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ENG 5005-001: Graduate Seminar

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5005-001

English 5005-021: GRADUATE SEMINAR

Downbeat Romanticism, or, Broken Subjects in a Ruined World

Fall 2011 / ~~W~~W 15:30-18:00 / Coleman Hall

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“One always remains to tell the story.”— William Gilpin

When William Gilpin first published his famous description of the remains of Tintern Abbey in 1782, he was reflecting an already-established interest in ruins that had developed over the latter half of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, Gilpin, more than any other eighteenth-century writer, was able to articulate *why* this fascination with figures of ruin arose during the period. The epigraph for this course—“one always remains to tell the story”—refers to Gilpin’s delineation of the architecture of Tintern Abbey: even though many of the features of the abbey had been laid to waste, an enduring “corresponding part” lingered, revealing the building’s original state, even though the symmetrical partner was absent.



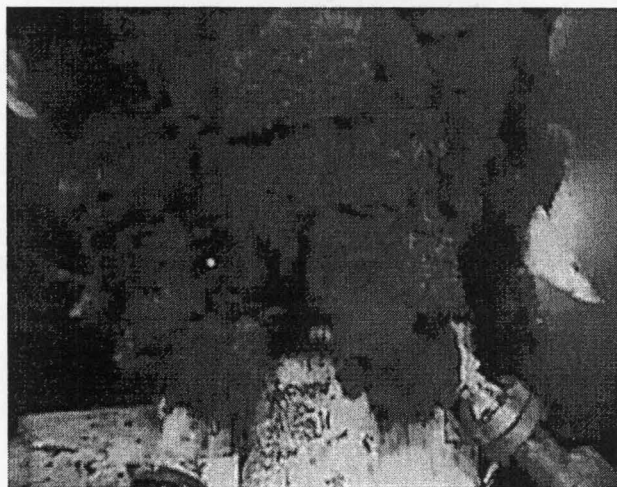
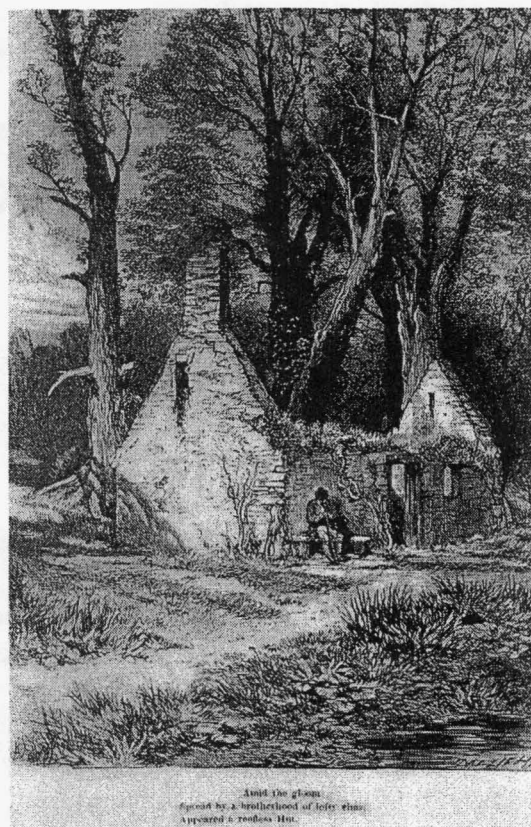
This play on presence/absence becomes something of a talisman for writers of the Romantic Age that followed. “One always remains to tell the story” might be considered an apt formulation for many of the canonical—and lesser-known—texts of the period: Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (not to mention *Frankenstein*), P.B. Shelley’s *Alastor*, and the many solitary figures of Wordsworth, to name but a few. These figures—broken, yet enduring—tell the stories of absent things, events, and people in a world where everything appears to have fallen apart.

I would like us to focus on the fascination of Romantic writers with images and narratives of ruination and decay, with gradual processes of deterioration. There is, of course, something profoundly melancholic—and perhaps neurotic—in the minute observation of decomposition and rot. And yet we find late-eighteenth-, and early-nineteenth-century anthologies replete with crumbling and festering, corrosion and decline. We will engage with these sorts of aesthetic objects—or are they aesthetic subjects?—in order to reflect on what makes Romantic aesthetics *Romantic*.

Friedrich Schlegel coined the term “*romantisch*” in opposition to Classical forms of writing, drawing on an etymology connecting it to the medieval *enromancier*, *romancar*, the translation or rendering of predominantly Latin texts into the vernacular. To be “romantic”, at its root, means to be translated, to be infected through exposure to something from the outside, to be, as Goethe famously put it, “sick”: “The Classical I call the healthy and the Romantic the sick.”

