

ENGLISH 595.01

T 12:30-3:00 / New North 311

Tragic Ecologies

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Spring 2016 / Georgetown University

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William Henry Fox Talbot, "An Oak Tree in Winter," Calotype negative and salted paper print, c. 1842-3

Since the Greeks, tragic form has given shape to stories of irreversible and unwilling catastrophe. Starting in the Victorian era, the term ecology began to name intricate systemic interactions from which no single phenomena could be extracted without loss. With tragedy and ecology as its coordinating principles, this course in environmental humanities takes the now-irreversible climate catastrophe of our late carbon era as the starting point for surveying the literary history of disaster. How have literary writers of the fossil fuel era imagined system-wide failures, "natural" cataclysms, and calamities that seem to exceed the power of any single individual to alter them? Amid early and more recent premonitions of the world's end, might literature offer models not just for writing the disaster --but also for thinking beyond it? And could attention to the longer history of our present moment --extending our sense of the contemporary-- help us find in the jumbled relics of past thought a resource for action now?

This course will focus primarily on British literature from the Age of Coal, circa 1800 to the present. The work to be considered will be "tragic" only in the broadest sense: we'll start with theories of that form from Aristotle, Hegel, Nietzsche, and others, but spin off to survey a variety of genres, modes, and media platforms. We'll examine pseudo-scientific

treatises and geological catalogues of “deep time”; look at poetry, verse drama, film, and the novel. We’ll move from unstaged Romantic plays about utopia to Victorian pastoral elegies, shipwreck poems, and triple-deckers about interconnection; from tiny, handmade books to video games that generate endlessly variable new worlds. Throughout, we will work to see nineteenth century thinking as a resource for engaging the present.

Required Texts:

Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Major Works* (Oxford World’s Classics): 978-0199538973

Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights* (Oxford World’s Classics): B00BSZTWM8

Emily Bronte et al., *Tales of Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal: Selected Early Writings* (Oxford World’s Classics): 978-0192827630

Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders* (Penguin Classics): 978-0140435474

Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (Columbia UP), ISBN: 023116954X

The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory (Broadview): 978-1551111001

(You can purchase this book used online for around 22 dollars.)

Recommended Texts:

These are books from which we’ll read significant sections. They’ll be available as PDFs but if you’re serious about continuing the study of English I recommend you own them. Used is cheapest.

Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford UP): 978-0195198102

William Wordsworth, *The Major Works Including The Prelude* (Oxford World’s Classics): 978-0199536863

Additional Readings:

A significant amount of our semester’s reading will be posted on our course blog; these readings are marked on the syllabus with an asterisk (*). You should plan to budget at least \$50 for printing these files in the required hard copy format. You are expected **to print the PDFs in hard copy; read everything on printed paper; and (of course) bring all secondary texts to class.** Readings marked “supplementary” are just that: not required (formally or informally) but available to you should you desire further guidance on the primary texts.

Assignments:

Formal Course Work (70% of final grade)

Conference abstract. (500 words) You will use one of the resources posted on our blog to find a conference in Nineteenth Century Studies (Romantic or Victorian) or an adjacent field and then write a proposal for that conference. Guidelines forthcoming.

Close reading assignment. (2-3 pages, single spaced) Details for this exercise in close reading will be provided, but essentially this is an assignment in the hyperbolically slow apprehension of a textual artifact. Your task will be to take time to appreciate this object in all its dynamic and possibly self-contradictory specificity: terms, tips, and helpful suggestions will be provided. You are not meant to argue or defend a thesis but to *read*: your job is to notice everything. Details TBA.

Seminar paper. (15-18 pp.) This is a sustained academic argument that follows the format of a published scholarly article, if slightly shorter. You are encouraged to expand on your conference paper into a longer, more developed and fully-researched analysis. But you should also feel free to generate an entirely new argument about new text(s).

Conference Presentation. (7 minutes) At the end of class we will convene in a mini-conference in tandem with at least one other graduate seminar. You will present a streamlined version of your research to an audience of your peers. Short and sweet: 7 minutes maximum.

Other Work (counted as part of participation grade, which is 30% of final grade)

Weekly posts to our online blog. Each week every seminar participant will make a contribution to the class blog. In keeping with the multimedia nature of the era of coal, these posts can take any form: short essays making an argument about the week's reading(s); close readings of single passages with questions appended; or sets of discussion questions in dialogue with other posts. You may also gather and present a piece of writing, art, or mass culture that you see as relating to what we've read. (In this case a word about the relation you see would be appropriate.) I encourage you to vary the form of your entries, moving from criticism to questions to creative posts and remediations of archival objects. *Posts are due the night before class, no later than midnight.* All class members are required to read all posts.

