she speaking to? What is he displaying? What is she camouflaging? We will consider this aspect of style as well as the usual craft issues—lines, linebreaks, diction, tone, vocabulary, angle of approach, beginnings and endings....

Every week you will turn in a poem based on the prompt, as well as a 300-word response paper on a poem in the assigned book. When you turn in your portfolio, I would like a substantial prose piece that builds on your responses to the readings throughout the semester—at least 1500 words.

Workshop will be 2 hours, presentation/discussion 45 minutes. Rules for workshop:

- The poet must offer something either substantial or amusing, with part of the amusement residing in a formal choice.
- Readers must offer constructive criticism. Two harsh but important questions to ask yourself: “So what?” (The poem is either *too* personal or *too* frivolous.) And “Do I believe this?” (The poem is either trying *too* hard to be creative or trying *too* hard to appeal to our emotions.)
- I am not the first one to speak.

Presenters must prepare 15-20 minutes of material. (no more than 10 minutes on YouTube or other media). **Presentation must include a close reading of one or more poems.** Class should be prepared to ask questions and engage the presenter.

Required Texts:

James Schuyler: Selected Poems
John Ashbery: Selected Poems
Frank O’Hara: Selected Poems
Barbara Guest: Forces of Imagination
John Ashbery: Selected Prose

Recommended Texts:

Barbara Guest: Collected Poems
Kenneth Koch: Collected Poems
James Schuyler: Selected Letters
The Last Avant-Garde by David Lehman

Schedule

- Aug 21 Introduction to course. Discussion of style, wit, comedy, irony, light verse and satire, and general value of sociality and innovation in the arts.
- Aug 28 Workshop Prompt 1
- Sep 11 Workshop Prompt 2 (2 hours)
Presentation on James Schuyler and the paintings of Fairfield Porter
(recommended text: *Fairfield Porter; A Life in Art* by Justin Spring) (1 hour)
- Sep 18 Workshop Prompt 3
Presentation on Frank O'Hara and the New York City cultural scene of the late 1950s and early 1960s: Balanchine's ballet, Pollock's abstract expressionism, Bernstein's conductorship and American/European cinema.
- Sep 25 Workshop Prompt 4
Presentation on John Ashbery and Ekphrasis using "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" and the accompanying Parmigiano painting.
- Oct 2 Workshop Prompt 5
Something Different (to be determined)
- Oct 9 Workshop Prompt 6
Discussion of John Ashbery's Selected Prose
- Oct 16 Workshop Prompt 7
Presentation on New York School and formal innovation: sestinas, odes, collages, meanders.
- Oct 23 Workshop Prompt 8
Presentation on the New York School and cosmopolitan influences: Anglophile (e.g. W.H. Auden, metaphysical poets) and Francophile (e.g. Surrealists, Symbolists; Ashbery's translation projects)
- Oct 30 Workshop Prompt 9
Presentation on New York School and outsiderdom (see O'Hara on Billie Holiday, Ashbery's *Other Traditions*). Relation to women and gay subculture; "minor figures" (Edwin Denby, John Wheelwright, Laura Riding, et al.).
- Nov 6 Workshop Prompt 10
Discussion of *Forces of Imagination*
- Nov 13 Workshop Prompt 11
Something Different
- Nov 20 Workshop Prompt 12
Presentation on Beauty in O'Hara, Ashbery, Schuyler, and Guest. What is the definition of beauty? What is its relevance?
- Nov 27 Workshop Prompt 13
Presentation on New York School influence on subsequent generations ("Second generation New York School," etc. (See Lehman book.)

Dec 4

Turn in portfolio (prompts, revisions, response papers).