Modern and Contemporary MPhil

Phantom Tables: philosophy & literature (1890-present)

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Introduction: 'Oh he's not here as a philosopher; he's here as an anthropologist'—so T.S. Eliot described Ezra Pound to other members of the Aristotelian Society in 1915. This course departs from such encounters or collisions between literature and philosophy to inquire into how modern and contemporary writers think about their forms, sources, and limits of (self)-knowledge. During it, we will meet many of the major philosophies against and within which twentieth-century literature takes place: pragmatism, non-naturalist ethics, ordinary language, existentialism, deconstruction. But the seminar preserves Pound's angle of incidence: our attention will be to the forms and affects associated with these philosophies, particularly as measured by striking literary responses to them. How are different kinds of knowledge experienced? What is it like to write poems in an intellectual context of solipsism, or when you're uncertain that the table on which you write exists? How does it feel to write philosophy alongside modernist and postmodernist revolutions of the wor(l)d? In addressing such questions, this seminar touches on topics such as: dialogue, silence, irony, essay, syllogism, solipsism, skepticism, common sense, nonsense, extraordinariness, formal innovation, argument, (bad) logic, self-discipline, social critique.

Seminars depart from attentive reading of works of literature in order to consider what philosophical material literary writers read or did not read; what they embraced, absorbed, mutated, and what they disliked reading, refused to read, turned away from. We will also trace philosophers' engagements with literature, exploring the possibilities for including literary experience within the intellectual history of some of the modes of thought that often seem the most strenuously insulated from it. This course focuses particularly on philosophy as a conversational, miscellaneous discourse, composed of remarks, lectures, unpublished pieces, and largely on what literary theory tends to neglect: the 'analytical', rather than 'continental', tradition. 'Philosophy' for the purposes of this seminar is more a dance of thought than a ladder to wisdom. Like dance, it is half-ephemeral; we need to recreate its forms and the experience of its thought from partial notations. To this end, we will engage with some of the unique archival resources of Cambridge, making acquaintance with unpublished papers, complex material texts, and marginalia.

Course structure: 6 x 1.5 hr seminars in weeks 2-7 of Michaelmas term. The final week also includes an additional group visit to the Wittgenstein Archive in Cambridge. Further independent visits to other archives within Cambridge are encouraged. Key and collateral reading is listed here; further secondary reading for each week will be made available to those taking the course. The individual chapters or page spans specified in the 'Key' list are the minimum for our group discussions; reading more is of course encouraged.

Essays: All students wishing to write a coursework essay for this seminar are encouraged to meet me for a 30 minute supervision to discuss a short preliminary piece of writing (an outline or paragraph, for example).

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Week 1. Grammatical Streams: William James, Gertrude Stein, Henry James

We begin by setting out some general terms and problems for the course; discussing, for example, how we might understand 'philosophy' and its varied forms of discourse or writing; also, how to consider 'influence' or shared 'intellectual climate'. To test out these general speculations, we'll take what should be a 'direct' case of influence from one philosopher to two writers, considering the pragmatist, pluralist thought of William James and its intersections with the works of his brother, Henry James, and his student, Gertrude Stein. We will explore possible connections between pragmatist ideas and modernist practices of prose, in particular, parataxis, stream of consciousness, automatic writing. Other subjects of interest here include: habit, character, rhythm, sentences, style, decision, anomie. You may also wish to glance at the responses to pragmatist philosophy by other modernists, such as Marianne Moore, who gave these alternative models of influence: 'Prizing Henry James, I take his worries for the most part with detachment; those of William James to myself'—'He', she wrote of the latter, after reading 'The Will to Believe', 'has convinced me that life is worth living'.

Key works:
--William James, 'The Will to Believe' [lecture, 1896]; and, from *Principles of Psychology* (1890), chapters: 'Habit', 'The Stream of Thought', 'Attention'.
--Henry James, *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914); chapters 1 and 5.
--Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans* (1924/1995); 'The Dehnings and the Herslands', 'The Hersland Parents'.

Collateral works:
--Marianne Moore, 'Henry James as a Characteristic American' in *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*, edited by Patricia C. Willis (1987), pp.316-322.
--*William and Henry James: Selected Letters*, edited by Skrupskelis & Berkeley (1997).
--Gertrude Stein, 'Sentences and Paragraphs' [1931], in *Gertrude Stein: Selections,* edited by Joan Retallack (2008).

