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Fall 9-1-2000

ENLT 420.01: History of Criticism and Theory

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Recommended Citation

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Autumn 2000

English 420: History of Criticism and Theory

Texts:

Richter, David H., *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*.
Bedford Books.
Steiner, George. *Real Presences*. University of Chicago Press.
Kermode, Frank. *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative*. Harvard
University Press.

Plan:

The aim of the course is to offer an historical survey of some of those key critical and theoretical texts that continue to inform our understanding of literature, in its most critical and interpretative phase. We will begin with selections from Plato (*The Republic*, Book X) and Aristotle (*Poetics*), and move chronologically forward to the present day. The fullness of our discussions and time will dictate the number of texts that we will read, though every effort will be made to insure that the texts are historically representative. The hope is that there will be time to read the following:

Horace, *The Art of Poetry*
Longinus, *On the Sublime*
Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*
Samuel Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare*
Immanuel Kant, from *Critique of Judgment*
William Wordsworth, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*
S. T. Coleridge, from *Biographia Literaria*
John Keats, *Letters*
Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*
Matthew Arnold, from *The Study of Poetry*
Henry James, *The Art of Fiction*
T. S. Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*
Virginia Woolf, from *A Room of One's Own*
F. R. Leavis, from *The Great Tradition*
William Empson, *Epilogue to Seven Types of Ambiguity*

Among more contemporary theorists, my hope is that we will have time to read selections from Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Paul de Man. Meanwhile, as the course will be focussed around the matter of hermeneutics—the science of interpretation—I would like to end the course with two contemporary full-length texts that meet this subject head on:

Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative*
George Steiner, *Real Presences: Is there anything in what we say?*

Requirements:

Participation in class discussions is expected and attendance is mandatory. You can anticipate numerous quizzes upon the readings, including readings that may be named at a later date. Missed quizzes cannot be made up. Your grade, meanwhile, will be based upon the following: a term paper (25%), to be assigned at the semester's mid-point and to be due late in the semester, a mid-term examination (25%), a final examination (25%), and attendance and participation (quiz grades included; also your participation in a group presentation) (20%). Regarding attendance, you are permitted three absences without penalty; each subsequent absence will result in a subtraction of five points from the twenty points allocated to the participation and attendance portion of your grade (e.g., 20% to 15% for the fourth absence, 15% to 10% for the fifth absence and so forth). Late arrivals are more than frowned upon, and if you need, for some good reason, to leave class early, you are required to notify me ahead of time; otherwise, an early departure will count as an absence from class.

The final examination, testing on the material from the midterm forward, will be on Tuesday, December 19th, from 10:10 to 12:10.

Grading Criteria

A Paper: Perhaps the principle characteristic of the A paper is its rich content. Some people describe that content as “meaty,” others as “dense,” still others as “packed.” Whatever, the information delivered is such that one feels significantly taught by the author, sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph. The A paper is also marked by stylistic finesse; the title and opening paragraph are engaging; the transitions are artful; the phrasing is tight, fresh, and highly specific; the sentence structure is varied; the tone enhances the purpose of the paper. Finally, the A paper, because of its careful organization and development, imparts a feeling of wholeness and unusual clarity. Not surprisingly, then, it leaves the reader feeling bright, thoroughly satisfied, and eager to reread the piece.

B Paper It is significantly more than competent. Besides being almost free of mechanical errors, the B paper delivers substantial information—that is, substantial in both quantity and interest-value. Its specific points are logically ordered, well developed, and unified around a clear organizing principle that is apparent early in the paper. The opening paragraph draws the reader in; the closing paragraph is both conclusive and thematically related to the opening. The transitions between paragraphs are for the most part smooth, the sentence structures pleasingly varied. The direction of the B paper is typically much more concise and precise than that found in the C paper. Occasionally, it even shows distinctiveness—i.e., finesse and memorability. On the whole, then, a B paper makes the reading experience a pleasurable one, for it offers substantial information with few distractions.

C Paper It is generally competent—it meets the assignment, has few mechanical errors, and is reasonably well organized and developed. The actual information it delivers, however, seems thin and commonplace. One reason for that impression is that the ideas are typically cast in the form of vague generalities—generalities that prompt the confused reader to ask marginally: “In every case?” “Exactly how large?” “Why?” “But how many?” Stylistically, the C paper has other shortcomings as well: the opening paragraph does little to draw the reader in; the final paragraph offers only a perfunctory wrap-up; the transitions between the paragraphs are bumpy; the sentences, besides being a bit choppy, tend to follow a predictable (hence monotonous) subject-verb-object; and the diction is occasionally marred by unconscious repetitions, redundancy, and imprecision. The C paper, then, while it gets the job done, lacks both imagination and intellectual rigor, and hence does not invite a rereading.

D Paper: Its treatment and development of the subject are as yet only rudimentary. While organization is present, it is neither clear nor effective. Sentences are frequently awkward, ambiguous, and marred by serious mechanical errors. Evidence of careful proofreading is scanty, if nonexistent. The whole piece, in fact, often gives the impression of having been conceived and written in haste.

E Paper: Its treatment of the subject is superficial; its theme lacks discernible organization; its prose is garbled or stylistically primitive. Mechanical errors are frequent. In short, the ideas, organization, and style fall far below what is acceptable in college writing.