ENGL 683, Topics in Theory: Poststructuralism and After

Paul De Man once clarified what he meant by “theory”: it was the movement that began with the introduction of linguistic terminology. He was referring to the intellectual revolution that Ferdinand de Saussure’s structural linguistics had brought about in fields such as poetics, anthropology, psychoanalysis, Marxism, history, and philosophy, a tradition that is evident even today in the work of such highly visible cultural critics as Homi Bhabha and Judith Butler. The vocabulary that emerged from the encounter of linguistics with these disparate fields has been indispensable to the production of critical insights about the nature of language, culture, and the human subject.

We begin with Saussure’s Course in General Linguistics, and from there trace how writers in different fields worked with key methodological issues that transformed how they constructed the object of their discipline, and in turn transformed the discourse that became “poststructuralism.” Writers may include: Emile Benveniste, Roman Jakobson, Roland Barthes, Claude Levi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler, and Giorgio Agamben.

Assignments: two written in-class reports, and a final paper of 10-15 pages.

Fulfills requirement for a theory course.