Many Romantics were indeed fascinated by illness, even to the point of desiring to be mutated by some sort of “higher synthesis,” as Novalis called such a transformation through an infusion of the Other: “Could *sickness* not be a medium of higher synthesis—the more frightening the pain, the higher the desire hidden within.” And many Romantics wrote about the deterioration of land tracts, of buildings, of characters, and of social structures, as though ruined cottages and deserted villages were objects of profound “beauty,” but perhaps the phrase “aesthetic enjoyment” would be more appropriate.

But is our contemporary aesthetic so very different? Or, better yet, should it be? We too seem gripped by images of widespread ruin. Do you recall the now-infamous “spillcam” of the distant past (i.e., 2010)—the live feed that legislators forced BP to upload on their homepage? That static, yet moving image was linked to hundreds of other websites and homepages, and testified to the mesmerizing effects of watching the uninterrupted stream of leaking oil. Millions of viewers across the globe left the live spillcam feed running continuously on their desktops. What would it mean to say that *The BP Spillcam* is *The Ruined Cottage* 2.0? And what



sort of upgrade in our thinking skills become necessary in order to read *The Spillcam* with the same intensity and scrutiny that Wordsworth read and wrote about the environment of Margaret in *The Ruined Cottage*?

Such novels and poems of the Romantic period, like those images and stories documenting our own widespread ruination, hardly represent the most “upbeat” of topics. By stressing the “downbeat,” though, I hope to question the aesthetic attraction of such texts and images: we very much like to hear about, and witness, figures of ruination and disintegration. Why is that? How does the “downbeat” set up a form of *syncope* whereby

absences (of a sound, of a beat, of consciousness itself) tell us as much about the structure of such texts as the beats that are present?

One of the ways we will reevaluate Romantic aesthetics is to listen to, rather than focus on, our objects of attention. That is, we will address the ocularcentrism of “theory,” and question what an orocentric aesthetic might entail. We will engage literary texts using some contemporary theory addressing the relation between the visual and the audible: Catherine Clément, Jean-Luc Nancy, Timothy Morton, amongst others. Although this course may sound like the title to a country song, I hope it will end up a little more “downbeat”—a bit jazzy and a bit ambient.

Texts

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*

Fenwick, Eliza. *Secresy*

Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgment*.

Macdonald/McWhir. *Broadview Anthology of Literature of the Revolutionary Period*

Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*

Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Discourse of the Syncope*.

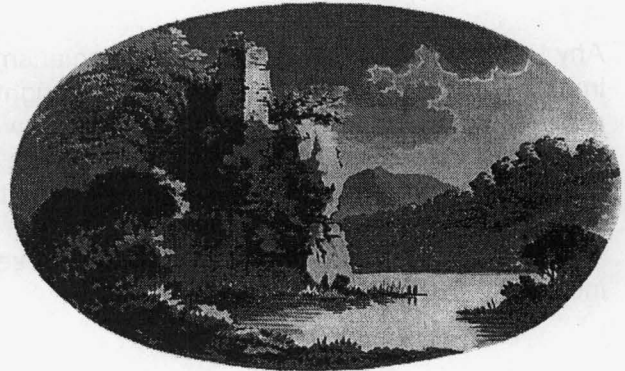
Requirements

| | |
|--|-----|
| Participation | 20% |
| Project Abstracts (two) | 10% |
| Response Paper (~3 pages) | 20% |
| Presentation of Project (informal, required) | 0% |
| Writing Project | 50% |

****ALL ASSIGNMENTS AND EXAMS MUST BE COMPLETED TO PASS THE COURSE****

Writing Project (50%)

In the first half of the semester, I would like you to select a text that you consider to be informed by some of the questions surrounding aesthetics that we address in this course. There are a number of texts included on the course list that we will *not* be using for our class discussions, but that I suggest would be prime candidates for the analysis that follows. These texts may—but do not have to be—taken from the British nineteenth century.



William Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye*, 2nd Ed. (1789), facing p. 39

You will thoughtfully select a brief section of the larger work in order to analyze closely the significance of your chosen passage as it aids in understanding the larger text from which it is taken in relation to some of the theoretical concerns about aesthetics that we have reflected upon in this course. You will, therefore, despite the implications above, be required to engage with aesthetic categories of the Romantic period, even if your primary text is, for example, a twentieth-century text from New Zealand. You should also complete a substantial annotated bibliography of criticism on the text of your choice.

Project Abstracts (10%)

In anticipation of the project outlined above, I will ask you to submit two abstracts, one of 250 words, and one of 400 words, framing your proposed project. These will be due around mid-semester, and just before the Thanksgiving Break, respectively.

Presentation of Final Project (0%)

I will ask you to present in the final weeks of the course a brief (five-minute), informal presentation of the work you have done in preparing your final project. The presentation is required, but ungraded.

Response Paper (20%)

I would like for you to write a short (approximately three-page) response to one (or more) of our readings from the first half of the semester. You should find something about a text that you find intriguing, confusing, or simply incomprehensible and address this problem critically. (More to follow.)

