Three Modern Essayists  
Fall 2016 - WRTNG-UG 1012  
Silver, 407  
Tuesday and Thursday, 3:30-4:45  
Professor Lisa Goldfarb

COURSE DESCRIPTION
Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, and James Baldwin were 20th century writers perhaps best known for their fiction – Mrs. Dalloway, Animal Farm, and Go Tell it On the Mountain readily call to mind their respective authors. Yet, each of these figures was also a master of the essay, and in their numerous works they address pressing issues in the tumultuous time in which they lived: the cause of women’s rights and feminism in the case of Woolf; British imperialism, violence, and war in Orwell’s; and the question of American politics and particularly race in the work of Baldwin. In this course, we will explore the modernist essay through the works of these three writers to understand both the breadth and depth of their ideas, and, most importantly, the ways they stretched and innovated the form of the essay itself. As this is a writing course, we will focus intently on studying their works as models for students’ own writing. At the same time we will delve into the subjects that they took up in their work, we will use their essays as spurs for student essays. There will be a workshop component to this course so that students share their essays in progress. Readings may include essays such as: Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”; Orwell’s “Shooting an Elephant” and “Looking Back on the Spanish War”; Baldwin’s “The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American” and “Fifth Avenue, Uptown: a Letter from Harlem.”

As you can see from the syllabus, this course encompasses a careful study of these three modern masters of the essay form, and is also a course which will use the essays we read as jumping off points for student writing. As we move through the various readings, from time to time, we may also search out contemporary essays on similar subjects (feminism; imperialism, violence, and war; American politics and race) to compare styles and approaches to these subjects, which are as vital to our world as they were to our three essayists/writers. When we study the essays, we will look with double lenses; first, we will study the literary qualities of Woolf, Orwell, and Baldwin, and engage the subjects about which they write in class discussion. We will then turn to ways of generating ideas for our own writing using their various styles and approaches as models and inspiration.

LEARNING GOALS
- Students will become familiar with the essay writing of three master essayists of the 20th century: Woolf, Orwell, and Baldwin, and the subjects that concerned them.  
- Students will learn to read closely and carefully, and to study various styles of essay writing.  
- Students will learn how to approach their own writing by modeling their work in relation to the stylistic approaches of the various writers under study.
• Students will gain experience in workshops, sharing their writing-in-progress, and presenting their work orally to the class as a whole.
• Students will gain familiarity with subjects and concepts that continue to mark our own period, and they will gain historical perspective on the subjects taken up by Woolf, Orwell, and Baldwin: feminism and class; violence and imperialism; American politics and race.

REQUIRED TEXTS
James Baldwin: *Nobody Knows My Name* (Vintage)
George Orwell: *A Collection of Essays* (Harcourt, Brace)
Virginia Woolf: *A Room of One’s Own* (Harcourt, Brace)
Virginia Woolf: *The Captain’s Death Bed and Other Essays* (Harcourt, Brace)
Virginia Woolf: *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (Harcourt, Brace)

All books should be available at the NYU Bookstore.
*Please note that as we move through the course, there may be additional short readings distributed and/or posted on NYU Classes (critical essays, fiction, etc.).

READING AND WRITING ASSIGNMENTS
To ensure that our discussions are lively and meaningful, each week students will write a critical response on each week’s reading in which s/he addresses questions regarding each text, and observations about how the reading relates to our theme of study, as well as a few questions pertinent to the class. I will collect critical reading responses at the end of each Thursday meeting or as indicated on the syllabus.

There are three required essays for the course, two papers of roughly 5-7 pages and a final longer paper of about 8-10 pages. I will be handing out suggested topics on which you may choose to write before the papers are due, but much of the writing will be generated by class discussion and weekly assignments. If you choose a topic of your own, please discuss your ideas for topics with me before you begin. The first three essays may be revised as long as students resubmit the paper no later than one week after they have been returned to you. Final papers cannot be revised for the course after those papers have been submitted.

Please keep in mind that all written work must be typed, double-spaced, with one-inch margins on all sides. Formal papers must be documented according to the *MLA Handbook*.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADES
“Three Modern Essayists” is a seminar course that develops through class discussion and group work. It is crucial that you attend class regularly, and that you arrive on time. If, due to illness or emergency, you cannot attend class, please be sure to inform me. Also, please be sure to consult the syllabus and speak to someone in class so that you can be sure to be prepared for the next class. Your participation in class is vital to the success of the class, as is your timely submission of all weekly written assignments and formal papers.
Grades are based on the quality of all of your written work, informal and formal papers, as well as class participation. Please note that excessive absences (more than two unexcused absences) can jeopardize your course grade.

Grades will be calculated as follows:
Informal writing and class participation: 25%
Essay # 1 – 25%
Essay# 2 – 25%
Essay# 3 – 25%

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY
As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html] for a full description of the academic integrity policy.

