# Research Framework Seminars

**Poetry & Poetics**

This series of seminars ranges widely in the history of Anglophone verse to set poetry in dialogue with the philosophical, theoretical and conceptual paradigms that have framed its composition, circulation and reception. Reading between the particulars of poetic artefacts and their theorisation, the seminars hold the distinction between primary and secondary texts up for scrutiny, to encourage as much discussion of the conceptual work done by poems and the historical and verbal particulars of critical texts as *vice versa*.

Poetry & Poetics seminars might typically include the following term-long courses:

## Forms and Affordances

This course focuses on poetry and poetics on and off the page. With particular attention to current work in historical poetics and the new lyric studies it considers aspects of verse- making that are as much conceptual and ideological as they are formal and technical.

Topics discussed might include ‘Poem’, ‘Rhythm’, ‘Rhyme’, ‘Space’, ‘Figure’, ‘Voice’.

## Transmission and Exchange

This course takes the cross-period dimension of the seminar series as a provocation to consider poetic interactions across time and between cultures. The course puts theories of genre, mode, influence, and translation into conversation with particular moments of poetic exchange, when verse produced in one period, place, or culture calls on, listens to, adapts or betrays that of another. Topics discussed might include ‘Genre, mode and transmission’, ‘Sequence and collection’, ‘Recovery in the archive’, ‘Loss in translation’, ‘Cultural borrowing and theft’, ‘Between media’.

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# Politics & Culture: Capitalism, Ecology, Decolonisation

This seminar series brings together overlapping and urgent concerns which emerge at the intersection of the environmental humanities, colonial / postcolonial studies and engagements with Marxism, capitalism, technology, materiality, feminism, class, nation and sexuality. The seminars will offer a diverse range of courses, with the aim of creating intellectual synergy between areas and consciously moving away from untenable separations (including that of the Western and non-Western). Seminars may examine, for example, decolonization and nationalism; indigeneity and ecology; the cultures of late capitalism in dialogue with gender and queer studies; or the question of race alongside class, gender, climate or archival justice. Some of the most important theoretical insights of the last several decades lead us towards thinking in terms of intersecting and intertwined phenomena and situating the text and the critic in the world. In response, this is a series of seminars that seeks to identify and elucidate connections that are not only intellectually vital but increasingly a matter of survival. Aesthetics and politics are put back into urgent dialogue.

Politics & Culture: Capitalism, Ecology, Decolonisation seminars might typically include the following term-long courses:

**Empire and Decolonization**, including topics such as ‘Empire, Modernity and Colonial Discourse’, ‘Anticolonialism and Decolonization’, ‘“Race” and Resistance’, ‘Indigeneity and Epistemology’, ‘Queering Postcolonialism’, ‘Capitalism and Postcolonial Ecologies’.

**Ecology and Writing**, including topics such as ‘Land Uses’, ‘Body Burdens and Toxic Legacies’, ‘Decolonising Nature’, ‘Planet Slum’, ‘Life On A Damaged Planet’, ‘Epigenetics and Entanglement’.

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# Material Texts

This seminar series will explore the current state of thinking about the material text, asking how changing configurations of media affect the writing, circulation, reception, and editing of literature, and how our own interpretations might be reshaped by a better understanding of textual mediation. Ranging boldly across periods, examining texts in manuscript, print, and other forms, and making extensive use of the extraordinary holdings of the University Library and other Cambridge collections, the seminar will draw a hands-on acquaintance with the stuff of books into an ongoing conversation about the philosophical, historical, political and aesthetic implications of thinking about texts as things in the world.

Material Texts seminars might typically include the following term-long courses:

## Texts, Media, Readers

This course of seminars - taught in the University Library and making extensive use of its collections and historical printing room - looks at the ways in which literary texts are produced and transmitted, in manuscript, print, and other media. It pays particular attention to the material technologies and processes that make texts, and that make meanings, and their implications for editors and critics.

