**Geoff Dyer**

**Spring 2020**

**Engl 305** : Introduction to Non-fiction Writing

Monday 2-4:20pm THH 107

(Office Hours at THH 430: Tuesday 1245.-1.45pm, or by appointment)

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(This syllabus may be revised)

**The Impersonal Art of the Personal Essay – and Vice-Versa**

Primarily a workshop, we use a number of classic examples of the essay to help guide us through the pitfalls and possibilities of the form. How to avoid crossing the line from the personal to the willfully self-indulgent? We know that you are interesting to *you* but how to make that ‘you’ interesting to everyone else? Conversely, how to imbue essays with the stamp of personal testimony without the support of a participating authorial personality? To help us navigate this potentially slippery terrain we will enlist the support of work by William Hazlitt, George Orwell, Joan Didion, James Baldwin, Annie Dillard, Meghan Daum and others.

Please make sure you buy and read Phillip Lopate’s anthology *The Art of the Personal Essay*. Even though it will not be a course text book as such, this will provide our reading with a useful spine, and give a sense of the chronology, development and range of the form.

I anticipate that there will be time for each student to submit two 3-5 page essays in the course of the semester (though this will depend on the final number of students enrolled). Each of these essays will be presented to and workshopped by the rest of the group. At the end of the semester one of these pieces should be re-submitted, fully revised and reworked – and possibly expanded. Or a new piece can be submitted (see below under ‘Writing Requirements’).

Also each student needs to hand in:

1. At the beginning of each class 2 paragraphs or so about the assigned reading for that week.
2. Short responses to the pieces workshopped the week before. This can also take the form of marked-up copies of the pieces themselves

NB: In some of the weeks listed below I have included extra books and/or essays in brackets that you might find helpful and interesting in addition to the main ones. Reading these additional titles is not mandatory.

NB again:

‘Titles in inverted commas like this’ are individual essays.

*Titles in Italics Like This Are Whole Books*

**Week1 (January 13):**

Preliminary discussions. Outline what we’ll be doing including agreeing the order in which students will submit pieces for workshop etc.

**Week 2: (January 20): NO CLASS**

**Week 3: (January 27)**

Montaigne : Various essays in *The Complete Essays* (ed M A Screech)

Plus see Gore Vidal on Montaigne, Emerson on Montaigne (and see essays by some of the others below on Montaigne – Hazlitt and Virginia Woolf, for example)

(See also Sarah Bakewell’s book on Montaigne: *How to Live*)

Workshop:

**Week 4: (February 3)**

Essayists in the Romantic period:

Hazlitt: ‘My First Acquaintance with Poets’, ‘On the Pleasure of Painting’, ‘On the Pleasure of Hating’, ‘Montaigne’, ‘Farewell to Essay Writing’, ‘The Fight’.

See also Virginia Woolf’s essay on Hazlitt

(See also: De Quincey ‘The English Mail Coach’)

Workshop:

**Week 5: (February 10)**

D. H. Lawrence**:** ‘Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine’ **,** ‘Nottingham and the Mining Countryside**’,** ‘New Mexico’, ‘Hymns in a Man’s Life’ all in *The Bad Side of Books* (NYRB Classics)

(See also Rebecca West ‘Elegy: D. H. Lawrence’)

Workshop:

**Week 6: (February 17): NO CLASS**

**Week 7: (February 24)**

Virginia Woolf : ‘Montaigne’, ‘Hazlitt’, ‘The Modern Essay’, ‘The Death of the Moth’, ‘Street Haunting’

(See also: Rebecca Solnit: *Men Explain Things to Me)*

Workshop:

**Week 8: (March 2)**

George Orwell: ‘Why I Write’, ‘Shooting an Elephant’, ‘Inside the Whale’, ‘A Hanging’, ‘Such, Such Were the Joys’ and others

(See also Salman Rushdie ‘Outside the Whale’ in *Imaginary Homelands)*

Workshop:

**Week 9 (March 9)**

Albert Camus: ‘Summer in Algiers’, ‘Nuptials at Tipasa’, ‘Return to Tipasa’ in *Selected Essays and Notebooks*

Workshop:

**Week 10: (March 16) NO CLASS**

**Week 11: (March 23)**

James Baldwin: ‘Notes of a Native Son’ and/or ‘The Fire Next Time’ (See also Ta-Nehisi Coates *Between the World and Me*)

Workshop:

**Week 12: (March 30)**

Joan Didion: *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The White Album*

And Eula Biss ‘Goodbye to all That’ in *No Man’s Land*.

(See also Katie Roiphe on Didion in *In Praise of Messy Lives*)

Workshop:

**Week 13: (April 6)**

Annie Dillard: *Teaching a Stone to Talk*

Workshop:

**Week 14: (April 13)**

John Berger: ‘Why Look at Animals’, ‘Ape Theatre’, ‘Turner and the Barber Shop’, ‘Leopardi’ and others from *Selected Essays* (Vintage)

Workshop:

**Week 15 (April 20)**

James Wood on Keith Moon in *The Fun Stuff* (this can also be found in the *New Yorker* online)

Meghan Daum: on Joni Mitchell and other essays from *The Unspeakable*

Workshop

**Week 16: (April 27)**

Conclusions

Plus

Ariel Levy**: ‘**Thanksgiving in Mongolia’ (*New Yorker* online)

Workshop:

**Writing requirements**:

A paper of 12-20 pages either on one or more of the authors read, or on one or more of the issues raised in the course, or a piece of creative narrative composition demonstrating an awareness of or a way of resolving some of the questions/issues raised in the course of the semester.