The British Nineteenth Century in Literature, Nature, and Science

English 444

This course explores a range of writings primarily from the nineteenth century about nature, spirit, and evolution through three units. The first section, on animals, will consider how Darwin and writers of poetry and fiction explored links between humans and nonhuman animals. The second unit, on spirit and matter, investigates the robust interest in mesmerism, clairvoyance, telepathy, and spiritualism in the Victorian period. The third unit focuses on evolutionary narratives through concepts of time: historical, geological, and astronomical. The resources of the Museum of Natural History just down the street in South Kensington and Darwin’s Down House in Kent will be key opportunities for this course.

Reading list: Excerpts from Darwin, On the Origin of Species (1859) and The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals (1872); Frankenstein by Mary Shelley; Angels and Insects by A. S. Byatt (the story “Morpho Eugenia” and the 1995 film Angels and Insects); The Lifted Veil (1859) by George Eliot; essays on spiritualism by A. R. Wallace; Amy Levy’s short story “The Recent Telepathic Occurrence at the British Museum” (1888); H. G. Wells’s The Time Machine (1895), and additional poems by Matthew Arnold, Amy Levy, Mathilde Blind.

Written requirements and learning expectations: one 5-pp. essay that focuses on an object or display from the Museum of Natural History relevant to one or two of the assigned readings; one 10-pp. essay that incorporates local knowledge drawn from one of the related field trips (Museum of Natural History, Down House) or explorations of pertinent sections of London that also ties in with literary treatments of animals, or spirit/matter, or evolution and degeneration. Learning outcomes include a grasp of the key debates and theories about animal nature, spirit and matter, and evolution in nineteenth-century British writing; an understanding of different literary genres including nature writing, the essay, poetry (lyric, narrative, and epic forms), the serial novel, a polished essay that has gone through a revision process in a workshop format.