Syllabus

What is pleasure?

In pleasure you revel. Perhaps it's something you turn to of your own volition, providing yourself with nourishment by which you might feel good about yourself, forget yourself, or improve yourself.

Let's proceed with a highly qualified assumption; that you read for pleasure.

Not all the time, of course, and not all the time (or even nearly so) when you can move the ends of the earth and find the time, but once in awhile, when you're not preoccupied with school or work or the complex, shifting entanglements of Relationships, amidst the arsenal of activities you might turn to for pleasure you choose reading. You pick up a book.

Most of us have had the experience of feeling that a book has changed us, if not in the way we understand the world then in how we feel about our experience. It may help sort out the confusing ambiguities that so often accompany our feelings. Books may provide us with information, turn our opinions inside out or furnish us with the ammunition to better defend opinions we already possess. Sometimes, should the book be a work of art, the narrative may compel us to take a profound look at ourselves, who we are and where we're going. Faulkner, summing up the ambition (if not the precise accomplishment) of his art, posited that the hope and the grandeur of great fiction was to inspire us to be braver, kinder, more compassionate than we are. I might be inclined to regard such lofty sentiment as grandiose, except that I have felt that when reading Faulkner and a few others.

What we carry away from a good book can last an hour or a lifetime.

If, as Saul Bellow has said, a writer is a reader who's been moved to emulate, certainly the indispensable factor in the equation is the emotional and intellectual largesse one experiences when one has been touched by grandeur. Being so moved is a little like falling in love--- you want to keep it to yourself for as long as you can bear, but you also want to pass it around. You're never as generous as you are when you're falling in love, and you're never as selfish. Perhaps that's why, at least since the invention of moveable type, serious poets have been concerned with the challenges of making poetry vital for a larger audience that seemingly cares little for it.

The selected readings and presentations in this course seek to describe and analyze not only the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary poetry, but the directions some poets are now taking to invigorate the art, to compel the larger audience now inclined, for pleasure, to turn elsewhere in the array
of available options—to instead read a serious novel, biography, or possibly a whimsical essay on the discoveries of natural science, to see a film or attend a symphony.

In the face of such noble, generous ambition, how might you conduct a critical analysis?

Well, perhaps you've noticed these are all highbrow alternatives, as if these observers, having given up the prospect for poetry again becoming a popular art, are content with expanding the audience marginally. Are their assumptions shrewdly realistic, or merely lacking in imagination? You may choose to conduct a critical analysis of their descriptions and analyses, to confront their recommendations, or to make a case they haven't.

Some of the selected readings—including the centerpiece, Joseph Epstein's controversial attack on the contemporary milieu, "Who Killed Poetry?"—talk to each other. You may choose to join the conversation. Or you may advance specific supportable claims on behalf of a poet you've come to love, or dispute articulated lines of hype championing one you find, after close and fair examination, over-rated. The possibilities for practicing the skill of critical analysis on the subject of contemporary poetry are abundant, given enough effort and an open heart.

Robert Frost often maintained that the function of a poem is to instruct and delight. Perhaps that's what the speaker in William Carlos Williams' "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," means when he says, "It is difficult/to get the news from poems/yet men die miserably every day/for lack/of what is found there." To communicate such force always has been the ambition of serious poets. Whether the current avenue is to enlarge the lyric in such a way that it might embody more discursive subject matter, or to explore strict narratives in which all aspects of the poem are subservient to the story (thereby recovering possibilities long ceded to the novel), to return to formal constructions and their rhythmic, mnemonic properties (coupled with a casual subject matter centered in pop culture), or to fully engage the suggestive possibilities of pure language divorced from traditional referents, the directions of a contemporary poetry in transition make their case for the same destination.

Sometimes, for pleasure, you pick up a book.

I've found that the following class policies work well in fostering an atmosphere in which critical analysis can be learned. While our class is not governed on democratic principles, should your assessment differ please feel free to make your case during office hours. My door is always open.

