MA in Modern and Contemporary Literature and Culture

2016-17

CORE MODULE: READING MODERNITY

AUTUMN TERM

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This module addresses some of the major literary trends and cultural debates of modern and contemporary times. It considers the different ways that ‘modernity’ has been understood – whether it be as a period or as a particular constellation of values or some combination of both – and focuses on the multiple art-forms and theories of art this yielded. We will proceed in a loose chronological fashion, examining a broad swathe of writers, genres and intellectual disciplines. The aim is not to provide an exhaustive survey, but to focus on some salient or representative moments of recent cultural history that will allow you to make informed choices about more specialised options of study. The module is conducted through seminars, offering a broad variety of teaching styles and critical approaches. For each seminar there is core reading which is compulsory preparation, and also a selection of further reading which you are encouraged to sample as widely as possible.

THE TERM AT A GLANCE

Week 1: Introductory Meeting (Adam Kelly)*
Week 2: Modernist Poetry and the Politics of Allusion (Hugh Haughton)
Week 3: The Modernist Novel: Joyce’s Ulysses (Lawrence Rainey)
Week 4: Elizabeth Bowen and the Modern Short Story (Victoria Coulson)
Week 5: Utopian Longings (Emilie Morin)
Week 6: Reading Week (and procedural essay)
Week 7: Confession and Death at Mid-Century (JT Welsch)
Week 8: Beckett’s Voices (James Williams)
Week 9: Thatcherism, Neoliberalism and Resources (Claire Westall)
Week 10: Signifying Katrina (Bryan Radley)

*Note that this meeting is for students on the MA Modern and Contemporary Literature and Culture, rather than all students taking Reading Modernity.

With the exception of Weeks 1 and 4, all seminars meet on Tuesdays at 11am in SLB/005. The Week 4 seminar meets on Tuesday at 9am in SLB/006.

Hugh Haughton

In his essay on ‘Metaphysical Poetry’ of 1921, T.S. Eliot wrote that:

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.

Addressing the question of ‘difficulty’ and the claim that modern poetry must be ‘more allusive’, the seminar will focus principally on T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land (1922) and Marianne Moore’s poems ‘Marriage’ (1923), ‘Poetry’ and ‘The Octopus’ (1924), published in Observations (1924). The Waste Land and Observations presented 1920s readers with verse that was multiply allusive, poly-vocal and often palimpsest-like. Both books also notoriously included extensive notes along-side the texts of the poems, para-textually foregrounding the dimension of allusion within their texts.

I would also ask you to read two essays by Randall Jarrell that bear on the problem as seen from the mid twentieth-century, ‘The End of the Line’ and ‘The Obscurity of the Poet.’ Taking off from there, the seminar will reflect on related questions. Is modernist poetry inherently difficult? If so, is it more so than poetry from earlier periods? Is it more allusive, or simply allusive in a different way? What is the relationship between poet and audience in these poems? Is there a crisis of transmissibility and the accessibility of poetic experience? Is the allusive modernist text necessarily elitist? What does it suggest has happened to the poet’s relationship to her audience? How does poetic form impact on notions of history and ‘tradition’ and vice versa? Is ‘Modernist’ poetry of the kind represented by Moore and Eliot now irrevocably past and passe?

Core Reading (these texts will be available on the VLE)


Further Reading

Victoria Bazin, Marianne Moore and the Culture of Modernity (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010)
3) The Modernist Novel: Joyce’s *Ulysses*

Lawrence Rainey

*Ulysses* is a litmus test: all theories of literary modernism can be tested against it, and every history of the modern novel must come to terms with its extraordinary innovations. We’ll focus on chapter 13 (the ‘Nausicaa’ chapter). This will be made available on-line through the VLE. If you want to purchase your own edition of the novel, please get *Ulysses: the Corrected Text*, edited by Hans Walter Gabler, with Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior (New York: Vintage Books, 1986; London: Bodley Head, 1993). I would urge you not to bring in editions by other editors (Jeri Johnson, Declan Kiberd, etc.) or other publishers (Penguin Modern Classics, etc.).

