Course description

English 638, Topics in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Literature
Spring 2014

Some Words of George Eliot

In his 2003 book about George Eliot's relation to authorship and being, *George Eliot's Pulse*, Neil Hertz--arguably her most sensitive and most astute critic--names one chapter for some of Eliot's words ("Some Words: Repeating, Remnant, Remainder-Man") and another for some others ("More Words: Nullify, Neutral, Numb, Number"). Doing so, Hertz locates his work within the tiny critical genre of the words project--works that organize their thinking around attention to particular words.

In this seminar, students will be invited to examine the preoccupations of George Eliot--not only her interests or her themes, but those notions, habits of mind, and habits of expression to which she returns again and again—and to do so in part by attending to her language. Recognizing Eliot's preoccupations, though, requires attending to more than her language. It requires knowing something of Victorian culture and writing, of the circles in which Eliot moved and wrote, of the cultural obsessions with which her own might have engaged.

The aims of this course, then, will be multiple: to read Eliot extensively, focusing on her novels but with some attention to her other writings; to consider Eliot's involvement with the cultural obsessions of her moment and with her own reading; to identify her "words" and to investigate her preoccupations as these manifest themselves in her diction; to understand this in the context of attention to nineteenth-century English; and to do all this while also thinking about what it means to do--or even to want to do--a words project.

Readings will include: Eliot's novels and selected other writings, secondary work on Eliot and on nineteenth-century culture, work on nineteenth-century English, and selections from word projects.

Requirements will include: one or two brief “word” papers, a report on some aspect of Eliot criticism, and a long final paper on a topic of the student’s choosing and in line with his or her interests.

Students should feel free to contact me, of course, with any questions about our plans.

The course will meet the 1660-1900 literature requirement.