Topics discussed might include: ‘The state of the field: theories and practices’, ‘From manuscript to reader: writers, editors, annotators’, ‘Reproducing texts: technologies and values from manuscript to digital’, ‘Textual technologies: paratexts, incl. prefaces, indices, diagrams, annotation, etc.’, ‘Text, design, image: illustrations, artists’ books, typography, page design, etc.’, ‘Making texts - practical exercise and reflection in the historical printing room.’

## Textual Cultures

This course of seminars - taught in the University Library and making extensive use of its collections - looks at material texts as things in the world. Ranging from the medieval to the digital ages, we will examine the range of forms, contexts, and conditions within which literary texts are made, circulated, valued, consumed, collected, and contested.

Topics discussed might include: ‘Print cultures (magazines, broadsides, pamphlets, newspapers, printed ephemera)’, ‘What is a book? (including manuscript, anthology, Sammelband, serial publication, play text)’, ‘Books in public: marketing, collections, readerships, kinds of value’, ‘My book: readers, owners, use, reception’, ‘Texts and the state: copyright, licensing, property, censorship’, ‘Books across the globe: colonisation, migration, export, suppression’.

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# Narrative and Its Mediations

Narrative lies at the heart of everything we do. Every culture constructs narratives about its origins and its purposes, its ambitions and its failures. Stories make sense of things. This strand of seminars will consider some of the uses and attractions of narrative — from offering advice to encouraging empathy, from documenting experience to enabling us to imagine alternative realities. Seminars will also consider how narrative operates across different genres and media: that is, how narrative works in particular literary genres, but also what happens when we think about narrative in aural and visual media, in the form of song, painting, film, gaming and much more.

Narrative and Its Mediations seminars might typically include the following term-long courses:

## Some Uses of Narrative

This course of seminars explores what it is that stories enable us to do: how they store and transmit cultural knowledge; how they teach us to operate in the world and enable us to imagine new ways of living; how they establish and disrupt identities. Texts from a variety of genres, cultures and periods will be read in the context of key theoretical debates on these questions. Topics discussed might include: ‘Origin and identity’, ‘Advice’, ‘Testimony’, ‘Empathy’, ‘Speculation’, ‘Entertainment’.

## Narrative Media

This series offers an introduction to thinking about narrative beyond the page. Seminars examine works from a variety of old and new media (from song to TV, painting to gaming) and consider how the particular properties of each medium shape the way in which stories are told. They explore the ways in which narrative theory might work across diverse media, and the extent to which new media necessitate new theoretical approaches. Topics discussed might include: ‘Song and story’, ‘Narrative in Painting’, ‘Narrative in Film’, ‘Serial TV’, ‘Graphic Narrative’, ‘Gaming’.

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# Literature & Philosophy

This series of seminars places literary and philosophical texts drawn from a range of periods in conversation, asks how these different modes of thinking and writing address common concerns, and considers what each can teach the other. Both ‘literature’ and ‘philosophy’ are understood broadly in this context, the one as encompassing diverse genres of creative writing (poetry, plays, fiction, life writing, polemic), the other as embracing multiple forms of abstract intellectual enquiry ranging from discussions of cognition and language philosophy to ethics, aesthetics, and (in a wide sense) theology. The emphasis is on treating the different kinds of texts explored here on their own terms first, before bringing them into dialogue to see how each — the literary and the philosophical — challenges and complements the other, and how this relationship changes over time. (No prior knowledge of philosophy is required for these seminars.)

The following, term-long courses (each of which could be taken independently of the other) are typical of the sort of seminars that will be offered for this option.

## Language, Faith and Beauty

A course of six sessions organised around the themes of language, faith and beauty. We begin by asking seminar members to examine some philosophical attempts to characterise language and to test the adequacy of those ideas against their own experiences of different kinds of literary language. The discussion in later sessions then turns to some ways in which belief and faith have been defined and imagined, both by theological and secular writers, and in literary and argumentative genres. The course concludes by concentrating on beauty — questions such as what beauty has meant to literary and philosophical authors, and to what uses it has been put in different periods and contexts.

