

Undergraduate Research Symposium May 18, 2018 Mary Gates Hall

Online Proceedings

SESSION 1S

MINING TEXTS AND CONTEXTS: FROM JOURNALS TO BELLES LETTRES AND PUBLIC POLICY

*Session Moderator: Walter Andrews, Near Eastern
Languages and Civilization*

JHN 111

12:30 PM to 2:15 PM

* Note: Titles in order of presentation.

Bernauer's Legacy; A Scientist's Opposition to Nazism through Epistolary Analysis

*Alexandria Jennifer Rose Spofford, Junior; Comparative
Literature*

Mentor: Richard Block, Germanics

This paper analyzes a collection of letters and postcards hand written during World War II, authored by German crystallographer and volcanologists Ferdinand Bernauer to his son. The analysis draws on aspects of critical theory of the epistolary genre, while keeping in mind that the collection is a set of artifacts, not a fiction, as they were never published or intended as a work of literature. Their analysis provides a unique insight into the decisions and repercussions of a strong refutation of Nazism by a distinguished man of science residing in Hitler's Germany. His greatest contributions to the academic world – proof of Continental Drift through his studies in Iceland and a crystal growing method now lost to mankind – attest to his considerable intellect and dedication. Yet it is his letters that uncover a life worthy of investigation for what they illuminate about the human psychological faculty of weighing the risk of death with the ethical reward of fighting for one's values. The epistolary lens allows the reader to grasp aspects of the text not explicitly written such as intentional self-censorship, introspection upon one's choices and moral stance, and stylistic choices made because the intended recipient was his son. The letters, unlike actual epistolary novels, need no omniscient narrator to provide a historical backbone upon which the narrative may play out, because it has been provided largely by World War II records. Therefore, this work facilitates a strong identification between Ferdinand Bernauer and the reader in an absorptive reading experience typical of an epistolary novel, without vast holes in histori-

cal perspective. This analysis explores a method of reading letters written under political oppression that enables one to understand the real difficulty in making the choice between standing against an immense malevolent power, and portraying one's resistance quietly among the chaos.

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Energy and Modernity in Rilke's *Duino Elegies*

*Olivia Gilbert, Junior; Politics, German Studies, Whitman
College*

*Mentor: Emily Jones, German Studies and Environmental
Humanities, Whitman College*

The *Duino Elegies* is a collection of ten elegiac poems written by Austrian-Bohemian poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926). At turns mournful and ecstatic, sardonic and visionary, the *Elegies* were composed from 1912-1922, a period marked by the so-called "language crisis" (Sprachkrise) in German-speaking modernist circles and the entirety of the First World War. The poems' major themes include this crisis, the role of divinity in a secularizing society, and the ways in which the mass production of commodities threatens human relationships with things and with other humans. The latter point will be the focus of my presentation. Drawing on scholar Teresa Brennan's interdisciplinary studies of the energetic, psychic, social, and economic aspects of modernity, I read the *Elegies* as presenting a theory of energy that is at once an affective, poetic experience of modernity in Western Europe. More specifically, I show how the *Elegies* map out and respond to a collective psychic exhaustion. Alongside Brennan, I argue that capitalist production in modernity—and the attendant accelerations in transportation and communication—is the main culprit. Collective psychic exhaustion finds its correlate in natural exhaustion—the depletion of natural re-

sources extracted for commodity production—which, if not yet catastrophic in Rilke’s time, certainly is now. It should be noted that Rilke is a western, middle-class poet, and his work can by no means be read as speaking for all of ‘humanity.’ Yet with capitalism having only become more global, pervasive, and hegemonic since Rilke’s time, the *Elegies* offer illuminating insight into our own heterogeneous, global experiences—social, psychic, and energetic—of capitalism as it unevenly and differentially entangles, exploits, and mangles various parts of the world.