Beauty, Suffering, and the Cross

Duke Divinity School
Spring, 2015

General Information:
Prerequisites: OT 11, NT 18, CT 32

Instructors
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Course Description:
In the context of the day’s news, talking about Beauty can like playing Nero’s fiddle. If Beauty is thought of apart from our conceptions of the True, the Good, and what faithfulness in a created world looks like, and if suffering is merely an instance of something we have not yet managed to subjugate (either by force of will or technological prowess), then “playing” anything does indeed seem irresponsible. But for Christians, beauty – like everything else in creation – is uniquely illuminated by the cross where, in the words of Bruno Forte, “The ‘Verbum abbreviatum’ – the self-emptying of the Eternal Word – reveals beauty as a ‘tiny infinity’.” On the cross, the realities of God, beauty, and suffering are held together by love. In a world drawn by the Augustinian temptation to ‘love lesser beauties’, this course will move toward recovering what an older Augustine saw in the intertwined twin-themes of God and beauty, illuminated by the cross of Christ: “I asked the earth, ‘What is all this?’ and it replied: ‘We are not your God, seek higher.’ … And then I said to all those things seated before the door of my senses, ‘If it is not you, tell me something about my God, speak to me of God.’ And with a mighty voice all cried: ‘God is our creator.’ I looked at the creatures, and asked; their beauty was their answer.”

This course will not follow the impulse of many modern theological and medical efforts to offer abstracted ‘explanations’ of suffering. Instead, it will approach the story about the relationship between God, suffering, and beauty by leaning on an aesthetic, theological, and ethical contention that there can be no true, good, or beautiful ‘telling’ of a story which does not also show forth the truth of Easter Sunday as inextricable from the goodness of Friday, and the ongoing transfiguration of the life of the Church where the Cross is the orienting (and sometimes dis-orienting) image of beauty par excellence.

This course will be a kind of Lenten pilgrimage. Students will be invited to immerse their whole selves in works of both literary and visual art that respond to the evident suffering of the world, and that often grow out the artist’s personal experience of suffering. But the writers and artists who will populate the course will be people whose work is permeated by the mystery of creation, the incarnation, the cross, and the hope of resurrection.

One philosophical question that will be tested in the course of conversation is an aesthetic presupposition underwritten by the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the created nature of the world, namely, the presupposition that the ‘content’ of an artistic work is unintelligible apart from its ‘form’. Our aim will be to cultivate the kind of contemplative attention that might serve the Church as it seeks to live out the mystery of the Eucharist.

Required Texts:
1. *Collected Works* (Library of America edition), Flannery O’Connor
2. *The Beauty of the Infinite*, David Bentley Hart
4. *Murder in the Cathedral*, T.S. Eliot

**Highly recommended, but not required:**
5. George Rouault’s *Miserere et Guerre* (a 2006 edition, subtitled “This Anguished World of Shadows” is very good, but many older printings of this collection are available and would also serve our purposes.)

**Excerpts on Sakai:**

2. *Grace and Necessity* (selected essays) – Rowan Williams
3. “Performing the Faith” – Stanley Hauerwas and James Fodor
4. *The Glory of the Lord: Seeing the Form* (selections), Hans Urs von Balthasar
5. “Two Theological Musicians” and “Beauty, Sentimentality and the Arts,” Jeremy Begbie

**Recommended Background Texts:**

*Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale*, Frederick Beuchner
*God, Medicine and Suffering*, Stanley Hauerwas
*On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scary
*Gravity and Grace*, Simone Weil
*The Beauty of the Cross*, Richard Villadesau
*Beauty: A Very Short Introduction*, Roger Scruton
*The Portal of Beauty: Towards a Theology of Aesthetics*, Bruno Forte
*Grace and Necessity*: Rowan Williams
*The Doors of the Sea*: David Bentley Hart
*Performing the Faith*, Stanley Hauerwas

*Cross-Shattered Christ: Meditations on the Seven Last Words*, Stanley Hauerwas
*Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, Karl Barth
*Music, Modernity, and God: Essays in Listening*, Jeremy Begbie