Week 2. Happy Warriors: G.E. Moore and Bloomsbury

'If a man could write a book on Ethics which really was a book on Ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world' (Wittgenstein, 1929). For the Bloomsbury set, the reclusive moral philosopher G.E. Moore achieved this with his advocacy of non-naturalism, *Principia Ethica* (1903), which, Lytton Strachey announced, 'wrecked and shattered all writers on Ethics from Aristotle and Christ to Herbert Spencer and Mr. Bradley'. Moore, in this book and in papers given to the Cambridge Apostles, argued that: 'personal affections and aesthetic enjoyments include *all* the greatest, and *by far* the greatest goods we can imagine'. This seminar explores the significance of friendship and coterie as a topic and setting for philosophy and literature. We will think about Moore's ethical vision as improbable inspiration for Bloomsbury's epistemological and literary forms, with particular attention to the virtues of happiness and clear sight. As well as Moore's explosive book, we will consider the forms of thought as they unfold in other kinds of philosophical work: his lecture notes, his commonplace book, his letters. You are encouraged to consult Moore's unpublished papers in the University Library manuscripts room and any Bloomsbury papers of interest to you from the Modern Archives at King's College.

Key works:
--G.E. Moore, 'Is conversion possible?' (unpublished lecture, 1900, in UL manuscripts); 'Achilles or Patrolus?' (Apostles talk, 1894); 'Ch.6: The Ideal' in *Principia Ethica* (1903).
--Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (1931).
-- Wittgenstein, 'Lecture on Ethics' [1929] (John Wiley & Sons, 2014: online access).

Collateral works:
--Virginia Woolf, 'On Not Knowing Greek' [1925], in *The Common Reader, vol.1*.
--E.M. Forster, *Howards' End* (1910).
--G.E. Moore, *Commonplace Book, 1919-1953*, ed. by Casimir Lewy (1962).

Week 3. Symmetrical Education: Oxford philosophy and T.S. Eliot

What feelings do we get from explanations? Can we shape forms of writing in which thought and sensibility are not dissociated? As a student of philosophy with Josiah Royce in Harvard, then with Harold Joachim in Oxford, Eliot was intrigued by the deep psychic affects of expository forms and strenuously concerned by the limits of certain kinds of systematic thinking. Eliot contends that most people misunderstand the philosophical poet to be one who has 'a scheme of the universe, who embodies that scheme in verse', when in fact to be 'philosophical' in poetry is to find 'the emotional and sense equivalent'; to work by indirect and expressive collateral forms. Is Eliot, in this sense, a philosophical poet-critic?

To ask this question, the main writings of interest will not just be those Eliot published in professional philosophical journals (i.e. the *Monist*) but also his unpublished fragments and marginal notes, which practice a version of his sense of metaphysics as 'second thoughts'. Eliot annotated profusely; his copy of Aristotle's *de Anima*, for example (held in King's College Modern Archives). Does this alter our understanding of the presentation of 'The Waste Land', a poem annotated like a classic? Other crosswinds of philosophical influence you might consider include: Bergson, Russell, Schopenhauer, F.H. Bradley (the subject of Eliot's PhD), Joachim, Collingwood. You might also wish to look back to other writers with university educations in philosophy—Walter Pater, for example, or Gerard Manley Hopkins—or glance forwards to Susan Sontag's parallel journey to Eliot's: both turned away from 'Oxford philosophy' for that of Paris.

Key works:
--'Notes/Summary': pp.72-77; 82-9; 118-121; 173-7 in *Josiah Royce's Seminar, 1913-14*, ed. Harry T. Costello (1981).
--T.S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land' [1922] (preferably the facsimile, ed. Valerie Eliot).
--Eliot, 'Lecture 1' in *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* [1926], ed. Ronald Schuchard.

You are encouraged to consult the Hayward Bequest, King's, which includes:

--Eliot's three Essays on Kant (1913), with comments by Eliot's supervisor at Harvard.
--Eliot's 'Philosophical Essays and Notes' from Harvard.
--3 annotated proofs for Eliot's preface to Simone Weil's 'The Need for Roots', (1952).
--Eliot's profusely annotated copy of Aristotle's *De Anima* ['Copy used in 1914-15 with notes made during R. G. Collingwood's explication de texte'.]

Collateral works:
--T.S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley* [1918] (1964).
--G.M. Hopkins, *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins, vol.4: Oxford Essays.*
--H.H. Joachim, *Immediate Experience and Mediation* (1919).

