Medieval literary theory can often seem strikingly modern and even postmodern in its concern with probing the nature of human language and its inherent limitations. For writers such as St. Augustine, the Occitan troubadours, Chrétien de Troyes, Dante Alighieri and the authors of the Roman de la Rose, writing is always an act of interpretation, one which confronts the essential indeterminacy of linguistic signs, both spoken and written. This anxiety reflects the unstable nature of medieval textual culture, as well as the fractured reality of spoken vernaculars dialects in contrast with the universal status of Latin as the language of literary and historical authority. In this class, we will study texts from a variety of genre (poetry, exegesis, romance) that interrogate the nature and function of language, from early medieval Biblical hermeneutics to the scholastic renaissance of the 12th century, the rise of vernacular literary cultures in the 13th and 14th century, and the textual revolution brought about by printing in the 15th century. How might medieval texts from this period of rapid cultural and technological change speak to our own current shifting media landscape? Classwork will include close examination of medieval manuscripts. Reading knowledge of French is required.
This course traces the writing of absence in select works of fiction by writers from various parts of Francophone Africa. While the writing of absence is a dominant political and historical theme in contemporary literatures of migration, exile, and war, we will frame the question much more broadly in order to attend to absence as a constitutive dimension of literary writing. In this sense, the writing of absence may also imply absence as writing. In order to begin thinking the possibilities that the relationship between these two elements suggest, we will make brief excursions into theoretical works that may help frame the question for us in a preliminary fashion. A thinker who has suggestively elaborated the relationship between absence and writing in his own work is Maurice Blanchot. We will therefore begin the first segment of our course with selections from Blanchot’s work so that we can glimpse some of the stakes of this mode of reading and questioning. We will then move to theoretical and literary works by writers from the African continent written in French and try to tease out the ways in which these diverse approaches to literary writing might think absence in relation to writing. Given Blanchot’s own mode of writing where the literary and the theoretical are often not distinguishable, we will not prioritize the theoretical over the literary. Rather we will read them in conversation with each other allowing them to interact by confirming and/or challenging each other’s stakes. This course is designed to accompany the Department of French and Italian’s Fall Colloquium focused on Maurice Blanchot entitled “Maurice Blanchot: Thought of Absence,” which will take place on Friday November 3rd, 2017.
This seminar offers an introduction to the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century. Our survey includes canonical European avant-gardes and their international circulation, but also a range of non-European movements: Futurism in Italy and Russia; Berlin Dada; Stridentism in Mexico; Surrealism in France, Japan, and Egypt; Brazilian Anthropofagism; and Négritude. Our focus will be on manifestos, literary works, and critical theories of the avant-garde, but we will also consider the visual arts, with a planned group trip to the Art Institute of Chicago.