

Syllabus:

On Moral Nonfiction

Fenton Johnson

On Moral Nonfiction

This is a broad survey/practicum in the issues and styles of creative nonfiction. Students will be asked to read and write in a variety of styles, including shorter and longer work, memoirs, short and long essays, etc. The emphasis will be on issues of craft: How does a writer achieve literary effect? We will also discuss the shifting boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, and our particular experiences working across those boundaries. Students are required to select a particular author and to give a brief presentation on considerations of style and craft in his/her work. In our discussions we will focus first on the long and honorable history of the genre we call “creative” or “literary” nonfiction. In the course of examining notable works from history, we will discuss the uses and versatility of writers’ extended conversations with themselves. As we read more contemporary authors, we will discuss the rise of the notion of objective writing (an idea that would have struck any pre-Enlightenment writer as strange in the extreme). In that context we will address the moral issues raised in the course of using other people’s stories for our purposes, however laudable we may perceive them to be.

Pay attention always to issues of craft. We'll concern ourselves less with underlying issues (e.g., the political stance Baldwin adopts in Notes of a Native Son) than how the pig got across the sty (e.g., how does Baldwin achieve the expression of rage in prose which is so cool and distant?). This requires focussing on the nuts and bolts of the work -- literally on how the nouns and verbs are strung together to achieve effect. That in turn may require rereading several sections in order to discern and analyze the trees in the forest. And now I'm getting out before I find another metaphor.

Reading list:

Journalist and the Murderer, Malcolm
Consolation of Philosophy, Boethius
Meditations, Marcus Aurelius
Seven Storey Mountain, Thomas Merton
Stones of Florence, Mary McCarthy
Labyrinth of Solitude, Octavio Paz
Speak, Memory, Vladimir Nabokov
Geography of the Imagination, Guy Davenport
Desert Solitaire, Edward Abbey
West of the West: Imagining California, ed. Michael Leonard

The Names of Things, Susan Brind Morrow
Ways of Seeing, John Berger
The Women, Hilton Als

This reading list will also be supplemented with in-class photocopies of works by various authors, among them:

Plato, Symposium and Phaedo
Augustine of Hippo, Confessions
Athanasius, Life of Anthony
Pseudo-Dionysius, Mystical Theology
Julian of Norwich, Revelations
Teresa of Avila, Autobiography
D.T. Suzuki, Zen Buddhism

We will also view “Stranger with a Camera,” a public television documentary directed by Elizabeth Barrett with co-production and narration writing by Fenton Johnson. “Stranger” profiles the 1967 murder of Canadian documentary filmmaker Hugh O’Connor by a man who perceived him as “mocking” Appalachia, and uses that incident as a starting place from which to examine the appropriate relationship between the documentary maker (read: nonfiction writer) and her or his subject.

###