Romanticism remains a highly nebulous term in both literary studies and philosophy. Simultaneously taken to denote an historical period and a generic set of characteristics, romanticism is conventionally understood to involve various aesthetic attempts to heal the rift between humanity and nature opened up by historical modernity. In this course, we will read together the distinct traditions of late 18th Century and early 19th Century British Romantic poetry and German Romantic aesthetic theory, with a view to pursuing a more unsettling, less ameliorative vision of the romantic project, one that attends as much to the disturbing figural ambiguities of literary romanticism as to its political ambitions and historical import. Poets read will include Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Mary Robinson and William Blake; German thinkers studied will include Hölderlin, Novalis and Schlegel.

Framing this comparative pursuit will be the more contemporary question of why and how romanticism became, in the late 20th Century, the genre of choice for a school of theorists determined to overturn historicist and organicist conceptions of literature. Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman and, to a lesser degree, Harold Bloom all alighted upon romanticism in order to revolutionize from within formalist, New Critical and historicist assumptions about poetic form and artistic expressivity more generally. Why is romanticism so often the vehicle for these attempts to interrupt literary-critical and philosophical orthodoxies?