

THE REVOLUTIONARY TRADITION

ENGL 315

Fall 2011

Instructor: Michaela Bronstein, mbronstein@amherst.edu

Monday/Wednesday 2.00-3.20, BARR 102

Drop-in office hours: Monday 12-2, Johnson Chapel #5

(Please e-mail to schedule meetings at any other time.)

I wish to speak out about several matters even though my artistry goes smash.
What attracts me is what has piled up in my mind and heart; let it give only a
pamphlet, but I shall speak out.

—Fyodor Dostoevsky, letter regarding his novel *Demons*

Revolutionist and reactionary, victim and executioner, betrayer and betrayed, they
shall all be pitied together when the light breaks on our black sky at last. Pitied
and forgotten ...

—Natalia Haldin, *Under Western Eyes*, Joseph Conrad

Contrary to the hope Conrad's character expresses, we have not forgotten either the historical revolutionaries or the works they inspired. While Dostoevsky feared that his novel was too politically pointed to be a lasting work of art, *Demons* today is more well-known than the incident on which the novel was based. In this course we will analyze the afterlives of nineteenth-century novels about revolutionaries—not just their continuing interest, but their constant reappearance in later works.

Dostoevsky's worries about his novel turning into a "pamphlet" raise a broad issue for the novel form: why would an author who wishes to address pressing social issues write a novel rather than an essay? How do authors reconcile the long aims of literature with the urgent claims of the political present? Revolutionaries often appeal to their authors precisely because they seem to represent much more than the social problem they seek to reform—whether they represent the influence of ideology upon character or the difficulty of human attempts to plot better lives for themselves and others, revolutionaries usually carry the weight of much more abstract ideas than their immediate social purposes. We will examine to what extent this representative quality can help and hinder these novels' status as globally lasting art—and as locally relevant social commentary.

The novels and plays we will consider in this course also exemplify various kinds of literary influence: some re-imagine a Russian milieu of a century ago; others transpose plots from it to contemporary London or further. Some evoke predecessors' plots and themes; others borrow narrative techniques. Such appropriations raise a variety of problems for our understanding of literary influence and allusion: how do authors negotiate with the towering writers of ages past? how does a novelist writing about Kenya relate to the literary heritage of the British colonizers? Literary influence will be our way of examining what the uses of literature are—how it can remain live and reactive with generation after generation.

Texts

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859, British, set in France and England)
Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons* (1872, Russian)
Ivan Turgenev, *Virgin Soil* (1877, Russian)
Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima* (1886, American-British, set in England)
Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes* (1911, Polish-British, set in Russia and Switzerland)
Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967, Kenyan)
J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg* (1994, South African, set in Russia)
Tom Stoppard, *The Coast of Utopia* (2002, dir. Trevor Nunn, British, set in Russia and elsewhere)

All readings will be in English. Books will be available at Amherst Books, with the exception of *Grain of Wheat*, which is out of print and you will need to obtain used yourself; we'll discuss this in class. *The Princess Casamassima* will be slightly delayed, but should arrive by early September. Additional readings, marked with a *, will be available as part of a course packet. A course fee will be collected for the photocopies and copyright fees.

WEEK 0:

9/7

Course introduction; discussion from handouts

WEEK 1:

9/12

Tale of Two Cities, Books 1-2.9

9/14

Tale of Two Cities, Book 2.10-2.24

*Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, excerpt

WEEK 2:

9/19

Tale of Two Cities, Book 3

9/21

Demons, I.1-3 (including the Introduction)

*Coetzee, "The Artist at High Tide" (Review-essay)

WEEK 3:

9/26

Demons, I.4-5

*Dostoevsky, "One of Today's Falsehoods" (1873)

Handout: Writing Exercise: What difference does a narrator make? (700 words.)

9/28

Demons, II.1-6

Writing Exercise due.

WEEK 4:

10/3

Demons, II.7-10 and Appendix

*Sergei Nechaev, *Catechism of a Revolutionary*

10/5

Demons, III.1-4

Discussion of writing exercise.

[MIDWINTER BREAK]

WEEK 5:

10/12

Demons, III.5-8

WEEK 6:

10/17

Virgin Soil, 1-13

*James, review, *Terres Vierges*.

10/19

Virgin Soil, 14-26

WEEK 7:

10/24

Virgin Soil, 27-36

*James, essay "Ivan Turgénieff"

10/26

The Princess Casamassima, Book 1

*Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets*, excerpt

FRIDAY: Essay #1 due. (1500-2000 words.)

WEEK 8:

10/31

The Princess Casamassima, Book 2

Discussion of essay theses. (Brief summaries; see Expectations, below.)

11/2

The Princess Casamassima, Books 3-4

Henry James, "The Art of Fiction"

WEEK 9:

11/7

The Princess Casamassima, Book 5

Preface to *The Princess Casamassima*

11/9

Under Western Eyes, Part First

*T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"

WEEK 10:

11/14

Under Western Eyes, Parts Second-Third

*Conrad, "Turgenev," "The Crime of Partition"

11/16

Under Western Eyes, Part Fourth

[THANKSGIVING BREAK]

WEEK 11:

11/28

A Grain of Wheat, 1-8

*Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind* (excerpt)

11/30

A Grain of Wheat, 9-end

*Harold Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, excerpt

FRIDAY: Essay #2 due. (1500-2000 words)

WEEK 12:

12/5

The Master of Petersburg, 1-10

Discussion of essay theses.

12/7

The Master of Petersburg, 11-20

WEEK 13:

12/12

The Coast of Utopia: Voyage

The Coast of Utopia: Shipwreck

12/14

The Coast of Utopia: Salvage

DECEMBER 19: Essay #3 due (3000-4000 words).

CLASS EXPECTATIONS

“We weren’t many, but we spoke well, and I assure you we sometimes even acted well.” (Dostoevsky, *The Adolescent*)

In addition to being a lively, timely, and prepared member of class, you must come prepared to discuss your own writing. Two assignments especially require this: first, we will consider the results of the first writing exercise in class; second, you will each present one of your essay arguments to the class over the course of the semester: half of you will speak at the next meeting following each of the first two essay deadlines. (You’ll be able to choose in advance which essay you’d prefer to present.) These will be 2-3 minute thesis summaries, not entire arguments—the idea is to allow your classmates to benefit from the concepts you’ve developed.

You are also required to speak with me outside of class at least once during the semester—and I hope to see you more often! Given the wide-ranging subject matter of the course, it’s useful for me to have a better sense of what your interests are in order to advise you on your writing development. If my drop-in office hours are inconvenient, don’t hesitate to e-mail to schedule another appointment.

The course packet is available in a paper edition, and you must bring it to class. In addition, I expect you to obtain the exact editions of the novels listed at the bookstore (with the exception of the Ngugi); it’s important that our page numbers correspond for ease of discussion. No

computers will be permitted in class. If these requirements present financial hardships or accessibility difficulties, please see me within the first week and a half of classes.

ESSAYS

This class will have three essays. At least two of the three essays must analyze a relationship between authors, not just one author. Your essays must also treat substantially at least 4 of the 8 authors we will study. We will discuss essay expectations and guidelines as the class progresses.

If you wish to substitute another novel by one of our authors that you happen to have read (e.g., you want to discuss Conrad and Dostoevsky, but would prefer to talk about *Crime and Punishment* rather than *Demons*, or *The Secret Agent* rather than *Under Western Eyes*), you must make your proposal to me, including an explanation of your interest, at least 1 week before the essay is due.

GRADING

Essay #3: 30%

Essays #1-2: 25% each

Writing Exercise, presentation, and other in-class assignments: 10%

Participation: 10%