1. To ensure that each student receives the full benefit of their tuition, class will start at the precise time given in the Schedule of Classes. Tardiness is tantamount to absence.
2. You have 3 cuts. My advice: Don't use them all up right away. Cut 4 may lower your final grade. (I reserve the right.)


4. No late papers. All formal assignments are to be typed, double-spaced.

5. Class will frequently assume a workshop format. This means that you will be expected to comment on your classmates' work. (In other words, to present a critical analyses of your classmates' critical analyses.) In that this is a class in critical analysis, your evaluation of your classmates' efforts are considered to constitute your practicum.

6. Do I grade on improvement? Over the course of the workshop process it's expected that your efforts will demonstrate considerable improvement. In that only the final draft will be graded, your grade will invariably reflect that improvement.

   Major papers must be workshopped at least once. Otherwise I will not accept them.

7. There will be two or three graded papers of 3-5 pages each.

   There will also be weekly written assignments as we tackle the readings and workshop our papers, on which you will receive either a check or a zero, depending upon whether you demonstrate a good faith effort. There will be 15 weekly assignments; you are required to hand in 12.

8. Texts for the course are available in the UMC Bookstore. The two required texts are the Reader (a packet of selected essays described above) and Weingarten and Higerson's Poets of the New Century (Godine). While far from definitive, occasionally cockeyed in its selections, sometimes unsure of its purpose, PNC ranks as the most useful--for teaching purposes--anthology of contemporary poetry with which I'm familiar. It promises to serve as both an apt survey and a fertile source for critical analysis.

   As optional texts I recommend Dana Gioia's Can Poetry Matter? (Graywolf), which concerns itself with many of the issues pertinent to our class, and Suzanne Hudson's and Molly LeClair's Thinking and Writing in the Humanities (Thomson Wadsworth), a cogent demonstration of the structural approach we'll use in this class, as well as a text abundantly worthy of its title.

9. Plagiarism results in an F; your case will be turned over to the Dean of A&S. All secondary sources you consult in writing your formal papers must be cited.
10. Grade key for major papers:
A  Exceptional in form, content and performance; clean, clear style, no mechanical errors.
B  A good, interesting paper with no major flaws.
C  Adequate, reasonably confident; a mixture of strengths and weaknesses; basically follows form.
D  Seriously deficient in content, form, or mechanics.
F  Paper incoherent, disastrously flawed, or not turned in when due.

Reasonably well-executed essays which are intellectually uninspired will receive Cs.
Descriptive essays will receive Ds. (Here's my concept: Given that the focus of this class is critical analysis, D is for description.)

11. Grade weights
In most cases, your final grade will be determined according to the following considerations:
Weekly assignments-  25%
Class participation-  25%
Major papers-        50%

In some instances, weekly assignments and class participation will be weighted more heavily than the combined 50% indicated above.

12. Unless you provide a superior alternative, your major papers will be expected to take advantage of the following structure:

Analysis Structure:
Occasion (an interesting observation about the evidence)
Transitional Question (about the Occasion)
Thesis (the answer to the transitional question and the central opinion that your analysis seeks to develop and support)
Projected Organization (the outline of the evidence in support of your thesis)
Developmental Sections (the development of your thesis through your specific lines of support. Generally, development can be defined as logic expressed through authority, analogy and anecdote.)
Conclusion

Argument Structure:
Occasion (an interesting observation about the evidence)
Transitional Question (about the Occasion)
Counterthesis (an opposing opinion about the transitional question)
Counterevidence (the outline of support for the opposing opinion)
Thesis (your opinion about the opposing opinion)
Projected Organization (outline of evidence that will point-by-point engage the counterevidence)
Counterdevelopment (the fair and thorough summary of the counterevidence)
Development Sections (the development of your refutations of the counterdevelopment.)
Conclusion

13. Critical analysis, too, can be a source of pleasure.

14. If you have a specific physical, psychiatric, or learning disability that requires instructor accommodation, please let me know early in the semester so that your learning needs may be met appropriately. You will need to provide documentation of your disability to the Office of Learning Disabilities, Willard 322, (303) 492-8671.