

“Absolutely Modern”: The Traces and Trails of French Modernism

Department of English, University of North Florida
LIT 4650: Comparative Literature (M 6-8:45) Bldg. 3, Room 1351

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Course Description

“There are in every man, at every moment, two simultaneous longings, one for God and the other for Satan. The invocation to God, or spirituality, is a wish to ascend; the invocation to Satan, or animality, is delight in degradation.”

-Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867)

“We must be *absolutely modern*.”

-Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891)

"If we are absolutely modern—and we are—it's because Rimbaud commanded us to be."

—John Ashbery, (b. 1927)

The title of this course is taken from a letter by the 17-year old French poet Arthur Rimbaud and his bold injunction (to himself and others) that the poets of his time must be “*absolutely modern*.” Intended in part as a rallying cry, Rimbaud’s insistence was that the new and the “modern” must be fully and unreservedly embraced by the artists and poets of his time, leaving behind the (dead) weight of history and tradition in order to encounter “the unknown,” to “make it new.”

With Rimbaud’s assertion very much in mind, this course will seek to understand more fully these early and seminal stirrings of French modernism and the literary and cultural context from which “the modern” was so abruptly and turbulently arising in France and elsewhere.

The focus of this interdisciplinary course will be upon the following: fiction (Gustave Flaubert, Marcel Proust, Gertrude Stein); poetry (Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, Guillaume Apollinaire); and painting (Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso).

Note: For those interested, during Summer B 2012, I will be conducting an 15-day cultural and literary tour of France (from July 1 – 15, 2012) where we will be visiting many of the major sites discussed in this class. Paris will be the central location for this tour, the hub of our travels, with three specific two-day excursions also arranged to related sites outside of the city. More details about this *optional* tour will be available soon.

Required Texts:

1. *The Anchor Anthology of French Poetry: From Nerval to Valery in English*, Publisher: Anchor; ISBN-10: 0385498888
2. *The Painters of Modern Life*, by Charles Baudelaire. Publisher: Phaidon Press; ISBN: 0714833657.
3. *Madame Bovary*, by Gustave Flaubert; trans. Lydia Davis. Publisher: Viking Adult; ISBN-10: 0670022071
4. *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters*. Publisher: University Of Chicago Press; ISBN-10: 2911397126
5. *Swann's Way: In Search of Lost Time*, Vol. 1, by Marcel Proust.; Penguin Classics, ISBN-10: 0142437964
6. *Gertrude Stein: Selections*. Edited by Joan Retallack. Publisher: U of CA Press; ISBN-10: 9780520248069
7. *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France-1885 to World War I*; by Roger Shattuck; Publisher: Vintage Books/Random House; Revised edition; ISBN-10: 0394704150
8. *Post-Impressionism*, by Bernard Denvir (Author), Publisher: Thames & Hudson; illustrated edition. ISBN-10: 0500202559
9. *Cubism (Art of Century)*, by Dorothea Eimert and Guillaume Apollinaire. Publisher: Parkstone Press. ISBN-10: 1844847497

Recommended Text (but required if you are seriously thinking about the French trip in July)

1. *A Simple Heart*, by Gustave Flaubert. Publisher: The Art of the Novella, ISBN-10: 0974607886
2. *Paris Spleen and La Fanfarlo*, by Charles Baudelaire, Publisher: Hackett Pub Co. ISBN-10: 0872209482