**Schedule of Topics and Readings:**

1. 1/13 Introduction
2. 1/20 Flannery O’Connor I: Cheap Beauty
   a. “A Partridge Festival”
   b. “A Good Man is Hard to Find”
   d. Recommended: *The Portal of Beauty*, Bruno Forte
3. 1/27 Flannery O’Connor II: Suffering and the Divine Eros
   a. “A Temple of the Holy Ghost”
   b. “Greenleaf”
   d. Recommended: *Grace and Necessity*: Rowan Williams
4. 2/3 Flannery O’Connor III: “Compassion” and the Face of Evil
   a. “The Displaced Person”
   b. “A Memoir of Mary Ann”
   c. Hart: Trinity 3 pp. 187-210
5. 2/10 Flannery O’Connor IV: Suffering and Revelation
   a. “Revelation”
   b. “Parker’s Back”
   c. Hart: Trinity 4 pp. 211-249
   d. Recommended: *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale*, Frederick Beuchner

6. 2/17 Poetry: Creation Groans
   b. Hart: Creation 1 pp. 249-274
   c. Recommended: *The Doors of the Sea*, David Bentley Hart

7. 2/24 Drama:
   a. T.S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*
   b. Hart: Rhetoric without Reserve 413-445
   c. Recommended: “Performing the Faith,” Stanley Hauerwas

8. 3/3 Music: (Class Meets in Goodson Chapel)
   a. “Two Theological Musicians” Ch. 7 *Resounding Truth*, Jeremy Begbie
   c. Hart: Creation 2 pp. 274-318
   d. Recommended: *Music, Modernity, and God: Essays in Listening*, Jeremy Begbie

3/10 Spring Reading Week

9. 3/17 The Novel:
   a. Peter Devries: *The Blood of the Lamb*
   b. Hart: Salvation 1: 318-344
   c. Recommended: *God, Medicine and Suffering*, Stanley Hauerwas

10. 3/24 Visual Art:
    a. Georges Rouault’s *Miserere et Guerre*
    b. Hart: Salvation 2: 344-395

3/31 Easter Week

4/7 Film Screening: (Details TBA)
   a. Terrence Malick: *Tree of Life*

11. 4/14 Last Class:
    a. Hart: Eschaton pp. 395-413
    b. Recommended: *The Beauty of the Cross*, Richard Villadesau

Assignments:

1) **Written response to texts** (30%). Each week students will write a 300-400 word response to the assigned text(s). This should begin with a question about the texts or topic, and the body of the response should be an attempt to wrestle with the question. This may mean offering a preliminary answer, but it may also mean pointing towards why the question matters, or why it is challenging. We hope that these questions and
responses will contribute not only to the quality of the class discussions, but also to the process of thinking about a final paper for the class. These should be emailed to both instructors by noon the Monday prior to class. Timely completion of these responses is the basis for this part of the grade.

2) Class participation (2 parts). Because this course is structured as a graduate seminar, informed and engaged participation from all of us is important if the course is to be productive. Students are expected to read all given assignments, to attend class, and to engage in course discussions. Because different students have different styles of participation, the assessment is not based on quantity of discussion alone, but on quality as well: sometimes less is more. Of course, sometimes less is uncomfortable silence.
   a. Opening class discussion (10%). Each student will initiate the class discussion once during the semester, using their written response as a starting point. Each week two students will be called on.
   b. Improvisational response (10%). After a student has been called on to open the discussion, one student will be called on to respond as a way of furthering the class discussion.

3) Paper (50%). Each student will write a 12-15 page paper (double-spaced, one inch margins, 12 point font) that pertains to the central subject matter of the course. The paper can build an argument attending to theological reflection (in the course of building the argument, the paper might engage one of our texts more deeply, engage a topic, or offer considered approaches to some challenge encountered in the course of ministry). The paper can also use alternative approaches such as creative writing, though the specifics of such an approach should be discussed with the instructors. The final draft of the paper will be due Thursday, April 30. The paper grade will be based on clarity of writing and relevance to the subject matter of the course. If a student wishes to write a draft and have it reviewed by the instructors, the first draft should be turned in by April 10.

Disability statement:
Students with disabilities who believe they may need accommodations in this class are encouraged to contact, if you have not done so already, the Disability Management System—Student Access Office at 668-1267 as soon as possible to better ensure that such accommodations can be implemented in a timely fashion. Please also contact Rev. Kori Robins, Divinity Registrar (krobins@div.duke.edu or 660-3428), to assist with the process.

Integrity:
In accordance with the Honor Code, students are expected to do their own work for each of the assignments. Any violation of the Honor Code will result in a failing grade, and depending on the severity of the case could result in additional consequences.

Inclusive Language:
In each assignment students are expected to follow the guidelines for inclusive language outlined in the Duke Divinity School Bulletin.