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 technical term for speculation about interpretation--hermeneutics.

This course will not attempt systematically to cover even one of these areas of speculation, let alone to survey the entire field. Rather, in this seminar we will introduce ourselves 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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Office: Hagey Hall 254, X2416
Office hours: 2:00-4:00 Thursday, or by appointment

Required texts:
Cornford, ed., *The Republic of Plato* (Oxford)
Golden, ed., *Aristotle's Poetics* (Florida)
Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford)
Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Baskin
Derrida, Of Grammatology (Johns Hopkins)
Anderson, Imagined Communities (Verso)
Irigaray, This Sex which is Not One (Cornell)
Kinko's Course Reader

Recommended Texts:
Eagleton, Literary Theory (Minnesota)
Gibaldi, ed., MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers

Assignments: attendance, active participation in seminar discussions and exercises, and a class presentation (30%); in-class essay (10%); 3 page paper (10%); 6 page paper (20%); and a final examination (30%). I will substitute a quiz, or even drop the final altogether, and re-weight the remaining assignments, if the progress of the seminar with the assigned readings is clear.

NOTE: Unlike a lecture course, a seminar gives you a chance to think for yourself, offer your own insights, and assess and comment on the ideas of others, without the constant influence of the instructor. Think of this class as a workshop in which you have the opportunity to contribute to the team effort at every meeting. Address yourself to all the participants, not just to me. My role, above all, will be to facilitate discussion and act as a resource person.

The in-class essay will be held on January 21. The first paper is due in class on February 11, the second is due in class on March 25. Papers must be typed and double-spaced; if using a word-processor, laser print and do not use right justification. A page is 250 words. Papers must follow the format for citation and quotation laid out in the MLA Handbook. Papers late without prior permission may be penalized. Uncompleted assignments will be graded F-.

NOTE: Please keep a photocopy of any paper you submit, and never hand a paper in by sliding it under (or sticking it to) my office door.