

David Ellison's Graduate Courses:

FRE 614
Spring 2011
Eighteenth-Century French Literature
Dr. Ellison

Course title: "Raison, déraisonnement, égarement: le sujet pensant face à son monde au 18e siècle, ou : « Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point ».

In this course we will concern ourselves with the period that immediately preceded and ushered in what we now call the Enlightenment (*die Aufklärung, les Lumières*) and that provides the background out of which Immanuel Kant's philosophy would emerge.

We shall begin with canonical dramas from the French seventeenth century (Molière's *Tartuffe* [1669] and Racine's *Phèdre* [1677]) and examine, within their pages, the combat between reason and its antagonists (variously called "passion," "seduction," love as "poison," and "madness"), a battle that originates in the difficulty reason has in establishing itself against opposing forces at the very beginning of the Age of Reason, with René Descartes's *Discours de la méthode* (1637). In this short treatise which has generally been understood to be a manifesto of modern philosophy itself as a discourse founded on certainty, Descartes grants considerable space not only to the foundational function of doubt, but also to the destabilizing forces of thought's inherent waywardness (its tendency to wander away from the goals established by reason) and to the obverse of waking thought, namely the dream.

Once we have read Molière and Racine in relation to Descartes, we shall turn to the French eighteenth century and devote the majority of the seminar to the analysis of texts by Crébillon fils (*Les égarements du coeur et de l'esprit*, 1736), Diderot (*Le neveu de Rameau*, 1761-1780), Voltaire (*L'ingénu*, 1767), Laclos (*Les liaisons dangereuses*, 1782), and Rousseau (*Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, 1782). In this section of the course we shall be principally concerned with the ways in which the discourse of reason runs up against formidable adversaries, which can be called, in French : *déraisonnement* and *égarement*. We shall examine the various rhetorical modes which the discourse of anti-reason assumes: irony, buffoonery, allegory, epistolary seduction, and an apparently disengaged reverie.

Each of these writers takes as his point of departure the potential within reason to slide into its opposite, but to remain as a trace memory or a remote vestigial presence within even the most outrageously excessive and deviant of aesthetic and ethical constructions.

FRE 616
Spring 2010
Dr. Ellison

The Contemporary French Novel

The purpose of the course is to read a selection of novels written in France during the past twenty years. Unlike earlier periods in the twentieth century, when certain trends or currents dominated the literary scene (surrealism, existentialism, the *nouveau roman*), the more recent past is characterized by a wide variety of themes, approaches, and styles. Prose fiction from 1990 until the present is not easily characterized or subsumed theoretically, and such convenient tags as “autofiction” do little to specify or clarify recent developments. With this in mind, the novels selected for the course were chosen for their thematic and stylistic diversity, for their intellectual acuity, and for their innovative qualities rather than for any suitability they might possess for inclusion within a general typology of the contemporary novel, if such a scheme were conceptually possible.

This said, there is perhaps one motif or thread running through the novels I list below and which will be included in the course syllabus – namely, a series of variations on the theme of inside versus outside, inclusion versus exclusion, “French” versus “non-French.” Some of the novels to be studied were written by native French writers living in France (*Français de souche* as the interesting metaphorical expression expresses it); some by French writers who have chosen to live and write outside of the hexagon; some by writers who are more widely-read outside France than in their own country; and some by writers of French expression who have chosen to live as long-term exiles in France and whose native language is not French. This linguistic and cultural question will remain at the center of our discussions.

FRE 615
Spring 2009
Dr. Ellison

Baudelaire et ses effets

This seminar will have a double focus: first, on Baudelaire’s poetry (*Les Fleurs du Mal*, *Le Spleen de Paris* (*Les petits poèmes en prose*)) and his critical and theoretical writings on the arts, as contained in the collected essays entitled *Écrits sur l’art* and *L’Art romantique*. The second focus will be on the “effects” of Baudelaire, which can be understood in various ways: the ways in which Baudelairean themes appear in the writings of his contemporaries (Balzac, Flaubert); the ways in which he is read and absorbed by the next generation(s) (Rimbaud, Proust, Mallarmé, Benjamin); the ways in which the Baudelairean legacy (*les effets de Baudelaire* in the French sense of “effects” passed on through inheritance) has informed the development of central aesthetic concepts such as the beautiful, the ugly, the grotesque, the spiritual, the uncanny, and the modern. In what sense (borrowing from Michel Foucault in “What is an Author?”) can one speak of Baudelaire as a “founder of discursivity?” To what degree does his writing praxis move beyond the oppositional categories of talent versus genius or naïve versus sentimental? A close reading of the texts should open up these and other related questions.

FRE 616 (20th-century French Literature)
Fall 2007
Dr. Ellison

L'héritage de Proust

In this seminar we will examine the question of Proust's impact on 20th-century French literature. At the beginning and end of the semester, we will read selected volumes from *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-27). We will start with *Du Côté de chez Swann*, and will conclude with *Albertine disparue* and *Le Temps retrouvé*. The middle section of the course will be devoted to the examination of Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée* (1938), Michel Butor's *La Modification* (1957), Samuel Beckett's *Compagnie* (1980), and Andreï Makine's *Le Testament français* (1995).

Some of the issues and problems to be examined will be: the matter of literary influence itself, viewed theoretically; the multiple ways in which Proust's novel lends itself to incorporation, parody, caricature, rewriting, and misreading; and the Proustian text's resistance to appropriation, especially in the case of the latter volumes.

FRE 616
Contemporary French Thought
Spring 2007
Dr. Ellison

La question des origines: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Rousseau, Derrida

With the splintering of literary theory into increasingly numerous sub-specialties vying with each other for attention and recognition, it may be inevitable to ask the two related questions : 1. How did we get here? 2. What is the origin of contemporary theory? But the latter question calls for reflection in itself. What is it to question origins? How does one begin to ask about beginnings? By an interesting coincidence which is probably not a coincidence, contemporary thinkers who might well be considered to be among the most important originators of literary and cultural theory placed in the center of their preoccupations the question of origins and the difficulty of that question. This seminar will undertake to read Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals*, Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Foucault's *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison*, and Derrida's *De la grammatologie* (in the light of Rousseau's *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, of which it is an extended commentary).