MA in Victorian Literature and Culture 2019-20

QUESTIONING THE VICTORIANS: TEXTS, CONTEXTS AND AFTERLIVES

Convenor: Dr Emma Major
Email: emma.major@york.ac.uk
Office: King’s Manor K/G73; Phone: (01904 32)4974

This course surveys some of the major literary and cultural developments in, and the central preoccupations of, Victorian writing, as formulated by contemporaries and by recent critics and theorists. It introduces key thematic areas and problems in the interpretation of nineteenth-century literature across a broad range of genres. Sessions are grouped to enable students to sample theoretical, historical, and aesthetic approaches. Below is an outline of the module so you can see the whole term at a glance, followed by more detailed descriptions of seminars.

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. To give you an idea of what to expect, unless a tutor indicates otherwise a well-prepared MA student arriving for a seminar will have read all the core reading and at least three or four article-sized items—which could be, for example, book chapters—by different authors in the further reading.

THE TERM AT A GLANCE

Week 1: Introductory Meeting (Emma Major)*
Week 2: Manifestos and Theses (John Bowen)
Week 3: Elizabeth Gaskell’s North and South (Trev Broughton)
Week 4: The Invention of Irish Poetry (Matthew Campbell)
Week 5: The Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian ‘Literary’ Painters (Elizabeth Prettejohn)

Week 6: READING WEEK

Week 7: Marx’s Ghostly Matters (John Bowen)
Week 8: The Victorians and Dialect (Matthew Townend)
Week 9: Yellowing the 1890s: The Yellow Book (Nicoletta Ascuito)
Week 10: Oscar Wilde: Art, Theatricality, Aestheticism and Comedy in the Fin-de-Siècle (Hugh Haughton)

* Please note this meeting is for students taking the Victorian Literature and Culture MA, rather than for all students taking Questioning the Victorians.

Seminars usually meet in the same room at the same time each week, but rooms and times can vary to accommodate staff availability. Please consult online timetables at the start of term for up to date information.
SEMINAR INFORMATION

WEEK 2: MANIFESTOS AND THERSES
Prof. John Bowen

This seminar is designed as an introduction to Victorian Studies through the prism of three influential manifestos or theses, one from the nineteenth century, one from the period of high modernism and one from 2015. They are all in different ways partial, provocative, polemical and influential, and raise important questions about what, how and why we are studying, particularly how we might write and think about the ‘historical’.

Marx and Engels’s Communist Manifesto of 1848 is probably the most influential single text written in the nineteenth century. Is it what you expected? How is it written? To whom is it addressed? What is surprising, strange, unexpected about it? There are multiple prefaces to later editions (Italian, German etc) but please don’t feel you don’t have to read them or grapple with the massive secondary literature. Just think about what they say and how.

Walter Benjamin’s 1939 ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ is in one way a response to Marx but also to the political crisis of the 1930s and to the literary modernism and cultural criticism in which Benjamin’s work was embedded. It is explicitly about the relation of culture and history. How does it think about time? What claims does it make about culture? Do you think he is right?

In 2015 the ‘ten theses’ of the V21 collective livened up debate among Victorianists, and animated their self-consciousness about their locations, assumptions, methods and aspirations. The ten theses can be found here: http://v21collective.org/manifesto-of-the-v21-collective-ten-theses/ They generated a substantial debate which you can follow by signing up for the blog (on the right of the initial v21 screen), but please also try to respond directly to it. Should there be more of this sort of stuff in academic writing?

As preparation for this, our first session of the module, please chose a short passage from each of the texts that seems to you particularly provocative, puzzling, fascinating, wrong-headed, brilliant, intriguing, annoying, unsettling, mysterious, enigmatic, suggestive, absurd, contemptible, admirable, witty, disturbing, uncanny, incomprehensible, strange or simply worth discussing. Be prepared to tell us why you chose each passage and what drew you to it. There are no right answers or preferred approaches but do try to think about how these texts are written as well as what they are saying, and the relationship between their ‘literary’ or rhetorical qualities and the claims they are making.

Core Reading
Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ in Illuminations (London; Fontana 1973)
In 1851 the national Census showed that for the first time in British history, more people lived in the city than in the country. The new industrial cities were seen as representing the best and the worst of Britain, and in the first half of the nineteenth century Manchester came under particular attention as the city in which commentators saw both the promise of a new Jerusalem and the horrors of the future. Gaskell’s novel asks many of the questions which troubled people of the time: How can a country call itself civilised, and Christian, and yet allow such poverty to exist? What should the relationship be between factory-owner and worker? Did the same class distinctions hold true for north and south of England? How obedient should one be, and to which laws? Did the new social order provide new opportunities for women? And what should the role of literature be in this troubled time?

**Core Reading**


**Further Reading**

The Introduction to the OUP recommended edition is useful, as is its bibliography. See also:


Sheila M. Smith, *The Other Nation: The poor in English novels of the 1840s and 1850s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).


and some related primary reading . . .

Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (1848).


