

# LT178 Theory of the Elegy

Seminar Leader: Francesco Giusti

Course Times: Tue & Thu 15:45-17:15

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Office Hours: By appointment—probably the hours directly before and after class.



## Course Description

Elegy is perhaps the most traditional of poetic genres, yet it remains a vital space for cultural reflection, transmission, and reinvention. For friends or partners, public figures or collective ideas, vulnerable social groups, endangered species or even a dying planet, the elegiac voice still performs a significant function in contemporary private and public discourse. By looking closely at examples from different traditions (in English translation), the course will both trace the developments of this poetic genre, from its ancient roots up to the digital age, and open up to broader cultural issues: the politics of memory and mourning, identity formation, online afterlives, negotiations with personal and collective past(s), as well as environmental emergencies and postcolonial urgencies. Today, artistic practices — not only in writing, but also in visual and performing arts (reenactment and archival strategies are widespread in contemporary art) — appear to be increasingly committed to rethinking our relations with the past, with a growing effort to do justice to what or who is no longer here and bear witness to their past existence. The elegiac mode thus becomes a kind of discourse for reckoning with love, grief, and social power, which needs to be re-discussed in a transcultural and transtemporal perspective.

## Requirements

Students are required to attend all classes, to come to class prepared and with the relevant materials and textbooks. Participation consists in contributing productively to class discussion in a respectful manner, and in demonstrating a sound knowledge of the texts assigned.

## Course Readings

Students are required to purchase the following text:

David Kennedy, *Elegy*. London: Routledge, 2007. ISBN-13: 978-0415367776

All other materials (poems, videos, artworks and theoretical writings) will be shared on Google Classroom.

## Use of Electronics

Please note that in seminars we will work on printed texts: NO COMPUTERS OR TABLETS allowed in class. Texts which are made available in digital format should be printed for use in class. The use of electronic devices during class time is only allowed for disability accommodation. If you have a disability accommodation please inform your instructor at the beginning of the course.

## Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the staunchest regard for academic integrity and expects good academic practice from students in their studies. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

## Attendance

Please note that attendance at ALL classes is expected. More than two absences (that is absences from two sessions of 90 minutes) in a semester will significantly affect the participation grade for the course. Late arrival or leaving during class time will count as an absence. Missing more than 30% of all sessions may result in failing the course. Please consult the Student Handbook for regulations governing periods of illness or leaves of absence.

If you cannot attend class because of a COVID-19 related issue, online alternatives will be made available, including remote participation, asynchronous discussion, and/or alternative assignments (video presentations or recorded dialogues with other students). If necessary, guest seminars will be held via Zoom. Any further forms of remote participation that become necessary during the semester will be communicated via email. During any online session it is strongly encouraged to have your camera on.

## Writing Assignments

Midterm essay (2000 words), due **23:59 Saturday, October 17**

Final essay (3000 words), due **23:59 Friday, December 18**

All assignments must be completed in order to pass the course.

## Policy on Late Submission of Papers

From the Student Handbook on the submission of essays:

*Essays that are up to 24 hours late will be downgraded one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline and cannot receive a grade of higher than C. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment.*

## Grade Breakdown

Participation 30%

Midterm essay 30%

Final essay 40%

## Schedule

### Week 1 – The Elegiac Mode

Tuesday, September 1 – Introduction: The Elegiac Mode in Poetry and the Arts

Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917)

David Kennedy, *Elegy* (London: Routledge, 2007), Ch. 1, pp. 1–9

Thursday, September 3 – The Funeral Lament in Ancient Greece

Homer, *Iliad* (XIX, 282–302 and 315–337; XXII 477–514; XXIV 725–745)

Euripides, *Andromache* (91–117)

Gregory Nagy, “Ancient Greek Elegy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, ed.

Karen Weisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010), pp. 13–45

### Week 2 – Mythologies

Tuesday, September 8 – Elegizing Sappho

Sappho, fr. 1; Ovid, *Heroides* 15; John Donne, “Sappho to Philaenis”; Giacomo Leopardi, “Ultimo canto di Saffo”; H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), “Fragment Forty-one”

Thursday, September 10 – Looking Back at Eurydice

Virgil, *Georgics* IV, 453–527; Ovid, *Metamorphosis* 10, 1–77; Rainer Maria Rilke, “Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes”; Louise Glück, “Orfeo,” in *Vita Nova* (1999)

### Week 3 – Excessive Desire

Tuesday, September 15 – Latin Love Elegy: Tibullus, Propertius, Ovid (selection of poems)

Alison Sharrock, “The poeta-amator, nequitia and recusatio,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 151–165.

