

Syllabus:

The Rise and Fall of Empire: The Fiction Writer in History

Instructor: Fenton Johnson

Among Western writers surely contemporary Europeans and their colonized peoples would have the most penetrating understanding of the rise and fall of empires. At this moment, with the American Empire teetering on decline, what lessons can we draw from their writings? How can they inform and influence our understanding of ourselves as citizens of a nation that, the abuses of Abu Ghraib notwithstanding, still understands itself (cf. Walt Whitman, or, more recently, Barack Obama's inaugural address) as the beacon of liberty and freedom? How can they broaden, and deepen our understanding of our role as citizens of the planet and situate ourselves as writers in history? Finally and most importantly for this class, what may we learn from their styles, so often formed in opposition to conventional literary modes and devices?

Early in the course we will look with particular care at the conventions and research techniques of writing historical fiction. We will discuss the definitions of "history" and "fiction," and the intersections and differences between them. Later we will explore writers' reaction against the literary conventions of empire, as we sought unconventional means to convey the stories of those caught in the trauma of disintegration and the exhilaration of the search for new forms.

Reading schedule:

Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian* (9/1, 9/8) (get the Farrar, Straus edition that includes plates of art from the Roman Empire)

Augustine, *Confessions* 9/8, 9/15), sections I-XI (I prefer the Pine-Coffin translation)

Jeannette Winterson *The Passion*

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (9/22)

E.M. Forster, *Passage to India* (9/22, 9/29)

Arundhati Roy, *God of Small Things* (9/29, 10/6)

James Joyce, *Dubliners* (10/6, 10/13)

Jamie O'Neill, *At Swim Two Boys* (10/13, 10/27)

No class 10/20

Graham Greene, *The Heart of the Matter* (11/3)

Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (11/10)

Aharon Appelfeld, *Badenheim 1939* (11/17)

Milan Kundera, *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (11/17, 11/24)

J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (11/24, 12/1)

Roberto Bolaño, *By Night in Chile* (12/1)

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (12/8)

Eduardo Galeano, *Faces and Masks*, selections throughout semester

Photocopied handouts: Gore Vidal, *The National Security State*; opening pp. of Lewis Hyde's *The Gift*, + 197-198 WWhitman on domestic art, + 221-224 or so diff between will and eros + some pages from *Democracy*.

###