ENGL 467
Seminar in 20th-Century Literary Criticism

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Course Description

Many of the dominant approaches to literature in the twentieth century have come from outside the discipline. Structuralist criticism, for example, took its inspiration from linguistics, in particular, from the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson. We will examine these theories, as well as their development in some representative criticism from the heyday of structuralism in the 1970s. One of our concerns will be with the limits of structuralism. What do these theories omit? What can’t they explain? To help us think through these questions, we will also consult recent work in linguistics by Robbins Burling, whose book on language provides us with a useful counterpoint to Saussure. Our primary emphasis, however, will be on how these linguistic theories have been used in the analysis of literature. To that end, we will read David Lodge’s study of what he calls the “modes of modern writing.” We will also pay attention to later developments in twentieth-century criticism, including the deconstruction of the structuralist model.

This seminar is reserved for English honours students, but I am open to accepting English majors who have a special interest in theory and criticism. Please see me if you are an English major and would like to take this course.

Proposed Assignments

Response Papers 30%
Research Essay 60%
Participation 10%

Proposed Texts