

Introduction to Critical Reading

“Heart of Darkness and Gravity’s Rainbow”

University of Pittsburgh
ENGLIT 0500
Spring 2014

Dr. Bradley J. Fest
Office: CL 517F
email: bradfest@gmail.com (preferred)
brf6@pitt.edu

TuTh 2:30-3:45 Victoria Building 229

Office Hours: W 11:00-1:00
& by appointment

Required Texts

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness (Norton Critical Edition)*, 4th ed., ed. Paul B. Armstrong
(New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006 [1899]).

Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006 [1973]).

Recommended Texts

Steven C. Weisenberger, *A Gravity’s Rainbow Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon’s
Novel*, 2nd ed., Revised and Expanded (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006).¹

Additional texts to be covered can be found on the calendar below. These will be available on CourseWeb under the heading “Course Documents.”²

Course Description

Our experience of reading in the contemporary world is unprecedented with regard to the sheer number of texts we can access. In the last decade, and with the rise of what is referred to as “Web 2.0,” our lives have increasingly become textual phenomena. It can often seem as if our every waking moment is inundated with text, with film, television, the internet, text messages, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, smart phones, etc. (to say nothing of “literature”). We might say, to paraphrase media theorist Alexander Galloway, that we are inundated by an atmosphere of information: text is air, it is what we breathe.³ And increasingly, with the advent of surveillance technologies like the NSA’s PRISM, text is defining who we *are*. Though surely not an entirely new phenomenon—indeed we might trace the “textual being” of modernity to the appearance of the Gutenberg Press, if not earlier—the exponential accumulation of and nearly unlimited access to text threatens to transform the incredibly important humanistic tradition of critical reading and thinking into merely the practice of sorting and choosing, of finding the right

¹ This text is *highly* recommended, as Pynchon’s novel is very difficult, and contains a wealth of allusions and references. Weisenberger’s text is nearly essential if one wants to go about critically reading *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

² The savvy reader will also note that many of the readings can be found in editor Vincent B. Leitch’s *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010). Obtaining this book is highly recommended, especially if you are planning on pursuing a degree in English or Creative Writing, as it is an *excellent* collection of literary criticism and theory, and it will continue to come in handy for you long after this class has ended. Acquiring this book is not required; all the additional readings will be available on CourseWeb.

³ See Alexander Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004).

algorithm, of assembling the most thorough archive. The long tradition of critical inquiry, of paying close, careful attention to a given object, seems to be fading in the face of the overwhelming number of available critical objects.

This course understands that with this proliferation of text it has become more important than ever to develop rigorous critical abilities to cope with contemporaneity in all its diverse and complicated forms. This course will provide students with the tools to begin the difficult work of critical reading by providing a broad overview of the history of literary criticism, and by asking students to closely and carefully read works of literature. Though this course may be taken to fulfill a general education requirement, its primary role is to serve as an introduction to the English Major. As such, students will be asked to negotiate difficult literary and critical texts, and to make complex arguments interpreting those texts. Additionally, you might consider this course beginning from a fairly basic set of questions: What does it mean to critically read something? How do we go about reading closely? Why might it be important to engage literature critically? Why *read* literature? To help us begin to answer these deceptively simple questions we will carefully read two novels that are loosely tied together thematically: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). We will be spending a significant amount of time with each novel. To further help ground our understanding of these novels we will read a number of important critical, theoretical, and philosophical texts from Plato to Fredric Jameson. We will also be investigating works that challenge the boundary between criticism and literature. Our investigations this semester are intended to be not only an introduction to the practice of critical reading, but also to provide significant, rigorous tools to look more closely at the world, to take a critical stance, and to make arguments about the specific formulations of textual and literary production that surround us.

Course Requirements and Assignments

Texts—Students will be required to have read and be prepared to discuss the assigned texts for each class meeting. This also entails that students bring the texts to class, whether the book or printouts of the .pdfs from CourseWeb. Additional readings for the course (see below) can be found under the “Course Documents” section of CourseWeb. *Failure to bring the assigned text(s) to class will count as an absence.* This course asks students to read *quite* a bit, and *very* carefully. Our meetings and discussions will depend upon the rigorous, intelligent, and frequent involvement of each and every participant of the class, and this involvement is simply not possible if students do not come to class prepared. All students should obtain the edition of the texts specified above. Students are responsible for printing out all the additional readings and bringing them to class. Students should expect to read around 150 pages per week.

