

**ENGLISH 549-01:
THE CRITICAL CANON AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES (3.0 CR.)
Language, Representation, and Competing Methodologies in Criticism and Theory**

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“The limits of my language mean the limits of my word.”
(Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*)

“Any refusal of language is a death.”
(Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*)

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND GOALS: This is a thematic, largely foundational survey of Western tradition in literary theory, criticism, and thought. Specifically, we will pursue the problem of literary representation and the ways various critics, theorists, and schools of interpretations have approached it throughout the ages. Thus, on the one hand, the course has a historical component, as we will discuss key works from Plato and Aristotle to Kant, as well as the responses these works have received from Saussure, Heidegger, Derrida, Rancière, Caroline Levine, Latour, and others; in fact, the course is organized around the direct and indirect dialogue between the classics and the moderns, and we will make sure the postmoderns are not left out either. On the other hand, their conversation, as well as our own, has a focus, or a “history of ideas” component: the discourse on language, more to the point, on literary language’s fundamental relation to reality. We will see how, variously conceived, this relation has given birth to several influential modalities of looking at literature and culture. In other words, the course will foreground certain linguistic and critical-theoretical paradigms derived, directly or indirectly, from these models: the ancient aesthetic of mimesis, medieval hermeneutics, modern formalism and poetics, poststructuralism, identity studies, New Formalism, ecocriticism, and so on.

While our discussion will pay attention to all genres, we will concentrate in particular on fictional prose and some of the reading tools developed to deal with it across time. Our literary “target text” will be Michel Houellebecq’s novel *Submission* (Eng. trans. 2015). Also, one of the major goals of this class is to help students develop and consolidate basic approaches and vocabularies in literary-cultural analysis with an eye to effective performance on PhD

examinations and MA theses, advanced research regardless of field, and writing for presentation and publication outside UNCG (see below under Professional Development).

CONTENT AND STRUCTURE: As specified above, the course is shaped both historically and typologically. We will examine literary theories that address the relationship between “reality” and its “expression” (“representation,” “copy,” “mirror,” “transfiguration,” “simulacrum,” “critique,” etc.). We will look, in the case of each theory or model, at its main critical-theoretical upshots, specifically, at the traditional ones first and, then, at their modern revisions. Examined materials will include both “pure theory” and “applications,” with emphasis on the former. We will proceed by and large chronologically in hopes to get a better grasp of theory as an evolving thought system across the history of ideas. We will notice, e.g., how certain reading models have emerged in response to previous theories of criticism and literary discourse, from early twentieth-century formalism and structuralism to the British and American “cultural” reaction to deconstruction in the late 1980s and 1990s, the crisis of critique, and the rise of U. S. New Formalism in the twenty-first century.

CLASS FORMAT: Running for almost three hours, this class will resemble a seminar. Accordingly, it will combine lecture, extensive discussion, student presentations, and group work. Usually, our meetings will open with a lecture by the instructor providing historical and philosophical background and placing the scheduled readings in the culturally appropriate context. Following this introduction, students will give 15-20-minute individual presentations on specific aspects of those readings. Then, we will discuss collectively the material for the day. I will set aside time to prepare, evaluate, and present writing projects, exams, and other assignments.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: Students are encouraged to use this course to put their work in the larger, more demanding and competitive perspective of professionalism and academic performance inside and outside our graduate program. Internally, we will concentrate on developing the skills, vocabulary, and rhetorical rigor necessary to preparing for the comps, from effective reading of a critical-theoretical text to its summarizing, cogent presentation and critique, and elegant and accurate formulation—whether orally or in writing, succinct or extensive—of your own argument in the context of available scholarship on the subject.

Externally, the class is geared toward graduate reading and writing carrying notable potential for presentation at conferences and publication in well-established peer-reviewed academic journals. While fulfilling the course’s requirements remains your major goal, I urge you to take these requirements as an opportunity to think about yourselves as part of the academic community, with its specific standards, language, methods, tools, and venues. Here are some of the questions you may want to ask throughout the term: Where do I stand as a scholar, teacher, critic and writer, and which are my goals? In what kind of scholarly conversation do I wish to intervene based on what I learn in this class? What steps do I have to take to do that? What are my resources? Which are the outlets for my work? What do I have to do, for instance, to turn my seminar presentation/paper into a conference paper/journal article/dissertation chapter/writing sample?

REQUIREMENTS:

1. Oral participation.

2. Individual presentations on the materials for the day.

Guidelines for presentations: Students sign up for their final project and oral presentations right away so that we can spread out the presentations over the course of the semester. Each student will give a brief, **15-20-min.** talk on the scheduled readings. The presentations need not be written. They cover a relevant aspect or material for the day. I do not expect you to fully analyze or explain the assignments or even one of these assignments. I do ask you, however, to

- a) summarize the content of the text you intent to talk about;
- b) make sure *you begin this summary with a clear and concise presentation of the basic argument or thesis of the text's author*;
- c) identify, then, one major element or theoretical problem in this work, and make a *personal point* (your own thesis) about this issue; and finally,
- d) use your take on the material to help us open up our class conversation about the particular reading.

This presentation must feature all these steps in this order and nothing else. Feel free to make a handout and circulate it.

