

ENGL 4811 Is Beauty Just: Write & Ethics

In E.B. White's children's classic, *Charlotte's Web*, an erudite and compassionate spider spins words that save her friend Wilbur from the slaughterhouse. All the farmers in the neighborhood are convinced that her web is a divine miracle, not the work of an ordinary arachnid, and the local minister is happy to confirm this impression. Elaine Scarry doesn't write about spiders or pigs in *On Beauty and Being Just*, but she does argue that beauty in any form increases our capacity for compassion and our inclination to justice. When her book was published some twenty-five years ago, this claim seemed startlingly out of step with the times. Scarry was already famous as the author of *The Body in Pain*, so the book was widely reviewed by scholars and public intellectuals alike. In general, the public intellectuals were glowing, but the scholars had doubts. Beauty was a suspect category at the time, a social construction at best and an agent of imperialism at worst. Yet in recent years, Scarry's book has been taken up by many writers and scholars, including Jennifer C. Nash, Ocean Vuong, Chloé Cooper Jones, and Saidiya Hartman. Across genres, these writers call beauty back, and they also insist on the intellectual and political value of the personal, the private, the amateur and the undisciplined. This course will investigate their work, and that of other writers who argue that beauty is not an indulgence but a mode of survival and a means of transfiguration. In that spirit, students will have the option to stretch the limits of their own writing into hybrid genres, including the narrative/personal essay.