Curatorial Presentation. Each member of the seminar will be asked to *curate* one archival object relating to ecology for the benefit of the class, with "object" understood to mean textual, aesthetic, ephemeral, and physical artifacts of the Age of Coal, roughly 1800-2015. The root of "curate" is "care," so this project asks you to learn about your object, meditate on its significance to our class and your thinking – in short, to care for it. This assignment will involve techniques of close

apprehension, fine-grained thinking, and intimate appreciation -- plus research. The results will be posted on a blog secured for this purpose. Details to follow.

Informal Research Presentation. At the end of the term we'll hold a mini-conference that will replicate the format of the Interdisciplinary Nineteenth Century Studies Conference (INCS): you will prepare a short (7 minute) oral presentation of your final project, which you'll present to your peers; discussion will follow.

Policy on Late Work:

Reliability is important, and respect for our shared academic endeavor means that lateness is strongly discouraged. Papers and other assignments will be penalized the equivalent of one letter grade for each day beyond their due date, with the first 24 hour period beginning immediately. Please see me in advance if extraordinary circumstances arise. Incompletes are offered only in genuinely exceptional moments of duress, like the Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction event, when a meteorite from space ended nearly all life on the planet and replotted the story of evolution.

Course Grading Policy:

Your final grade for this course will reflect the quality of written work you produce (70%); it will also reflect the quality of your participation in the collaborative labor of the course (30%). Thus, your thoughtful responses to the texts, your active participation in class discussions, and your level of commitment to our shared undertaking will all contribute crucially to your final grade. The central component of your grade is your final paper.

Absence and Tardy Policy:

The seminar-style nature of this course makes your presence in class imperative. See me in advance if a situation arises that will result in an absence. Please don't come to class late. Excessive absences (more than once) will result in a lowered grade; same with tardies (more than twice). In all cases it is your responsibility to make up missed class time.

Plagiarism:

The absolute prohibition here should be understood. See the Georgetown Honor System website for guidelines: <http://gervaseprograms.georgetown.edu/honor/system/53377.html>. Note that in all matters I expect you to observe the Georgetown honor pledge, which likewise describes what's expected of you as a member of the academic community: *To be honest in every academic endeavor, and to conduct myself honorably, as a responsible member of the Georgetown community as we live and work together.*

Disabilities, Special Conditions, Etc.:

I'm committed to providing whatever I can to help you be successful in this course. For details about medical and other dispensations, please see: <http://guarc.georgetown.edu/disability/accommodations/>; and visit me early in the term to discuss how I can help.

Guides for Further Study and Research:

Thinking conceptually about literature is difficult, since it entails showing how minute textual details reconfigure concrete historical dilemmas. For your research of matters Victorian, consult the library's wonderful guide to C19 resources; for matters of terminology, your first line of defense is the *Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*. Second stop is the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available with a Google search. For matters of literary history, consult the *Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature* or the *Columbia Guide to British Literature*. (Links to these are available the library's [19th century resources site](#).) Only after exhausting these options should you bother with Wikipedia. Please stay away from online summaries not mentioned here. And as always, please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions about this material. We're in this together. I'm here to help.

TRAGIC ECOLOGIES: SCHEDULE

Please note that this schedule is subject to change. Items marked with an asterisk are available online, via our course blog.

Tuesday, Jan 19 | The Passion of the World: Coordinates

Richard Anderson, "The World is Dying-- And So Are You" (handout)
G.W.F. Hegel, G.W.F. From *The Aesthetics* (handout)
Paul Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind" (handout)
Chris Jordan: *Midway: Messages from the Gyre*
John Clare, "The Badger" and "The Tame Badger" (handout)

Tuesday, Jan 26 | Disaster and the Problem of Genre

John Keats, "To Autumn."*
George Gordon, Lord Byron, "Darkness."*
Bill McKibben from *The End of Nature**
Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, Chapters 1 & 2. "A Fable for Tomorrow" and "The Obligation to Endure"*
Timothy Clarke, from *The Cambridge Companion to Ecocriticism**
*The Dark Mountain Manifesto**
Ursula Heise, "Lost Dogs, Last Birds, Listed Species, and the Cultures of Extinction"*
Jonathan Bate, "Living with the Weather"*

Tuesday, Feb 2 | Pastoral

William Wordsworth, “Home at Grasmere,” “The Ruined Cottage,” “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” “The Thorn,” “Nutting,” “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” “O Nightingale! Thou surely art,” “Appendix A: “There is an active principle alive in all things.”