Class Participation (20%)

This is a graduate course, and I will therefore expect you to come to class not only having read the material, but also with specific questions about and comments on the readings. While reading the course material, you should pinpoint specific moments of difficulty, and come to class with questions about them. Some of the course material is particularly challenging, and I encourage you to find and articulate examples of texts to help elucidate the theoretical discussions for yourself and for the rest of us. If you attend class without reading the texts carefully, you will find it extremely difficult to keep up with the discussions of the participating members of the course. I consider all productive communications with me about the course material and/or your writing for the course to be "class participation." I will expect you to meet with me at least once to discuss, in detail, your writing project, but I encourage you to meet with me more often.

Academic honesty: Students are responsible for knowing Eastern Illinois University regulations and policies regarding academic honesty. Plagiarism will likely result in your failing the course and in further action by the university. Here is the English Department's statement on plagiarism:

Any teacher who discovers an act of plagiarism – "The appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas, and/or thoughts of another author, and representation of them as one's own original work" (Random House Dictionary of the English Language) – has the right and the responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including immediate assignments, of a grade of F for the assigned essay and a grade of F for the course, and to report the incident to the Judicial Affairs Office.



Paper Policies

Charlotte Smith

Papers—and all other assignments—are due at the beginning of class. **Late papers will not be commented upon, and be marked a half grade lower for every class period late.** Essays turned in a week past the deadline will be given a "zero," but must nevertheless be submitted in order to pass the course. Your paper should be stapled and include page numbers. Format: 12-point Times New Roman font, double-spaced, with one-inch margins.

Absence Policy

When you are absent—especially when you are frequently absent—two things happen. First, your participation grade drops substantially. Second, you naturally fall behind in understanding course material and neither the class nor the Professor can catch you up on everything missed in a day's class. YOU need to decide when it is absolutely necessary to miss class. Be wise. It bears repeating: you cannot make up missed work and late assignments will be penalized. Whether these are excused or unexcused absences does not matter for this course. Being late for class will be counted as an absence.

Emailing Policy

I want to get to know you and your work this semester. Thus I ask that you call me or stop by my office during office hours (or scheduled times) so that we can talk. **DO NOT EMAIL ME TO ASK FOR AN "UPDATE" ON MISSED ASSIGNMENTS, OR TO EXPLAIN AN ABSENCE.** You should exchange telephone numbers and

email addresses with other students in the class so that you can contact someone for notes, handouts, and/or other missed messages.

Wharram / English 5005-031: *Schedule of Classes*—subject to revision

BA = *Broadview Anthology of Literature of the Revolutionary Period*

CP = Course Pack

Although we will not be discussing William Wordsworth's "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," 1800, (BA 640) on any particular day, I highly recommend that you read it, and will refer to it occasionally throughout the course.

WEEK ONE

W 8/24 **Wordsworth, "Lines Written on the Seat of a Yew-Tree"**

WEEK TWO

W 8/31 **Kleist, "The Marquise of O—" (handout)**
Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, "Book First: *The Wanderer*" (BA, 675-687)

Friday 9/2—Deadline to drop course without a grade

WEEK THREE

W 9/7 Clément, excerpts from *Syncope* (handout);
Shelley, *The Defence of Poetry* (BA, 1275)

WEEK FOUR

W 9/14 Mary Darby Robinson, "Sonnet 14" 1796 (BA 336)
Coleridge, "The Eolian Harp" 1796 (BA 747-8)
Charlotte Smith, "To a Nightingale" 1786 (BA 162)
Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Nightingale," 1798 (BA 778)
John Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale," 1819 (BA 1357)
Percy Bysshe Shelley, "To a Skylark," 1820 (BA 1208)
Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor* (BA 1153)

WEEK FIVE

W 9/21 TBA

WEEK SIX

W 9/28 Gilpin, excerpts from various *Observations* (online);

WEEK SEVEN

W 10/5 Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," 1800, (BA 640)
Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey";

Levinson, "Insight and Oversight";
Rzepka, "Pictures of the Mind"

WEEK EIGHT

W 10/12 Immanuel Kant, from *The Critique of Judgment*, 1790 (TBA)

WEEK NINE

W 10/19 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Discourse* (TBA)

WEEK TEN

W 10/26 TBA; Michel Serres?

WEEK ELEVEN

W 11/2 Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

Friday 11/4—Deadline to withdraw with a "W"

WEEK TWELVE

W 11/9 Coleridge, "The Ancient Mariner"
Critical Works TBA

WEEK THIRTEEN

W 11/16 Individual conferences

WEEK FOURTEEN M 11/21 – F 11/25 Thanksgiving Recess—NO CLASS

WEEK FIFTEEN

W 11/30 TBA, likely Wordsworth lyrics

WEEK SIXTEEN

W 12/7 Presentations;
TBA, likely Wordsworth lyrics