Papers—Students will be asked to write a midterm essay of 5-6 pages and a final paper of 7-10 pages during the course of the semester, along with 5 short papers of 2 pages each, and contributions to a class blog. These papers and blog posts are designed to build upon one another in preparation for your final paper. Their percentage of your grade will reflect this process. All papers should be proofread and polished. They should be typed, double-spaced, in 12 point Times New Roman font, with one-inch margins, and should accord to MLA guidelines for citation and format.^{4,5} Papers will be assessed primarily on the *strength of their argument* and the

⁴ For a good website on how to do this, visit <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>. On the other hand, students who wish to use Chicago Style are highly encouraged to do so, but must speak with me beforehand. The savvy reader will note that I myself prefer Chicago.

quality of their idea. Due dates for these papers are below. The assignments are to follow. All papers *must* be handed in as hard copies in class *and* submitted on CourseWeb through SafeAssign. There will be a link under “Assignments” to electronically submit your papers.

Blog—In order to help us deal with some of the complexities of Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, during the second half of the course students will be asked to write a series of three blog posts, and will be responsible for commenting on other students’ posts. (See blog assignment for the due dates.) A student’s total participation in writing posts and, just as importantly, *commenting* on other posts will be taken into account when determining the grade for this section of the course. The bare minimum of work on the blog will earn a student a “C” for the blog portion of their grade. Students will receive an email from me through Wordpress.com inviting them to write for the blog in the first week of class. They should be signed up and ready to participate by Friday, January 17th. See the assignment sheet I will be passing out the first day of class for more specific details. The blog is separate from CourseWeb and can be found at: <http://englit0500.wordpress.com>.

Quizzes—Students will often be given unannounced short quizzes on the assigned material. Students who have done the reading will, for the most part, find these quizzes quite manageable. Students who fail a quiz will lose two points off the possible fifteen points of their participation grade. If you do the math, multiple failed quizzes could *dramatically* lower your grade (by as much as almost two letters). Unless otherwise informed, all quizzes are open book.

Participation—An absolutely crucial part of this class will be student participation. Though I will lecture from time to time, this class will be primarily discussion based, as I would like to see this course as a collective endeavor into the subject matter. I am quite excited to delve into the material, as I see it as both quite challenging and, in all honesty, quite fun. But this class will be a two way street and will require the input of all its participants. I am completely aware that some students may be more vocal than others, but if I see a student consistently attempting to add to the discussion, I will take this into consideration. I have a habit of a rambling a bit, so please help me with this by asking questions of me if you are unclear. Asking questions can be an excellent way of participating. Since this class will rely heavily on student participation, your attendance is a necessity. More than three unexcused absences can be grounds for failure, in which case you may want to consider withdrawing from the course and taking it again under better circumstances. (Also, anyone observed texting in class, whether I call attention to it or not, will be marked absent for the day. Phones will not be tolerated in this class. The use of laptops or tablets is acceptable.)

Grading

Participation: 15%

Short Papers: 10%

Blog: 15%

Midterm Essay: 20%

Final: 40%

⁵ See Blog Assignment for formatting a weblog post.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a serious and intellectually inexcusable offense, and it will not be tolerated. Don't do it. It will result in an immediate zero for the assignment, and could result in more serious action, including failing the class completely and potentially being expelled from the University. *Plagiarism includes: lack of proper citations when quoting from someone else's work, representing someone else's work as your own, and knowingly allowing one's work to be submitted by someone else.* This should ultimately be a fun and stimulating class, and there is absolutely no reason for you not to take advantage of being able to do your own work and discuss it in an academic environment.

Students With Disabilities

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both myself and Disability Resources and Services, 216 William Pitt Union, (412) 648-7890/(412) 383-7355 (TTY), as early as possible in the term. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

Writing Center

Located at 317B O'Hara Student Center, 4024 O'Hara Street, the Writing Center is an excellent resource for working on your writing with an experienced consultant. Although you should not expect consultants to "correct" your work for you, they can assist you in learning to organize, edit, and revise your papers. Consultants can work with you on a one-time basis, or they can work with you throughout the term. In some cases, I may require that you go to the Writing Center for help on a particular problem; otherwise, you can decide on your own to seek assistance. Their services are free, but you should check on-site, call ahead (412-624-6556), or visit their website (<http://www.composition.pitt.edu/writingcenter/index.html>) to make an appointment.

