

Aesthetic Theodicy:

Affliction and Redemption in *Job, Dostoevsky, Weil, Thoreau, Nietzsche, Cavell, and Levinas*

Suffering, affliction, and adversity can be terrible enough with or without religious-theological response, but they become especially terrible when one sees the world to be ruled by Infinite Goodness, Knowledge, and Power.

In this seminar we will read classic texts and consider short exhibits that acknowledge affliction in a world we want to love, affirm, and take as good. Our focus moves from the failure of theodicy to the possibility of an aesthetic theodicy, the redemption of the world not through divine justice (the revelation that all things are just) but through the religious capacities of art, where human creativity and transfigurations model or replicate sacred, redeeming transfigurations.

Nietzsche writes that the world becomes tolerable only as an aesthetic phenomenon. Tragic theater makes suffering sufferable, not through a theodicy that vindicates divine justice

but through reenactment of death and rebirth. *The Book of Job* presents a more than sufferable, wondrous world that rests on a Divinity who abjures arguments that He is morally good or just. Dostoevsky portrays the weakness and strength of religious love in contest with the deepest evil and affliction. Thoreau (like Kierkegaard) pictures religious poets singing through pain and transfiguring existence. Levinas sees some suffering as beyond redemption by any means, and sees something next best to redemption in a 'useless', benevolent gesture. This 'para-ethical' gesture supervening in Hell can function religiously (perhaps religio-aesthetically) as a bulwark against cynicism or despair.

We will explore and respond to these and several other classic attempts to come to terms with affliction.

Below is a preliminary list of exhibits, essays, and texts, roughly by week:

Texts and Exhibits:

1. *The Book of Job*: Theophany, Non-Theodicy
And selection from 'A Lyrical Philosophy of Place'
And Cavell, "Excerpt from Memory
2. Levinas: Brick-Bread / Thoreau: Muskrat / Bugbee: Suicide planes
Nonpractical, nonforensic morality: compassion and affliction
3. Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor & Zossima

What is Hell: Clark West

Extended Exhibits & Essays:

4. Zak Braiterman on Anti-Theodicy (Weds. Mtg?)
Poetry after Holocaust?
5. Raymond Guess: Aesthetic Theodicy (2 essays);
Religion, persons, institutions
6. Stanley Cavell: Excerpts from Memory
7. Nietzsche: *Birth of Tragedy*: music-drama as theodicy
More Cavell
8. Simone Weil: *Affliction* (William Robert; Jill Adams)
9. Thoreau: "Walking" & "Wild Apples"
One Mooney essay
10. Cavell: Excerpts from Memory
11. Thoreau: John Brown, Hannah Dunston: Writing: Mourning and Morning
12. Lyman Mower on Levinas and Thoreau , "Silence and Night"
13. Clark West, Lyman Mower: "Ethics as First Philosophy"
Honneth: "Recognition" as Para-ethical Beginning
14. Incessant Tragedy and the Baptism of Words

Requirements: Two-page weekly reports, emailed Sunday night; [undergrads: one page]

Midterm essay [8 pgs]; Final essay [12 pgs]

Texts: [These particular editions are not crucial - perhaps you have some of these Already. Available at the University Bookstore]

The Book of Job, tr., Scheindlin (Norton)

Dostoevsky: *The Grand Inquisitor*: With Related Chapters from the *Brothers Karamazov*, ed. Charles B. Guignon (Paperback - Oct 1993)

The Essays of Henry D. Thoreau by Henry David Thoreau, Lewis Hyde, and Henry D. Thoreau (Paperback - May 5, 2002)

The Birth of Tragedy (Oxford World's Classics) by Friedrich Nietzsche and Douglas Smith (Paperback - Aug 1, 2008)

Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas (Paperback), ed. Jill Robbins (

Thoreau, *Week on the Concord and Merrimack*
Cavell: *A Pitch of Philosophy*, Chapt 1

From Blackboard [to be added after week one]

- "A Lyric Philosophy of Place: affliction and release" / pages 40-50 from *Lost Intimacy in American Thought* [Lost-In]
- "Dostoevsky", in "Cavell as Continental Religious Thinker", pp. xx-xx, "Lost-In"
- Grossmann & Levinas; + Michael Morgan pages
- Thoreau: Muskrat fm his Journal
- Bugbee: "Suicide Planes" in *Inward Morning* / pages on "Prayer", Lost-In
- Cavell "Excerpts From Memory"; "A Pitch of Philosophy"
- Simone Weil "Affliction"
- Raymond Guess
- On Thoreau: "Affliction & Wonder"/ "John Brown & Lilies"
- Thoreau: Wild Apples
- Honneth: Recognition precedes knowledge, Tanner Lectures
- Mooney: 'Rel in Humanities: Anxieties & Exaltations', Lost-In
- Mower: "Silence and the Night"
- West: "Dostoevsky in Hell"
- Robert: "On Weil"
- Braitermann: Representing the Holocaust

Sample Agenda

- 30 min. Cavell . . . or
- 30 min Graduate Student Report (one or two randomly selected)
- 30 min discussion on Major Assignment
- BREAK
- 60 min mini lecture-discussion on . . .
- 30 min ending with Cavell or . . .
- Conversation among survivors with voice