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WRITING CHRISTIAN POETRY

Autumn 2021

Now let us praise the Creator and Guardian
Of the heavenly kingdom, his power and purpose,
His mind and might, his wondrous works.
He shaped each miraculous beginning,
Each living creature, each earthly kind.
He first made for the children of men
Heaven as roof. Then our holy Shaper
Crafted middle-earth, a home for mankind:
Our God and Guardian watching over us—
Eternal, almighty—our Lord and King.

—Caedmon's hymn, trans. Craig Williamson

Christianity begins with God's creative Word: "In the beginning was the Word." This course approaches the study of Christian poetry as an exercise in creativity, encouraging students to explore the history of Christianity as an expression of the poetic imagination. Readings will be taken from across the ancient, medieval, and modern Christian tradition, focusing particularly on works originally written in Old, Middle, or modern English as models for writing our own poems, but drawing on a wide range of exegetical, liturgical, and visionary works to support appreciation of the symbolism and narrative embedded in these models. Is there such a thing as a distinctively Christian perspective on history, morality, beauty, and art? What role does irony play? Is Christian poetry fundamentally tragic or comic? What is the relationship between Christianity and culture?

BOOKS AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT THE SEMINARY CO-OP BOOKSTORE

Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask
(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953, 2013) [ISBN 9780691157009]

Anthony Esolen, *Ironies of Faith: The Laughter at the Heart of Christian Literature*
(Wilmington, Delaware: 2007) [ISBN 9781933859316]

Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination* (New York:
Routledge, 2012) [ISBN 9781409449362]

Andrew Thornton-Norris, *The Spiritual History of English* (The Social Affairs Unit, 2009)
[ISBN 9781500559366]

John Martineau, *Trivium: The Classical Liberal Arts of Grammar, Logic, & Rhetoric* (New
York: Bloomsbury, 2016) [ISBN 9781632864963]

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

The main requirement for this seminar is to write **a poem of 50 stanzas of 8 lines each (400 lines total)** on a Christian theme of your choice. The reading and discussion assignments are intended to help you think about the meaning of writing poetry within the Christian tradition, as well as to give you ideas about topics and imagery to include in your poem. Each week there will be an exercise to help you think about the content and structure of your poem. Your poem will be due at the end of the quarter, but you should start thinking about it and collecting materials for it from the first week of class. Your final version should include footnotes and a bibliography to help me appreciate your use of sources and models, along with a short introduction (4-5 pages) to your poem.

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READING AND DISCUSSION ASSIGNMENTS

September 20 Creation

Aurora Bearialis, by the Dragon Common Room (work-in-progress)

Thornton-Norris, *Spiritual History*, pp. 11-38

Curtius, *European Literature*, pp. 3-35, 587-98

Exercise: Bring a favorite poem to class to read out loud.

October 7 Advent

Christ I :Advent Lyrics, trans. Craig Williamson, *The Complete Old English Poems* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2107), pp. 303-25

Dream of the Rood, trans. Williamson, *Complete Old English Poems*, pp. 253-58

Guite, "Introduction: Poetry and Transfiguration: Reading for a New Vision," and "Seeing through Dreams: Image and Truth in *The Dream of the Rood*," in *Faith, Hope, and Poetry*, pp. 1-50

Thornton-Norris, *Spiritual History*, pp. 39-53

Curtius, *European Literature*, pp. 145-66, 446-75

Exercise: Write 20 lines of iambic pentameter in heroic couplets on your favorite feast day.

October 14 Heaven

Pearl, trans. J.R.R. Tolkien

Esolen, "The Child at the End of the Journey: *Pearl*," in *Ironies of Faith*, pp. 366-99

Curtius, *European Literature*, pp. 183-246, 501-14

Exercise: Brainstorm theme for final poem. Choose model structure (e.g. quest, pilgrimage, vision, parable). Define model stories, including passages from Scripture. Collect models for verse form and theme.

October 21 Psalmody

The Poets' Book of Psalms: The Complete Psalter as Rendered by Twenty-five Poets from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Centuries, ed. Laurance Wieder (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995)

Thornton-Norris, *Spiritual History*, pp. 55-67

Curtius, *European Literature*, pp. 247-301, 519-37

Exercise: Pick a psalm, and rewrite it in a meter of your choice. Compare your version with two other translations.

October 28 Story

William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Tempest*

Guite, "Truth and Feigning: Story and Play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*," in *Faith, Hope, and Poetry*, pp. 53-74

Esolen, "The Fullness of Time: Shakespeare's *Tempest*," in *Ironies of Faith*, pp. 112-51

Curtius, *European Literature*, pp. 302-47

Exercise: Collect reference materials for your poem: images, photographs, drawings, maps, costumes. Define main characters: traits, ways of speaking, style; philosophy and/or theology that they articulate.

November 4 Light

Sir John Davies, *Nosce Teipsum*, in *The Poems of Sir John Davies*, ed. Robert Krueger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 1-67, with commentary 317-53

Guite, "Understanding Light: Ways of Knowing in the Poems of Sir John Davies," in *Faith, Hope, and Poetry*, pp. 75-101

Curtius, *European Literature*, pp. 380-401

Exercise: Outline the plot of your poem stanza by stanza. Write Pixar-style "pitch."

November 11 Fall

John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (in 12 books), books I, IV, and IX

[<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/26/pg26-images.html>]

Guite, "Holy Light and Human Blindness: Visions of the Invisible in the Poetry of Henry Vaughan and Milton," in *Faith, Hope, and Poetry*, pp. 125-43

Esolen, "The Power of Obedience," in *Ironies of Faith*, pp. 195-228

Thornton-Norris, *Spiritual History*, pp. 69-81

Exercise: Write 10 stanzas of your poem.

November 18 Love

Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Wreck of the Deutschland," "The Loss of the Eurydice," and "The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe," in *Mortal Beauty, God's Grace: Major Poems and Spiritual Writings*, ed. John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), pp. 9-20, 27-32, 41-45

Esolen, "Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Dangerous Love of God," in *Ironies of Faith*, pp. 305-22

Thornton-Norris, *Spiritual History*, pp. 83-110

Exercise: Write 10 stanzas of your poem.

December 2 Words

Dana Gioia, "Can Poetry Matter?," *The Atlantic* (May 1991):

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1991/05/can-poetry-matter/305062/>

Poems by Dana Gioia, Carl Winderl, and Malcolm Guite

Thornton-Norris, *Spiritual History*, pp. 111-55

Exercise: Write 10 stanzas of your poem.

POEM (50 stanzas of 8 lines each, with introduction and notes) DUE DECEMBER 9 by 11:59pm on Canvas.