**WEEK 4: INVENTING IRISH POETRY: MOORE, FERGUSON, MANGAN**

Prof. Matthew Campbell

What was going on in Ireland before Yeats and Joyce? Was it all just gothic novels, famine and emigration, folksongs and music hall? Why do ‘Victorian poetry people’ not read nineteenth-century Irish poems? Just how can we think about Victoria’s Great Britain if we are not aware it had been since the Act of Union with Ireland in 1801 also a United Kingdom? Why do we think about Victorian England but 19th Century Ireland? How did Irish literature emerge from a European nationalism and republicanism that largely left England alone? And which are the good poems that it would be a pleasure to read and understand? These and other questions will be raised in this seminar.

**Core Reading**

A short anthology of texts will be circulated in advance via the VLE.

**Further Reading**

... some anthologies


Zimmermann, George Denis. *Songs of Irish Rebellion* 2nd edn. (Dublin: Four Courts, 2002).

... some History and Criticism
Arnold, Matthew, *On The Study of Celtic Literature* (1867) [various editions, including online at Project Gutenberg].
———, and Michael Perraudin (eds), *The Voice of the People 1760-1914* ([s.l.]: Anthem, 2012).
Princeton University Library Chronicle (Special Issue on Irish Poetry), 59, 3 (1998).

**WEEK 5: THE PRE-RAPHAELITES: VICTORIAN ‘LITERARY’ PAINTERS**
**Prof. Elizabeth Prettejohn**

This seminar will explore the visual art of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, their close associates and followers. Why are works of Pre-Raphaelite visual art overwhelmingly popular with museum and gallery audiences, yet treated with condescension or disdain by many art historians and curators? The seminar will address this question in a variety of ways, and will pay particular attention to the frequent charge that Pre-Raphaelite painting is ‘too literary’.
Core Reading — well, actually, Looking
Please familiarize yourselves with works by Pre-Raphaelite artists in the collections of Tate, the Ashmolean (Oxford), or Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, which can easily be accessed through their websites (listed below). You may make your own choice of which works to study; please choose at least 4-6 works by different artists, for example: Ford Madox Brown, Edward Burne-Jones, Charles Allston Collins, Evelyn De Morgan, Arthur Hughes, John Everett Millais, William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Elizabeth Eleanor Siddall, John William Waterhouse, Joanna Boyce Wells, Thomas Woolner. You may want to take advantage of the Pre-Raphaelite Sisters exhibition at the NPG (see below) to choose at least one work by a woman artist.

Tate: search at http://www.tate.org.uk/art/


See also the gallery installation shots at http://www.birminghammuseums.org.uk/bmag/highlights/the-pre-raphaelites


Another useful resource for finding pictures in public collections is the BBC’s Your Paintings website: http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/

Please try to make an opportunity to see the important exhibition Pre-Raphaelite Sisters at the National Portrait Gallery, London, 17 October 2019–26 January 2020; for details see:

https://www.npg.org.uk/whatson/exhibitions/2019/pre-raphaelite-sisters/

Further Reading
Tim Barringer, Jason Rosenfeld, and Alison Smith, Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde, exhibition catalogue (London: Tate, 2012).
Elizabeth Prettejohn, The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites (London: Tate, 2000).
Elizabeth Prettejohn, ed., The Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); also available as e-book.
WEEK 6: READING WEEK (NO SEMINAR)

WEEK 7: MARX’S GHOSTLY MATTERS
Prof. John Bowen

Karl Marx was a contemporary of Dickens and George Eliot and did much of his most important writing in England. His legacies have continued to haunt the study of Victorian literature and culture and this seminar explores some of the key moments of that presence and inheritance. This will also be an opportunity to encounter and work through an important text by perhaps the most influential and important of all modern philosophers, Jacques Derrida. As it can be quite demanding, I’ve set only one chapter so that our discussion will have a clear focus, attentive to its writing and argument.

Please begin with *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, followed by Stallybrass, followed by Derrida. You’ll need to have a sense of the political and cultural events that Marx is seeking to understand for *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. Richard J. Evans, *The Pursuit of Power: Europe, 1815-1914* (Penguin) and Robert Gildea’s *Barricades and Borders* (Oxford) give succinct summaries of Louis Napoleon’s rise to power and what preceded it. Think about how Marx writes as well as his argument: there is a striking metaphorical and figurative exuberance in his writing which both articulates and dislocates a complex sense of how and why social and political representation happen in the forms they do. Is it a very different Marx from what you might expect?

**Core Reading**
Karl Marx ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte’ , in *Surveys from Exile* ed. David Fernbach, especially sections 1 and 7. Also available on line at [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/)

**Further reading**

WEEK 8: THE VICTORIANS AND DIALECT
Prof. Matthew Townend

What were some of the dominant ideas about language in the Victorian period? One conspicuous feature was a surge in interest in dialect, and for two main reasons: first, because dialect was regional, and second, because it was historical. The issue of regionality is the more obvious of the two, and ties in with other, easily observed
phenomena of the period such as the rise of regional fiction and the establishment of local antiquarian societies.