**Core Reading (available on the VLE)**


**Further Reading**


4) Elizabeth Bowen and the Modern Short Story
Victoria Coulson

The purpose of this seminar is to introduce the work of Elizabeth Bowen by exploring in detail some of her short stories: 'Ivy Gripped the Steps'; 'The Little Girl’s Room'; 'The Apple Tree'; 'The Easter Egg Party'; 'Tears, Idle Tears'; and 'The Cat Jumps'.

These stories can be found in The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen (Vintage), but I will also make photocopies available for everyone early in the term. At the same time, I will email with specific information about how to prepare for the seminar.

Bowen’s novels are The Hotel (1927); The Last September (1929); Friends and Relations (1931); To the North (1932); The House in Paris (1935); The Death of the Heart (1938); The Heat of the Day (1949); A World of Love (1955); The Little Girls (1964); Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes (1968). If you want to explore Bowen’s novels, I would recommend that you read them in chronological order. It is not obligatory to have read any of them for the seminar.

Further Reading

5) Utopian Longings
Emilie Morin

In this seminar, we will discuss Aldous Huxley’s classic *Brave New World* (1932) in the light of post-war and contemporary debates about utopian thinking, as they have developed within and around the work of Frankfurt School philosophers. Our aim will not be to determine whether *Brave New World* is best read as an example of utopian or dystopian fiction; rather, we will seek to explore, through these precise theoretical lenses, the parameters of Huxley’s reflections on technology, boredom and the failures of rationality as they unfold in *Brave New World*.

Core Reading

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (any edition) (you must bring a copy of this novel to the seminar)
Theodor W. Adorno, “Aldous Huxley and Utopia”, from Adorno’s *Prisms*, pp. 95-118 (scan on VLE, under Resources List)
Ernst Bloch and T.W. Adorno, “A Conversation on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing”, from Bloch’s *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, to be read from https://files.nyu.edu/scr266/public/Adorno_Bloch.pdf

Further Reading

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [you can either read the excerpt and the introduction in the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, OR - if you wish to engage with this text in greater depth - you can read the introduction, chapter 2 on the culture industry and the concluding sections on propaganda]

Background Reading/Surveys

Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian fiction East and West: universe of terror and trial* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001)
7) Confession and Death at Mid-Century
JT Welsch

This seminar will explore the sense of cultural and personal loss in the work of John Berryman and Delmore Schwartz. We’ll consider their fraught associations with other mid-century ‘confessionalist’ writing, focusing on the elegiac forms by which both writers registered a perceived death of modernism. Berryman and Schwartz’s use of personae will also be an opportunity to consider the critical challenges posed by radically autobiographical writing. The main reading will be Berryman’s *Dream Songs* and selections from Schwartz’s writing, although you are encouraged to explore both writers further.

**Core Reading**


- The text of the poems is the same in any edition, but please read Michael Hoffmann’s introduction to the 2014 FSG Classics edition.
- Within the whole, please focus on the elegies for Delmore Schwartz (No. 146-158), and other writers: Theodore Roethke (No. 18), Robert Frost (Nos. 37-39), Sylvia Plath (Nos. 153 and 172), R. P. Blackmur (No. 173), Ernest Hemingway (No. 235), Randall Jarrell (No. 259), Louis MacNeice (No. 267), and William Carlos Williams (No. 324).


**Further Reading**

Robert Lowell, ‘For John Berryman’ and ‘To Delmore Schwartz’, *Collected Poems*
8) Beckett’s Voices
James Williams

In this seminar we will read two works by Samuel Beckett—or four, depending how you count them—the play *Krapp’s Last Tape* and the trilogy of short prose texts known as *Nohow On* (*Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho*). These texts could be compared in many ways: we’ll be focussing on questions of voice and address. What voices are speaking in Beckett? Who are Beckett’s voices speaking to? Who is listening? Does a voice presuppose a self? What if selves have multiple voices? How is a voice on the page related to a voice in performance? Where are the lines between dialogue and monologue? How is Beckett’s writing animated by these questions?

