Hello and welcome. This is the graduate poetry workshop at UF. At the unlegislable heart of it is something unknown to me, and possibly still to be thought of by you: the poems you will write and bring to class week after week. I do not intend to set you many assignments; I am fortunate in having colleagues who like to do that, and are much better at it than I am. If you need the security and imperative of a prompt, I will see what I can do (or help yourself from the individual proposals over). But broadly, the philosophy of this class (from your never-MFA'd professor) is the scriptural (and responsibly libertarian) ‘do as thou wouldst be done unto’. In other words, I want you to write the poems you want to write, that you perhaps always wanted to write, the poems you have it in you to write, the poems that come to you to be written. These are what we will talk about in class.

As a fallback or supplement or safety net or scaffold or set of references – I don’t know what figure is most appropriate, or most true – we will talk about (and I hope you will talk about!) 3 agreeably sprightly sets of Collected Poems: those of Weldon Kees, Philip Larkin, and Rosemary Tonks; an American (from Nebraska, no less), an Englishman and an Englishwoman. Larkin a mainstay of English schoolmasters and syllabuses everywhere, the other two somewhat obscure, even cultish figures, with an aura of sinister and derisive gloom. (Perhaps this is an afterbirth of last term’s ‘Depressing Poetry’.) Still, I think you will find both Tonks and Kees as the French say, ‘scriptible’ – i.e., they can and will and perhaps even should have an impact on your writing, with their respective dandyishness and electricity. With Larkin, I’m not so confident. It seems unfair to set ‘Aubade’ or ‘Church Going’ or ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ in front of you, and say ‘do likewise’ or ‘make like this.’ Still, that’s no reason not to read him (and he is at least unquestionably the other thing, which is ‘lisible’, or readable. ‘Larkinesque’ has entered the language; it is as much there as ‘Keatsian’ or ‘Miltonic’.) He is such a major figure, behind everything in contemporary British poetry, whether it be Armitage, Duffy, Fenton, Hamilton, Motion, Maxwell or Paterson; that miracle of proper sentences that scan and rhyme; really well-made and characterful modern poems. I’ve not taught him here before, and I’m curious how it’ll go over.

Four or five weeks per author. If you don’t know the poets, I would hope at least some of you will come away with new favorite poets. (And if you do, I hope they’re firm favorites already.)

Poems identified for discussion, and as possible models (NB: please don’t confine your reading to these, especially with the Larkin, who – note to self – is someone to read and re-read!):


Perhaps 4, 6, and 4 weeks on the poets, respectively?

Other things don’t change: a paucity (as identified above) of narrowly drawn assignments and corresponding freedom for you to write the poems you want to write; illegible comments; expressive squiggles; sibylline remarks; an unhelpfully Luddite stance that insists all poems be circulated on paper, one spare copy for me to keep. (It would give us a big boost if you would bring poems to our first class, so that we can begin prepared workshopping in the second... Also, copies of Kees.)

Anyway, I look forward to a lively and fast-moving term.

Class will be in the Suite. My office hours are Monday before class, and other mutually convenient times.

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