The issue of historicity requires a little more explanation. In the nineteenth century, the new discipline of philology – the so-called ‘science of language’ – revolutionized attitudes to language. Philology taught its adherents to view language historically, in terms of change over time, but also comparatively, in terms of family connections between languages and reconstructed ancestor-forms. It furthermore accentuated the primacy of spoken language over written, and thus foregrounded the value of non-standard modern dialects. In emphasizing these points, philology formed part of broader historicist movements in the nineteenth century, and had obvious affinities with other new disciplines such as folklore, comparative mythology, and (of course) evolutionary biology. Victorian Britain’s supreme philological achievement was the production of the *Oxford English Dictionary* – begun in 1857, though not completed till 1928.

In this seminar, we will consider the Victorian engagement with dialect by focusing on two Dorset writers – one very famous, the other somewhat less so – and we will look at both poetry and prose, fiction and non-fiction. Both William Barnes (1801-86) and Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) were heavily influenced by Victorian philology. Barnes was an important early worker in the fields of dialectology and historical philology, and should probably be regarded as the most influential dialect poet of the nineteenth century. As a poet, Hardy was more concerned with how the enlarged vistas of philology made available a whole range of forms and words, from different times and places; but as a novelist, of course, he became one of the most important writers to use dialect speech for some of his characters.

Our primary texts will be:

1. a selection of poems by Barnes;
2. Barnes’ ‘Dissertation on the Dorset Dialect of the English Language’ (published as an introduction to his 1844 *Poems of Rural Life in the Dorset Dialect*);
3. Hardy’s ‘Preface’ to his 1908 edition of *Select Poems of William Barnes*; and

Although our focus will be on Barnes and Hardy, we will also think more widely about the place of dialect in Victorian literature and thought. So in preparation for the seminar, please look back at *North and South*, to consider Gaskell’s use of dialect; and think also about other writers you have read who deploy dialect in either fiction or poetry – such as the Brontës, Dickens, George Eliot, Tennyson, or Hopkins. Why do such writers use dialect? What values and meanings does it bear?

**Reading**

All the primary texts will be made available in advance: you should read these carefully, and bring copies along to the seminar. The secondary reading is all available electronically, as either e-books or e-journals; please read a sample of the items listed.
Core Reading

Further Reading
. . . on Barnes and Hardy

. . . on Victorian dialect and philology

WEEK 9: YELLOWING THE 1890s: THE YELLOW BOOK
Dr Nicoletta Asciuto

Yellow and green were the two colours appropriated by Decadent writers and artists as symbolical of natural decay: this week, we shall closely scrutinize one particular shade of late Victorian and Decadent yellow, The Yellow Book. ‘[T]he Oscar Wilde of periodicals’, as it was welcomed by one of its first reviewers, The Yellow Book was relatively short-lived (13 volumes over three years) yet it caused a real sensation amongst the late Victorians which still fascinates scholars today. With its blend of
literature, art, satire, erotica, and even tradition, *The Yellow Book* quickly established itself as challenging Victorian morals and the precursor of modern literary magazines. In this seminar, we will discuss the texts of *The Yellow Book* in its original publishing context as well as consider its wider social, cultural, aesthetic, political, and literary value for the end of the Victorian age and for the looming twentieth century.

**Core Reading**

*The Yellow Book: An Illustrated Quarterly* (London: The Bodley Head/John Lane, 1894-1897). *The Yellow Book* is available in hard copy in the library, as well as via the ProQuest database (via Library website). It is also easily available in open access via the website *The Yellow Nineties Online* ([www.1890s.ca](http://www.1890s.ca)). Please come to the seminar having read Volume I (1894) of *The Yellow Book* in full.

Please also read the following two reviews of *The Yellow Book*’s first volume:


**Further Reading**


WEEK 10: OSCAR WILDE: ART, THEATRICALITY, AESTHETICISM AND COMEDY IN THE FIN-DE-SIÈCLE
Prof. Hugh Haughton

This seminar will look at Wilde in relation to theatricality, aestheticism and sexuality, setting his hyper-self-conscious farce The Importance of Being Earnest against two critical dialogues from Intentions (1890) and his fictional essay on Shakespeare, ‘The Portrait of Mr. W.H.’

Wilde was a master of numerous art-forms – poetry, theatre, fiction, fairy-tale, novel, review and critical essay among them – but he was also a major theorist of art, working in and against the English tradition of Ruskin, Arnold, Morris and Pater, and the French tradition of Gautier, Baudelaire and Huysmans. The nature of his own art as well as his thinking about art have been subject to scandal and controversy from the first, and we will look at the changing critical reception of Wilde from his own time to ours, as well as at the forms of theatrical questioning and self-questioning he practised in his plays and prose. Wilde is in many ways a transitional figure between ‘Victorian’ and ‘Modern’, and we will explore how Wilde’s writings bring together art and scandal, comedy and sexuality, in a way that continues to challenge our notions of cultural, moral and biographical identity.

Core Reading

Further Reading
.. on Wilde

.. on The Importance of Being Earnest and Wilde’s theatre

... on Intenons and Wilde's essays

Emma Major/James Williams,
August 2019.