**Re-enchantment: Transformations of Religion and Belief in Victorian Literature**

**Course Description**

This course calls us to rethink the stories we tell about faith in the nineteenth century: as the “age of doubt,” as characterized by a “crisis of faith,” as the origins of modern and postmodern godlessness. Portraying the nineteenth century (and nineteenth-century England especially) as a crucial catalyst in what Weber famously called the “disenchantment of the world,” however, leads to limited, reductive narratives of faith, doubt and religion in the Victorian age. Religious writers and movements are often discussed as aberrations from the norm or, as we saw in Levine’s work on secularism and the realist novel, unwittingly complicit in the promotion of disenchantment. Under these narratives, Christina Rossetti is an “unfashionably religious poet” (Leighton & Reynolds 356) and movements like nineteenth-century Spiritualism are the perverse repressed other of a predominantly rational society (*The Victorian Supernatural*).

This course seeks to revisit the Victorian age as one of *re-enchantment*, as an age characterized not by the disappearance, but rather by the transformation of enchantment and belief*.* This does not mean I ignore the struggles, discomforts and uncertainty so palpable in Victorian literature’s articulations of faith. I instead see these moments as inherently intertwined with Victorian experiences of wonder, enchantment, and belief. For Victorians, this uncertainty, I argue, is often what makes experiences of transcendence, wonder, and enchantment all the more profound.

The semester will begin with an examination of dominant narratives of secularization and nineteenth-century disenchantment. After adding to our theoretical vocabularies Taylor’s concepts of “buffered/porous selves” and the “cross pressures” of belief, we will embark on a series of readings articulating tensions and difficulties with belief. We read these works not as signs of disenchantment, but rather as the grounds for re-enchantment, for belief’s transformation. We then move on to works expressing and longing for wonder and arguing for the importance of belief and enchantment in modernity. In our final weeks, we discuss reading as enchantment, examining both nineteenth-century authors’ and twenty-first century scholars’ reflections on the act of reading as spiritual, religious, and enchanting.

Required Texts:

Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*

Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.*

Edmund Gosse, *Father and Son*

Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*

Poems and/or short stories by Christina Rossetti, Margaret Oliphant, and Gerard Manley Hopkins

Selections of criticism and theory by Max Weber, Charles Taylor, John Caputo, George Levine, Michael Warner, and Rita Felski

Final Grade Percentages:

Source Summary and Presentation—10% Reflection Paper—5%

Close Reading Essay—20% Final Exam—25%

“Cross Pressures” Research Paper—35% Participation—5%

1. **The “Disenchantment of the World”**

Week One:

D1: Introduction to Course and Narratives of Victorian Religion and Science

Summaries of “Religion and Science” and “Nineteenth-Century Religion” from Longman and Norton Anthologies (Read in class)

D2: The Secularization Thesis and the “Disenchantment of the World”

Weber, from *Economy and Society* (1922)

Week Two:

D1: Buffered vs. Porous Selves

Taylor, from *A Secular Age* pp. 35-43

**Assign:** **Non-Fiction** **Primary Source Summary:** Select one non-fiction primary text from the list appended to this syllabus. Read the excerpted version I’ve provided for you and write up a 500-700 word summary of its content, as well as a brief contextualization in the author’s life and its historical moment.

D2: Cross Pressures of Victorian Belief

Taylor, Selections from *A Secular Age* Chapters 8 and 11

Week Three:

D1: Timeline of Victorian Religion and Belief

Start creating our class timeline composed of primary source documents, first half of summary presentations

**Due:** **Non-Fiction Primary Source Summary**

D2: Timeline of Victorian Religion and Belief

Second half of presentations

1. **Ill-Fitting Garments: Struggles, Discomforts, and Uncertainty**

Week Four: Faith’s New Clothes

D1: Caputo, *On Religion* Chapter 1

D2: Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (1836) Book I

Week Five: Faith’s New Clothes, Cont.

D1: Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* Book II, Chapters 1-5

D2: Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* Book II, Chapters 6-10

Week Six: Faith and Doubt in Mourning

D1: Tennyson, *In Memoriam,* Prologue-Stanza XXX

**Assign:** ***In Memoriam* Close Reading:** In 4-5 pages, conduct a close reading of one stanza of *In Memoriam* in which you make an argument about how its form and content dialogues with the themes, tensions, and arguments of the poem sequence as a whole. Consider: language, meter, rhyme scheme, time written, placement in sequence, etc.

D2: *In Memoriam,* Stanzas XXXI-LXXIV

Week Seven: Faith and Doubt in Mourning

D1: *In Memoriam* Stanzas LXXV-C1

D2: *In Memoriam* Stanzas CII-Epilogue

Week Eight: Personal Transformation of Religion and Belief in Victorian Autobiography

D1: Gosse, *Father and Son*, Chapters 1-3

D2: Gosse, *Father and Son*, Chapters 4-7

Week Nine: Personal Transformation of Religion and Belief in Victorian Autobiography, Cont.

D1: Gosse, *Father and Son,* Chapters 8-10

D2: Gosse, *Father and Son,* Chapters 11-Epilogue

**Due: *In Memoriam* Close Reading**

**III. Re-Enchantments: Wonder, Belief, and the Otherworldly**

Week Ten: The Dangers of Disbelief

D1: Dickens, *Hard Times*, Book the First: Sowing

**Assign:** **"Cross Pressures” Essay:** Construct an argument about how a particular passage, symbol, motif, imagery, formal choice, character, etc. articulates what you see as a “cross pressure” of Victorian belief. Consider historical and/or biographical context and place your argument in conversation with at least one other piece of literary criticism.

D2: Dickens, *Hard Times,* Book the Second: Reaping

Week Eleven: The Dangers of Disbelief, Cont.

D1: Dickens, *Hard Times*, Book the Third: Garnering

D2: Levine, “Dickens, secularism, and agency,” from *Realism, Ethics and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science* (2008)

Week Twelve: Renunciation of the World and the Worldly

D1: Christina Rossetti, “At Home,” “Remmeber,” “When I am dead, my dearest,” “A Pause,” “A Chilly Night,” “Winter: My Secret” from *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862)

D2: Christina Rossetti, “The Thread of Life,” “An Old-World Thicket,” “Love Is As Strong As Death” from *A Pageant and Other Poems* (1881)

Week Thirteen: Victorians and the Spiritual Realm

D1: Oliphant, “Old Lady Mary” (1881), Chapters 1-3 and

Introduction, *The Victorian Supernatural* (2009), Bown, Burdett, Thurschwell, Eds.

D2: Oliphant, “Old Lady Mary,” Chapters 4-15

**Due: Cross Pressures Essay**

1. **Reading and/as Enchantment**

Week Fourteen: Enchanted Readers

D1: Michael Warner, “Uncritical Reading”

D2: Rita Felski, “Enchantment,” Chapter 2 of *Uses of Literature*

**Assign: Enchanted Reading Reflection:** Recount a moment in which you experienced a form of enchantment while reading. What was the affective experience of this moment? What do you think caused that enchantment? How did it change your relationship with the work you were reading?

Week Fifteen: Poetics as/and Theology

D1: Gerard Manley Hopkins, Selections from letters, sermons, and “the Spiritual Exercises,” “As Kingfishers Catch Fire” (1877), “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire” (1888)

D2: “The Wreck of the Deutschland” (1875-6)

**Due: Enchanted Reading Reflection**

**Final Exam: Date To Be Decided**