OFFICE HOURS
My office is in room 604 (1 Washington Place) and my office phone number is 998-7325. You can also reach me most easily by e-mail at lg3@nyu.edu or lisa.goldfarb@nyu.edu

My office hours for fall:
Tuesday: 9:45-10:45; 2:00-3:00; 5:00-5:30
Thursday: 9:45-10:45; 2:00-3:00; 5:00-5:30
• Please note that it is always important to arrange appointments in advance by emailing and confirming the date and time.

SYLLABUS

Week 1
September 6
• Introduction
• In-class writing
• Passages from each writer (to be distributed) – stylistic observations

September 8
• Reading: Orwell’s “Why I Write” (309)
• Writing: Notes toward “Why I Write”
Week 2
September 13
• Reading: Woolf – “The Death of a Moth” (Moth, 3); “The Modern Essay” (to be posted/distributed); “The Decay of Essay Writing” (to be posted/distributed)

September 15
• Reading: Woolf – “Street Haunting (“20), “Life Itself” (Captain, 21) “All About Books” (Captain, 120)
• Student readings
• Writing: Choose one passage in assigned essays that is striking stylistically and explain how and why you find it so.

Week 3
September 20
• Reading: Woolf – A Room of One’s Own (1-48)

September 22
• Reading: Woolf – A Room of One’s Own (48-114), “Professions for Women” (Moth, 235)
• Student readings / Workshop
• Writing: Choose one passage that you find striking for its historical moment and explain your critical response.

Week 4
September 27
• Reading: Woolf – “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (handout), “Modern Letters” (Captain, 146)

September 29
• Reading: Woolf – “Craftsmanship” (to be posted/distributed), “Reviewing” (Captain, 127)
• Student readings
• Writing – How would you describe Woolf’s relationship to the craft of writing in one of the above essays. Is there one aspect that you would like to incorporate into your own? Why and how?

ESSAY 1 DUE

Week 5
October 4
• CLASS CANCELED

October 6
• Reading: Orwell – Review of “Why I Write,” “Such, Such Were the Joys” (1)
• Student readings
• Writing: What aspect of Orwell’s depiction of childhood seems to travel across time? Why and how?

**Week 6**
October 11
• Reading: Orwell – “Shooting an Elephant” (148)

October 13
• Reading: Orwell – “Reflections on Gandhi” (171)
• Student readings
• Writing: Write a critical response to one of these essays considering Orwell’s experience as a colonial officer impacts his view of colonialism? What aspects of his discussion feel “frozen” in their time and place? What aspects seem pertinent to contemporary experience?

**Week 7**
October 18
• CLASS CANCELED

October 20
• Reading: Orwell – “Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War” (188)
• Student readings
• Writing: Thinking about “Why I Write,” how does Orwell’s experience of the politics of his time impact the way he looks at the Spanish Civil War? Is there an analogous aspect of your experience of the political realities of our time that exerts an influence on your own writing?

**Week 8**
October 25
• Reading: Orwell – “Charles Dickens” (48)

October 27
• Reading: Orwell – “Inside the Whale” (210)
• Student readings/Workshop

**Week 9**
November 1
• CLASS CANCELED

November 3
• Reading: Orwell – “England Your England” (252)
• ESSAY #2 DUE

**Week 10**
November 8
• Reading: Baldwin - “The Creative Process” (to be posted/distributed); “The Discovery of What it Means to Be an American” (3); November 10
• Reading: Baldwin – “Fifth Avenue, Uptown: a Letter from Harlem” (56)
• Student readings
• Writing: Choose one passage of either of Baldwin’s essay that you find particularly powerful in the way Baldwin considers racial politics of his own era? Why do you find it so? How does his approach resonate in our contemporary moment?

**Week 11**
November 15
• Reading: Baldwin – “East River, Downtown: Postscript to a Letter from Harlem” (72)

November 17
• Reading: Baldwin – “The Price of the Ticket” (to be posted/distributed); “A Fly in the Buttermilk” (83)
• Student readings/Workshop
• Writing: Choose one passage in either of the assigned essays and write about Baldwin’s voice. How would you characterize his voice and how does it carry through the form of the respective essays?

**Week 12**
November 22 – Baldwin - “In Search of a Majority” (127)
• Reading: Baldwin – “Notes for a Hypothetical Novel” (141)
• Writing: How would you describe Baldwin’s approach to his subject in “Notes”? You might also choose a section to close-read for discussion in class.

November 24
THANKSGIVING

**Week 13**
November 29
• Reading: Baldwin – “Notes for a Hypothetical Novel” (continued discussion), “Alas Poor Richard” (181, and all three sections)

December 1
• Reading: Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues” (to be posted/distributed)
• Student readings
• **ESSAY # 3 DUE**

**Week 14**
December 6
• Reading: Comparative pieces (tba) / Student readings

December 8
• Reading: Comparative pieces (tba) / Student readings
• Writing: FINAL REFLECTION/CREATIVE ESSAY DUE (INFORMAL)

**Week 15**
December 13 – NO CLASS: CLASSES ACCORDING TO MONDAY SCHEDULE

December 15
• Course review
• Student readings and favorite essays