

EN 8573: Studies in Literature Since 1900  
Fall 2019, Dr. West  
Mondays 2:00-4:50

### “Difficulty” vs. “Accessibility” in Post-1900 Poetry

When the American poet Mary Oliver died this past January, after a long, award-winning career—she won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award—many newspapers and other media outlets published celebrations of her work. Those encomia repeatedly described her poetry as “accessible,” meaning that her poems were reasonably easy to read and understand. That her work’s “accessibility” seemed to so many a virtue worth noting suggests a widespread sense that much other poetry is “inaccessible,” unreasonably difficult for the average reader to comprehend.

Of course much poetry *is* far from easy reading: certain poems by Shakespeare, John Donne, and Emily Dickinson, for example, have long left intelligent people scratching their heads. Especially since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, though, many ambitious poets have produced poems so challenging as to resist much comprehension at all on first (or second, or third) readings, and yet many of those poems are highly regarded by other poets and by the literary critical establishment. Those who admire such poems often see difficulty as an aesthetic virtue, regarding easily grasped poetry as facile and bourgeois. They most value work that requires the most thoughtful reading and rereading, even academic study, to reach any degree of understanding and/or appreciation.

In this seminar, we’ll read together work by several highly regarded poets active over the last hundred years, some famously difficult and some not. We’ll aim to identify the *kinds* of difficulty that some of those oeuvres present, and to articulate as precisely as possible the specific challenges we face at any given moment in individual poems. We’ll collaborate in navigating those difficulties; various theoretical frameworks will help us through that collaboration. My hope is that by the end of the semester, you’ll feel better equipped to read and speak about poetry in general, whatever the demands it makes of its readers.

#### **Books:**

*Collected Poems 1951-1971*, by A. R. Ammons (ISBN: 9780393321920).

*Selected Poems*, by John Ashbery (ISBN: 0140585532).

*The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, Vol. I (ISBN: 0374235139), edited by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue.

*Complete Poems*, by Marianne Moore (ISBN: 0140188517).

*Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (ISBN: 0399563245).

*The Poetry of Derek Walcott 1948-2013* (ISBN: 0374537577), selected by Glyn Maxwell.

Vol. 1 of *The Complete Poems of A. R. Ammons* would be an acceptable substitute for his *Collected Poems 1951-1971*: it’s hardcover and more expensive, but it reprints all the poems in the *Collected* and adds many more, as well as some helpful endnotes. Either *The Poems of Marianne Moore*, edited by Grace Schulman, or Moore’s *New Collected Poems*, edited by Heather Cass White, would be an acceptable substitute for Moore’s *Complete Poems*; if White’s edition had been available in paperback, I’d have adopted it instead of the valuable but misleadingly titled *Complete*.

I encourage you to purchase the printed books, but if you prefer to buy electronic editions (when they’re available), that would be fine.