3. Final Project Presentation: Each student gives a **10-15-min.** presentation on his or her final paper (see syllabus, last weeks).

4. Written Assignments and Exams:

- a) a written midterm exam reproducing closely the format of our PhD preliminary examinations (**6-7** double-spaced p., take-home). We will prepare the midterm as a group.
- b) a final paper (**20-p. plus** endnotes and Works Cited). After the Spring break, start e-mailing me your ideas for the paper.

COURSE POLICIES:

1. Attendance and Participation. Both are expected and will factor into the final grade. You are allowed no more than 2 (two) justified absences during the semester for illnesses (which you must document afterwards), religious holidays, or emergencies preventing you from attending. No undocumented absences allowed. Should they occur, they will affect your final grade. I will subtract 5% from the latter for any undocumented absence. Since we meet once a week, attendance is particularly critical to the success of your work. If you are the victim of an emergency, please stay in touch with me by e-mail or phone.

2. Late Papers: No late papers—and any other kind of late work for that matter—accepted. However, if you foresee any deadline-related problems, please talk to me ahead of time. We shall

work together to find a solution. All assignments are due in class on the day indicated in the syllabus.

3. Course Policies: Feel free to make an appointment to meet with me to discuss your specific interests, goals, or any aspect of this class. We will also talk about your plans for the final project.

4. Grading: As a general rule, no incompletes (but come to see me if you anticipate any problems). The quality of your work will be reflected in the final grade as follows:

1. Midterm: 30%
2. Final paper: 50%
3. Oral participation (includes group work, individual presentations, and presentations of your final projects): 20%

Note: I would like to discuss these percentages and all requirements in general on our first meeting.

REQUIRED READINGS:

II. Criticism and Theory:

1. Herman, David, et al. *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2012, pbk.
2. Leitch, Vincent B., et al., eds. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton, 2010. Pbk. [N]
3. Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015 or pbk.
4. Rancière, Jacques. *The Lost Thread: The Democracy of Modern Fiction*. Trans. Steven Corcoran. London: Bloomsbury, 2017 or pbk.
5. Zapf, Hubert. *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.

II. Target Texts:

1. Houellebecq, Michel. *Submission*. Trans. Lorin Stein. New York, Picador, 2016.
Optional: Moraru, Christian. "The Plot against France." Review of Michel Houellebecq's 2015 novel *Submission*, *American Book Review* 37, no. 4 (May-June 2016): 16-18 [available through UNCG Library, Project Muse].

DAILY SYLLABUS:

Week 1

Mon Jan. 8 Introduction to the course: topics, scope, structure, format, requirements.

Planning ahead, getting organized: individual presentations and conferences; setting up our discussion groups. Using Houellebecq for “applications” throughout the course (have the novel read by Jan. 22).

Individual presentations (sign-up)

Week 2

Mon Jan. 15 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday - no class

Week 3

Mon Jan. 22 Literary representation as mimesis and craft (*techne*):
Plato, N 41-64
Aristotle, N 83-119

Week 4

Mon Jan. 29 Representation from mimesis to historical stylistics and anti-mimetic and postmodern narrative theory
Auerbach, N 1027-1051
Richardson, *Narrative Theory* 20-28

Week 5

Mon Feb. 5 Writing, representation, and hermeneutics in classical and medieval times:
Plato, N 64-83
Aquinas, N 177-184
Dante, N 184-190

Week 6

Mon Feb. 12 Representation, the beautiful, and modern aesthetics
Kant, N 406-450

Week 7

Mon Feb. 19 Reconnecting politics and aesthetics, responding to the classics:
Rancière, realist theory, and narrative “dissent”
Rancière, *The Lost Thread* (have the whole book read for today)
Discussing the midterm: PhD exams and our midterm format
Group work: midterm questions

Week 8

Mon Feb. 26 Rancière, *The Lost Thread* (ctd.)
Assigning the midterm

Week 9

Mon Mar 5 Spring Break - no class

Week 10

Mon Mar. 12 Anti-Platonism, the critique of representation, and the birth of modern theory
Nietzsche, N 759-774
Heidegger, N 982-998

Saussure, N 845-866
Midterm exam due (in class)
Final project presentations (sign-up)
Discussing the final paper: thesis, research, execution

Week 11

Mon Mar. 19 Structuralism, structural poetics, and the analysis of narrative representation
Narrative Theory 29-138

Week 12

Mon Mar. 26 Representation and its deconstruction: poststructuralism and poststructural
 psychoanalysis
 Derrida, N 1680-1734
 Lacan, N 1156-1181
Presentations of final projects

Week 13

Mon Apr. 2 Old into New Formalism, intertextuality into network theory
 Eichenbaum, N 921-951
 Latour, N 2277-2282
 Levine, *Forms* (have the whole book read for today)
Presentations of final projects

Week 14

Mon Apr. 9 Levine, *Forms* (ctd.)
Presentations of final projects

Week 15

Mon Apr. 16 From Networks to Narrative Ecologies
 Zapf, *Literature as Cultural Ecology* (have the whole book read for today)
Presentations of final projects

Week 16

Mon Apr. 23 Last class
 Zapf, *Literature as Cultural Ecology* (ctd.)
Final paper due (in class)
 Final overview and evaluations