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ENG 5005-031: Pictures of Disintegration: Romantic Aesthetics and the Ecology of Bildung

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English 5005-001: GRADUATE SEMINAR

Pictures of Disintegration: Romantic Aesthetics and the Ecology of *Bildung*

Summer 2010 / MW 18:00-20:30 / Coleman Hall

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"[T]he sublime is limitless, so that the mind in the presence of the sublime, attempting to imagine what it cannot, has pain in the failure but pleasure in contemplating the immensity of the attempt"

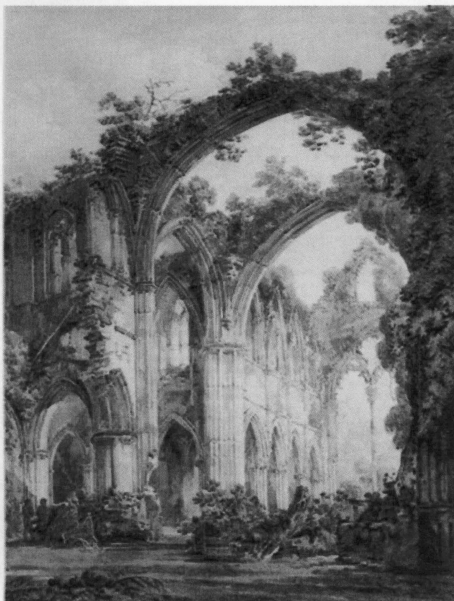
—Immanuel Kant, from *The Critique of Judgment*

Well it's kind of a... kind of a mass. It keeps getting bigger and bigger.

— Steve McQueen, from *The Blob*

With each passing day, it grows more and more likely that the summer of 2010 will be remembered as the time of the BP Horizon Blowout in the Gulf of Mexico. With each passing day, it grows less and less likely that the flow of oil from the Gulf's seabed will be stopped by the time this course concludes.

Rather than ignore the elephant in the room, or the leviathan in the gulf, we will think—and talk—about how and why the readings for this course might help us to *conceptualize*, if not exactly *imagine*, the almost unthinkable and unspeakable events happening a mile beneath the surface of the Gulf of Mexico, and along its shoreline.



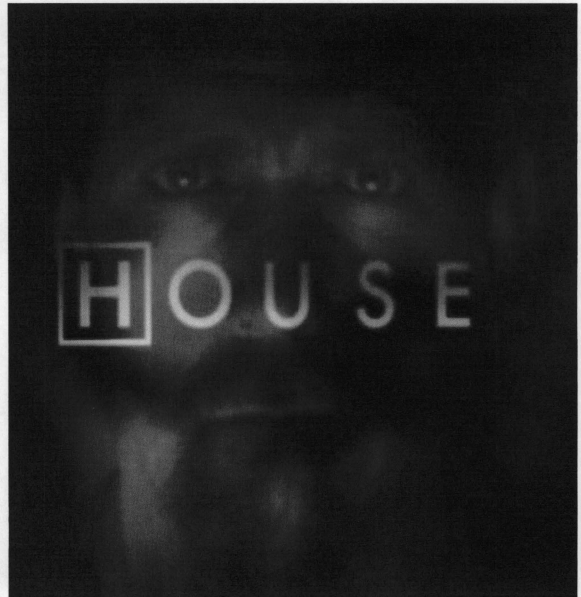
This course is entitled “Pictures of Disintegration,” because I would like us to focus on the fascination of Romantic writers with images and narratives of ruination and decay, with gradual processes of deterioration. There is, of course, something profoundly melancholic—and perhaps neurotic—in the minute 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. Numerous posts discussing the now-infamous “spillcam”—the live feed that legislators forced BP to upload on their homepage now linked to hundreds of other websites and homepages—testify to the mesmerizing effects of watching the uninterrupted stream of leaking oil. Millions of viewers across the globe leave the live spillcam feed running continuously on their desktops.



What does 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*?

As a further consideration of Romantic-era aesthetics, we will connect the phenomenon of the picturesque, so often reduced to a matter of the “taste” for landscape, to the form of Romantic literature that seems to have had the longest legs—the *Bildungsroman*. Almost exclusively (and problematically) identified as having originated with Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s*

Apprenticeship, the *Bildungsroman* became by the Victorian era, a recognizable and fashionable form of fiction, and maintains that popularity today. Searching with the keyword nets a surprising number of contemporary fictional works identified as “bildungsromans”: in the i-share catalogue, 83 such publications can be found for the year 2009 *alone*. Similarly, 68 separate book, article, and review titles identify themselves with the subject heading “bildungsroman” in the MLA International Bibliography database for that same year. What is it about the *Bildungsroman* that speaks so clearly to the twenty-first century, and what does it have to do with long history of Romantic aesthetics?

Texts

- Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*
 Fenwick, Eliza. *Secresy*
 Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *The Sorrows of Young Werther*
 Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*
 Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years*
 Macdonald/McWhir. *Broadview Anthology of Literature of the Revolutionary Period*
 Maturin, Charles. *Melmoth the Wanderer*
 Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*.
 Radcliffe, Ann. *The Italian*.
 Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*
 Stael, Germaine de. *Corinne, or Italy*
 Walpole, Horace. *The Castle of Otranto*



Goethe

Course pack available at Copy X, 219 Lincoln Avenue, Charleston

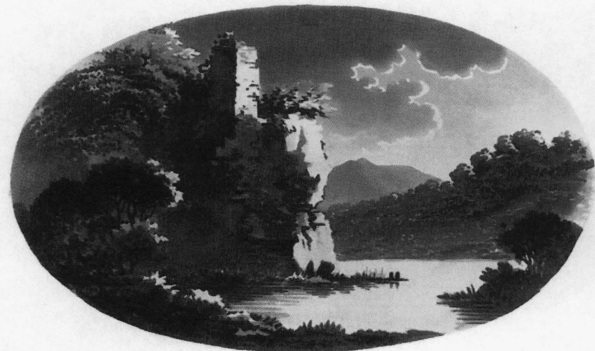
Requirements

Participation	20%
Project Abstracts (two)	20%
Presentation of Project (informal, required)	0%
Writing Project	60%

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

Writing Project (60%)

In the first half of the semester, I would like you to select a text that you could critically argue to be a *Bildungsroman* (or argue to be formally akin to a *Bildungsroman*), or, *alternatively*, a text that you consider to be informed by the aesthetic of the picturesque. 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 will also complete a substantial annotated bibliography of criticism on the text of your choice.

Presentation of Final Project (0%)

I will ask you to present in the final week 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.

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.



Charlotte Smith

Paper Policies

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.

You will receive the list of readings for this course on the Wednesday of the first week of class.