Approaching Literary Theory

Literary theory is speculation about literature. Historically, it has taken myriad forms. Literary theory may speculate about the nature of the beautiful; about the social role and value of art; about the nature of the object of study, i.e., the poem or novel; about the reactions of real or imagined readers; about the motives and means of the writer; about the relation between fiction and reality; about the relation between language and poetry; about the relation between a poem and its contents; and so on and on and on. In school, of course, and even at university, most of you will have been exposed to literary theory only indirectly, through training in how to read well. In fact, however, the best way to construe a text has long been the subject of debate, and there is even a fancy word for speculation about interpretation— it is called hermeneutics.

In this course we will not attempt systematically to cover even one of these areas of speculation, let alone to survey the entire field. Rather this course will introduce you to literary theory via a small number of topics. To approach literary theory will mean in part learning how to read speculative texts with the same sort of attention and care you have already learned to apply to works of literature. Literary theory can seem abstract and drily philosophical to new readers, and it is difficult. But it is only as difficult as, say, a play by Shakespeare; and the pleasures of these texts, while different, are just as numerous. This is also why we will be reading original texts and in some cases books or parts of books—to do justice to the original ideas of these thinkers, of course, but also to do justice to what is exciting and challenging in their work as writers.

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Assignments: attendance and active participation in class (10%); a 20 minute class presentation (20%); one 5 page paper (30%); and one 10 page paper (40%). Papers must be typed and double-spaced. A page is 250 words. The 1st paper is due February 11; the 2nd is due at the end of classes. Late papers may be penalized.

Texts and syllabus: because of a mix-up at the bookstore, the texts for this course will be uncertain for another week. The attached draft syllabus will be revised once the final order is confirmed. We will also read a number of articles that I will make available on reserve in the library.