E-mail Communication Policy

Each student is issued a University e-mail address (username@pitt.edu) upon admittance. This e-mail address may be used by the University for official communication with students. I will also communicate with students via their pitt.edu address. Students are expected to read e-mail sent to this account on a regular basis. Failure to read and react to either University or my own communications in a timely manner does not absolve the student from knowing and complying with the content of the communications. Students that choose to forward their e-mail from their pitt.edu address to another address do so at their own risk. If e-mail is lost as a result of forwarding, it does not absolve the student from responding to official communications sent to their University e-mail address.

Calendar⁶

- 1.7 Syllabus
Introductions
- 1.9 **Short Paper 1 Due**
Terry Eagleton, “What is Literature?” and “The Rise of English”¹
Ezra Pound, “In a Station of the Metro”²
- 1.14 Plato, from *The Republic*³
Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (pp. 3-15)
- 1.16 Aristotle, *Poetics*⁴
Re-read *Heart of Darkness* (pp. 3-15)
- 1.21 **Short Paper 2 Due**
M. H. Abrams, “Orientation of Critical Theories”⁵
- 1.23 *Heart of Darkness* (pp. 15-31)
- 1.28 **Short Paper 3 Due**
Friedrich Nietzsche, “On truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense”⁶
- 1.30 *Heart of Darkness*, (pp. 31-46)
- 2.4 *Heart of Darkness* (pp. 46-61)
- 2.6 *Heart of Darkness* (pp. 61-77)
- 2.11 **Short Paper 4 Due**
Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa: Racism in *Heart of Darkness*” (*HoD*, pp. 336-349)
J. Hillis Miller, “The Darkness”⁷
- 2.13 Edward W. Said, “Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*” (*HoD*, pp. 422-429)
J. Hillis Miller, “Should We Read ‘Heart of Darkness’?” (*HoD*, pp. 463-474)
Ian Watt, “Impressionism and Symbolism in *Heart of Darkness*” (*HoD*, pp. 349-365)
- 2.18 **Mid-Term Essay Due**
Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (Ch. 1 pp. 1-17)
- 2.20 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (Ch. 1, pp. 17-42)
Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”⁸
- 2.25 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (Ch. 1, pp. 42-72)
- 2.27 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (Ch. 1, pp 72-122)
- 3.4 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (Ch. 1, pp. 122-180)
- 3.6 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (Ch. 2, pp. 181-282)
- 3.11 *Spring Break, No Class*

⁶ Note: Additional readings or handouts may be assigned when appropriate. For ease with citation, bibliographic endnotes to the additional readings can be found below.

- 3.13 *Spring Break, No Class*
- 3.18 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (Ch. 3, pp. 283-365)
- 3.20 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (Ch. 3, pp. 365-440)
- 3.25 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (Ch. 3, pp. 440-490)
- 3.27 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (Ch. 3, pp. 490-534)
- 4.1 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (Ch. 3, pp. 534-587)
- 4.3 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (Ch. 3, pp. 587-627)
- 4.8 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (Ch. 4, pp. 629-714)
- 4.10 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (Ch. 4, pp. 714-776)
- 4.15 **Short Paper 5 Due**
Workshop Final Paper Proposals
- 4.17 TBD
- 4.23 **Final Papers due in my mailbox, CL 501 by 4:00 pm**

Endnotes

¹ Terry Eagleton, "Introduction: What is Literature?" and "The Rise of English," in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 1-14, 15-46.

² Ezra Pound, "In a Station of the Metro" (1913), in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 5th ed., eds. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), 1297.

³ Plato, selections from *The Republic*, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2nd ed., ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), 45-82.

⁴ Aristotle, "Poetics," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2nd ed., Vincent B. Leitch ed., (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2001), 83-114.

⁵ M. H. Abrams, "Orientation of Critical Theories," in *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 3-29.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" (1873), in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. and ed. Ronald Speirs, ed. Raymond Geuss (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 139-153.

⁷ J. Hillis Miller, "Joseph Conrad: The Darkness," in *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966), 13-38.

⁸ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July/August 1984): 59-92.