Core Reading


I may also set some bits of supplementary reading e.g. letters, extracts from the theatrical notebooks for *Krapp*, etc. but if so I will notify you in good time, and will provide them as a hand-out at least a week ahead of the seminar.

* You may be reassured to know that our seminar will be on the English versions of all these texts. However, if you can read French and are interested in Beckett, you stand to gain a lot from comparing the English texts with their French versions. Please note, however, that Beckett’s composition practices were far more complicated than they are sometimes made out to be (i.e. writing in one language—at first English, then later, French—and then self-translating into the other). *Krapp’s Last Tape* was written in English for the Northern Irish actor Patrick Magee, then self-translated as *La Dernière bande* the following year. *Company* was first written in English, then immediately self-translated into French and published in 1980 as *Compagnie*; the English text was then revised in light of the French and published later the same year. *Ill Seen Ill Said* was first written in French as *Mal vu mal dit*: Beckett began translating it into English even as the French text was still being written and revised. *Worstward Ho* was written in English, and never translated by the author. Beckett regarded it as untranslatable, but this didn’t stop Édith Fournier from having a go: her translation, *Cap au pire*, appeared in 1991.

Further Reading

There is no set secondary reading, however you are encouraged to explore the following reading list and I would expect a well-prepared student to come to the seminar having read three or four article-length things, or equivalent, from it.

Campbell, Julie, “‘Echo’s Bones’ and Beckett’s Disembodied Voices’, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui*, 11 (1001), 454-60.


9) Thatcherism, Neoliberalism and the Resources of the World-Literary System
Claire Westall

Following the elections of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the early 1980s, neoliberalism became the dominant ideological formation in the Anglo-American world. This seminar will set neoliberalism within the longer history of the capitalist world system but will also attend to a recent effort to portray Thatcher’s attack on labour in the 1980s. By working out from David Peace’s 2004 novel GB84 we will examine the manner in which resource fictions can help us understand how contemporary socio-economic debates relate to the large-scale dynamics of capitalist modernity.

Core Reading

GB84 (2004) by David Peace
(NB: this is a long, dense text and students are encouraged to read it well in advance of Week 8)

And…


Margaret Thatcher, The Downing Street Years (London: Harper Collins, 1993), Chapter XIII, ‘Mr Scargill’s Insurrection’ (VLE)


Further Reading

Web: http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v007/7.1brown.html
David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
Katy Shaw, David Peace: Texts and Contexts (Sussex Academic Press 2010)
Web: http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-plutocratic-imagination
10) Signifying Katrina: Disaster Capitalism, Displacement, and Race
Bryan Radley

Following on from the discussion of neoliberalism in the previous week, this seminar will look at the political and cultural legacies of Hurricane Katrina. The focus will be on Mary Robison’s 2009 experimental novel One D.O.A., One on the Way. Does Robison’s fragmentary, blackly comic, and generically mutable narrative provide an apposite aesthetic response to the challenge of representing the political ruptures, psychic wounds, and temporal discontinuities of New Orleans after Katrina? The critical coordinates for our discussion will include the biopolitics of disposability and ideas of disaster capitalism / apartheid (via the work of Henry Giroux and Naomi Klein respectively).

Core Reading


Further Reading / Viewing

Nandini Gunewardena and Mark Schuller, eds., Capitalizing on Catastrophe: Neoliberal Strategies in Disaster Reconstruction (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2008), esp. the three chapters that comprise Part 3, “Exposing Katrina: Class, Race, and Displacement”, pp. 117-156.
Cynthia Whitney Hallett, Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), 101-133. [This chapter provides a useful summary of the first twenty years of Robison’s career, with a focus on the short stories and her place within the minimalist movement.]
Chester Hartman and Gregory D. Squires, eds., There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina (London: Routledge, 2006).
Spike Lee, dir., When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Act (USA: HBO Video, 2006).
Tia Lessin and Carl Deal, dirs., Trouble the Water (USA: Zeitgeist Films, 2009).