Week 4. Other Minds: Gilbert Ryle and Iris Murdoch

Iris Murdoch turned against the currents of both continental and analytical philosophy that were dominant in her formative years as a thinker and writer: first, existentialism (it makes the good life appear like a mere shopping trip, she argued); then its seeming opposites, behaviourism and ordinary language philosophy (drastically dehydrated world views, she believed) — only to find they had strong affinities. By way of Murdoch's example, this seminar re-animates some powerful quarrels between philosophical traditions and practices. It also asks some acute questions of the ethical turn in recent literary criticism by setting Murdoch's critiques (in both essays and novels) of philosophers against their practices of prose. How, for example, does ordinary language philosophy help, or fail to help us to understand the ethical potential of the novel as form? How does the gap between 'continental' and 'analytical' modes of thought widen from the mid-twentieth-century onwards and how might it distort our possibilities for reading literature philosophically? We will pay particular attention to Sartre and Gilbert Ryle, testing, for example, Murdoch's satire of Ryle's methods against his own advocacy of 'thick description' and his taxonomies of feelings and forms of conviction.

Key works:
--Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (1949); chapters 'Emotion' and 'Self-Knowledge'; 'Jane Austen and the Moralists', *Oxford Review*, 1 (1966).
--Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net* (1954), and 'Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee', 'Thinking and Language', 'Against Dryness', in *Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. Peter Conradi (1999).

Collateral works:
--Austin, 'A Plea for Excuses' and 'Pretending' in *Philosophical Papers*, ed. by Urmson and Warnock (1990).
--Iris Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953).
--Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say* (1958).

5. 'Philosophy Notebook': Jacques Derrida and Samuel Beckett

'I never read philosophers'—so Beckett claimed in 1961. Like Wittgenstein, Beckett claimed not to have much concern for the history of thought; after all, what is not represented on a map is representation itself: that is unnamable. In this seminar, we will discuss shadow or negative relations between writers by way of Derrida's inability to write about Beckett's importance for him. We will explore this alongside Beckett's writing or lack of writing 'about' others significant for his thought, particularly philosophers. With close attention to recent work on Beckett's notebooks and the contents of his Paris library, we will ask questions about what is unsaid or unsayable. Beckett, for example, possessed a substantial (annotated) collection of works by and about Wittgenstein: is Wittgenstein to Beckett what Beckett is to Derrida? There will be opportunities to reflecting on questions of: naming, pronouns, translation, aporia, absence, chora, signing, dryness, minimalism, textuality, and philosophy as writing.

Key works:
--Beckett, *The Unnamable* (1953); 'Whoroscope' [1930], *Collected Poems in English & French.*
--Derrida, 'An Interview with Jacques Derrida', in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Attridge (1992); *On the Name* (1995).

Collateral works:
--Beckett, *Proust* (1931).
--Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', in *Essays Critical and Clinical* (1998).
--Van Hulle & Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library* (2013).

6. Language Games: Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jan Zwicky

As preparation for this seminar, we will visit the Wittgenstein Archive (located c. 1mile from the Faculty, off Barton Road). Our visit will allow us to explore Wittgenstein's way of writing philosophy in the form of 'remarks', in a complex network of connections and repetitions, only fully graspable within the contexts of the manuscripts.

We will trace Wittgenstein's afterlives in some forms of linguistically innovative poetics and poetry, which variously take up his sense of philosophy as 'working on oneself' or as 'language game'. Jan Zwicky's contrapuntal, non-linear modes of writing 'lyric philosophy' offer a powerful example here. You might wish also to think about the poems and poetics of, for example: Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Charles Bernstein, or Lyn Heijian. To extend these reflections on responsive forms, it may also be of interest to set Zwicky's sense of 'relinquishing' against the philosophical form of 'decreation' practiced by Simone Weill and explored poetically by Anne Carson. This seminar also has scope for considering interests in Wittgenstein's forms of inquiry across avant-garde art, music, performance and dance.

Key works:
--Wittgenstein, ed. Nedo (1994), *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Vienna edition*; Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* [1933-5], ed. Rush Rhees et al (1991).
--Jan Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy* (1992); Part One.

Collateral works:
--Simone Weill, *Gravity and Grace* (1947/52); esp. 'Decreation'.
--Anne Carson, *Decreation* (2005); esp. Beckett's Quad.
--Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Language-Games* (1971).