## Language and Forms of Life

This course offers students an eclectic and open-ended introduction to the relationship between literature and philosophy, with the more particular intention of exploring the porous discursive boundaries between these rich and historically variegated forms of intellectual inquiry and writerly art. No prior philosophical knowledge is required; nor does the course presuppose a stable and determinate notion of ‘philosophy’ (or ‘literature’, for that matter). We will engage, instead, with a variety of works from classical antiquity through the early-modern period and on to the twentieth century, asking in each case how philosophical thinking might assume shape, significance, and purpose within a particular formal medium (such as dialogue, lecture, essay, letter, and treatise). This aspect of the course will involve discussion of writers including Plato, Hobbes, Wittgenstein, and Arendt. But we also wish to consider some of the ways in which poetry and fiction might themselves be understood as enabling or embodying philosophical inquiry of various kinds—whether ethical, epistemological, or political—while holding in sceptical suspension the assumption that literary language can only ever aspire to function as the dress of philosophical thought.

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# Bodies

This series of seminars examines the role of the body in a variety of texts drawn from the ancient world through to the twenty-first century. The aim of each of the two ‘Bodies’ courses is to introduce and interrogate some of the ways in which these writings depict and explore embodiment – both its possibilities and its limitations. We will be aided in our investigations by approaches to the body philosophical, anthropological, psychoanalytic, medical and political, and will bring these to bear upon a wide variety of literary genres. Throughout both courses, we will explore how different epochs and cultural contexts have inflected thought about subjectivity, gender, sexuality, the senses, and embodied identity more generally. The body’s potential to work with or against social and cultural norms will be a repeated point of focus, too. Each ‘Bodies’ course will prompt the question how far an understanding of literary texts can be enhanced by reading them side by side with critical and methodological approaches that foreground the body.

Bodies seminars might typically include the following term-long courses:

## The Body in Culture

This series of seminars explores theoretical and historical perspectives on the place of the body in culture. We will read a selection of literary texts from early modernity through to the twenty-first century (Montaigne, Shakespeare, Anthony Trollope, Maggie Nelson, Ali Smith), alongside theorists of the body such as Marcel Mauss, Michel Foucault, Jean-Luc Nancy, Frantz Fanon, Simone Weil, Saidiya Hartman, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler. Some questions we will explore include: Is the body a form of knowledge? What part does the body play in the experience and construction of self and other? How is the immediate materiality of the body represented in literary texts? How, conversely, can the body itself be 'written' – racialized, epidermalized, marked and changed by ideological and socio-historical forces?

## Body Limits

## In this inter-disciplinary, cross-period course we examine how the body limits (whether constructively or restrictively) our understanding and experience. The course’s six seminars divide into three pairs. In our first two sessions we ask in what sense the body constitutes a boundary for the person (or a home for more than one person). We ponder, too, how meaningful it is to speak of a boundary between body and mind (or soul), and consider (conversely) to what extent bodily capacity may be limited by the mind. In our second pair of seminars we turn to the senses, focusing both on ways in which individual senses are limited and/or their limits can be overcome, and on ways in which authors have sought to circumvent the written word’s limitations as a medium through which to represent sensations. We also examine writers’ reflections on literature’s capacity to illuminate the relationship between matter, sensation, and sexuality. In our final two sessions we consider the embodied person as a focus of others’ sympathy and of narrative representation, and we ask what limitations various ethical, literary, and psychoanalytical forms of writing manifest in these respects. In pursuing these different themes, we repeatedly put modern and contemporary writings in conversation with ancient, early modern, eighteenth-century, and nineteenth-century works, whether by doing so within individual sessions or across a pair of sessions.

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