Thursday, September 17 – Medieval and Early Modern Elegy: Petrarch and John Donne

#### **Week 4 – Poetry of Mourning**

Tuesday, September 22 – John Milton, *Lycidas*

David Kennedy, *Elegy* (London: Routledge, 2007), ch. 2, pp. 10–34

Thursday, September 24 – Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats*

David Kennedy, *Elegy* (London: Routledge, 2007), ch. 3, pp. 35–56

R. Clifton Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), excerpts

#### **Week 5 – The Poetics of Twentieth-Century Elegy**

Tuesday, September 29 – A Human Condition: Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die achte Elegie* (Eighth Elegy)

Sigmund Freud, *On Transience* (1916 [1915])

David Kennedy, *Elegy* (London: Routledge, 2007), ch. 4, pp. 57–74

Thursday, October 1 – The Personal and the Political: William Butler Yeats, “Easter, 1916”; W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” and “September 1, 1939”

Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), ch. 4: “Nationalism, Transnationalism, and the Poetry of Mourning,” 71–93

#### **Week 6 – The Ethics and Politics of Mourning**

Tuesday, October 6 – Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by

Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 63–80

Diana Fuss, *Dying Modern: A Meditation on Elegy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), excerpts

Thursday, October 8 – Jacques Derrida, “The Deaths of Roland Barthes,” in *The Work of*

*Mourning*, ed. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 31–67

#### **Week 7 – The Ethics and Politics of Mourning**

Tuesday, October 13 – Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” in *Precarious Life: The*

*Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), 19–49

Thursday, October 15 – Students’ presentations: Every student pairs up with a partner and they present and discuss an elegy of their choice for 10 to 15 minutes.

The conversations can be held in class or video recorded.

**Midterm essay due 23:59 Saturday, October 17**

**Fall Break (Monday, October 19 – Sunday, October 25)**

### **Week 8 – Epic Elegies**

Tuesday, October 27 – Walt Whitman, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”

Max Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2007), 256–285

Thursday, October 29 – Allen Ginsberg, “Kaddish”

Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), excerpts

### **Week 9 – Time and Identity**

Tuesday, November 3 – Memory and Identity: Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes (and Anne Sexton)

David Kennedy, *Elegy* (London: Routledge, 2007), ch. 5, pp. 84–104

Thursday, November 5 – Suspended Time

Denise Riley, “A Part Song,” in *Say Something Back* (2016)

Denise Riley, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (2012), excerpts

### **Week 10 – Collective Voices**

Tuesday, November 10 – The Aids Elegy: Thom Gunn, Mark Doty, and the AIDS Memorial Quilt

David Kennedy, *Elegy* (London: Routledge, 2007), ch. 4, pp. 74–83

Thursday, November 12 – The Elegy in the Caribbean: Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite

### **Week 11 – Elegy and Dissent**

Tuesday, November 17 – Black Bodies: Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Claudia Rankine

Thursday, November 19 – The Elegy in the “Black Lives Matter” Era: Poetry and Street Art

Laura Vrana, “Denormalizing Elegy: Historical and Transnational Journeying in the Black Lives Matter Poetics of Patricia Smith, Aja Monet, and Shane McCrae,” in *Revisiting the Elegy in the Black Lives Matter Era*, ed. by Tiffany Austin, Sequoia Maner, Emily Ruth Rutter, and darlene anita scott (New York: Routledge 2020)

### **Week 12 – Eco-Elegies in the Anthropocene**

Tuesday, November 24 – An Impossible Elegy: Juliana Spahr, “Gentle Now, Don’t Add to Heartache” (2005)

Margaret Ronda, “Mourning and Melancholia in the Anthropocene” (2013)

Thursday, November 26 – Ecology and the Elegiac Voice

Bonnie Costello, “Fresh Woods: Elegy and Ecology among the Ruins,” and Timothy Morton, “The Dark Ecology of Elegy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, ed. by Karen Weisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 324–342 and 251–271

**Week 13 – An Endangered Planet: Octopuses in Theory, Poetry, and the Arts**

Tuesday, December 1 – Guest seminar: Cristina Baldacci (Art History and Theory, Ca' Foscari University, Venice)

Thursday, December 3 – Guest Seminar: Cristina Baldacci (Art History and Theory, Ca' Foscari University, Venice)

**Week 14 – Mournful Writing and Elegiac Images in the Digital Age**

Tuesday, December 8 – Selected images and texts from social media

David Kennedy, *Elegy* (London: Routledge, 2007), ch. 7, pp. 127–146

Davide Sisto, *Online Afterlives: Immortality, Memory, and Grief in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), excerpts.

Thursday, December 10 – Final discussion. Each student presents a poem or an artwork of their choice that exhibits an elegiac mode for 7 to 10 minutes. Presentations will be followed by a collective discussion. Presentations can be given in class or video recorded.

**Week 15 – Completion Week**

Final essay due 23:59 Friday, December 18