Raymond Williams, from *The Country and the City**

Jerome McGann, from *Romantic Ideology**

Marc Redfield, “Wordsworth’s Dream of Extinction”*

Selected paintings, John Constable*

Tuesday, Feb 9 | Counterpastoral

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*

Deirdre D’Albertis, “Dark Nature: A Critical Return to Brontë Country”*

Nancy Armstrong, “Emily Brontë In and Out of Her Time.”*

Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, selections

Tuesday, Feb 16 | Counterpastoral II

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, cont’d

The Brontës, *Tales of Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal*, selections

John Ruskin, “The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century”*

John Ruskin, “Of the Pathetic Fallacy,” in *Modern Painters**

Selected paintings, J.M.W. Turner*

Jane Bennett, “The Agency of Assemblages”*

Tuesday, Feb 23 | Elegy

Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”*

Peter Sacks, from *The English Elegy** [OPTIONAL]

Tim Morton, from *The Dark Ecology of Elegy**

Jeremy Jackson, “Ocean Apocalypse” (YouTube)*

John Milton, “Lycidas”; Shelley, “Adonais”; Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “In Memoriam A.H.H.,” “Tithonus,” Charlotte Brontë, “On the Death of Emily Jane Brontë”; “On the Death of Anne Brontë”; Emily Brontë, “Remembrance,” “The Night is Darkening Around Me”

Matthew Arnold, “Dover Beach,” “To a Gipsy Child by the Sea-Shore”

Jorie Graham, “Sea Change”*

Tuesday, March 1 | Counterelegy

Jennifer Chang: Guest Reading and Discussion of Modern(ist) Elegy/Pastoral

Robert Hass, “Introduction.” In *The Ecopoetics Anthology**

Robinson Jeffers, selected poems.*

T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land**; Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* facsimile manuscripts*

ABSTRACT DUE

SPRING BREAK

Tuesday, March 15 | Dark Natures

Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders*
Richard Kerridge, "Ecological Hardy"
Bruno Latour, "Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene"*

Tuesday, March 22 | Systems / Assemblages

Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, cont'd
Thomas Hardy, "Hap," "Neutral Tones," "The Darkling Thrush," "The Minute Before Meeting," and "Afterwards."
Select readings on determinism TBD.
Jahan Ramazani, "Hardy's Elegy for An Era: 'By the Century's Deathbed'"*

Tuesday, March 29 | Nonhuman Times

Christina Rossetti, "After Death," "An Apple Gathering," "Echo," "Song," *Monna Innominata*, and *Sing Song*
Charles Lyell, from *Principles of Geology**
Charles Darwin, from *On the Origin of Species**
Michael Madsen, dir., *Into Eternity*
Elizabeth Grosz, from *Nick of Time**
Lee Edelman, from *No Future**

CLOSE READING EXERCISE DUE

Tuesday, April 5 | Economies of (Post-)Nature

Gerard Manley Hopkins, all selections in anthology
From Bernadette Waterman Ward, *World as Word*
Stephanie LeMenager, "Petro-Melancholia: The BP Blowout and the Arts of Grief?"
Tim Morton, from *Ecology Without Nature**

Tuesday, April 12 | Future Humanisms

Benh Zeitlin, dir. *Beasts of the Southern Wild*
Patricia Yeager, "Beasts of the Southern Wild and Dirty Ecology"*
Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*.
Margaret Ronda, "Mourning and Melancholia in the Anthropocene"*
Juliana Spahr, selected poems*

Tuesday, April 19 | Worldmaking

Percy B. Shelley, *Queen Mab*; *Prometheus Unbound*; *Mont Blanc*, *On Life*, “The Sensitive Plant.” *Alastor*, “Mutability”; “To a Skylark;” *A Defense of Poetry*.
Thomas Hardy, “Shelley’s Skylark”; *No Man’s Sky*, and selected reviews.
No Man’s Sky, select reviews.

Tuesday, April 26 | Ending is beginning

Class wrapup and student-curated presentations of media objects.

Tuesday, May 3 | *Ecology, Tragedy, and the Animal: A Graduate Mini-Conference*

Class mini-conference and reception.

DELIVER CONFERENCE PRESENTATION

SEMINAR PAPERS DUE IN HARD COPY, FRIDAY MAY 6, 5 PM