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Office Hours: TR, 1:30-4:00 and by appointment

MLA 500: Belief and Doubt in Literature

This course will combine intellectual and social history, philosophy, and literature, of the period from the eighteenth century to the present. Our focus will be on the extended crisis of faith inaugurated in the West by the Enlightenment, and its ramifications and reflections in literature over succeeding generations. We begin with an essay that presents a poetic version of the philosophical optimism that dominated much of the 17th and early 18th centuries. Pope's sanguine assessment of the human condition, his unwillingness to recognize impediments to blithe optimism and unbounded faith, are an invitation to the cynical indictments of unreflective belief that will soon ensue.

The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 serves well as a particular event that galvanized debate on the competing perspectives of faith and doubt in God's existence and/or benevolence. Any number of counterparts could serve as well (such as the recent tsunami that even precipitated a volume called "Tsunami Theology") but this works well because of its timing at the cusp of secular modernity and because it elicited a number of literary treatments of the dilemma it raised.

The Romantics were the first to venture in a more or less systematic way to explore the darker recesses of human doubt about God and his universe through literary treatments. The hostile reaction Byron's drama on "Cain" provoked raises pertinent questions about how avenues to challenge orthodoxy are legitimized or invalidated. His work is also a classic treatment of the discrepancy between biblical Judaeo-Christianity, and culturally constructed Judaeo-Christianity.

A few years later, Tennyson offers what is still considered one of the best literary treatments of the turmoil precipitated in one individual's mind by Lyell's Geology and Darwin's Evolutionary Theory. Tennyson labors to recapture a faith that has been assaulted by personal tragedy (the death of his friend Hallam) and the onslaughts of modern science. It is in itself a profound psychological study of the mechanisms of grief that in this case treat human death and the loss of faith as comparable grounds for mourning.

The Brothers Karamazov, arguably one of the very greatest novels in world literature, is the best example we have of a literary work that addresses problems of faith and doubt, good and evil, with a power and sophistication that rivals any philosophical treatise on the subject. Critics like the Russian Mikhail Bakhtin have singled out this novelist as an example of a genuinely polyphonic voice, ie, one that gives due authenticity to countervailing perspectives without subsuming them in any moralistic posture. It is thus a respectful and haunting meditation on the appeal of atheistic certitude and ingenuous faith, represented by Ivan and Alyosha respectively.

Tolstoy's disturbing meditation on death can be viewed as an exemplification of one definition of the tragic: humanity's perennial attempt to confront and transcend the inescapable horror and absurdity of death.

Frederick's Damnation of Theron Ware can be read as a morality tale of sorts that depicts the humiliation of a religious martinet ill-equipped to confront a secular world. Catholicism's favorable treatment in this book, related to that religion's perceived embrace of higher criticism and a more liberal theology, thus can be read as one instance

of how cultural pressures are seen to have effected a satisfactory reconciliation of faith and doubt.

Nobel prize-winning Lagerkvist weaves a minimalist tale around the figure of Barabbas, released in Christ's stead. The dynamic that drives this novel is the haunting suspicion that emerges by the book's end that the human mind is endlessly resourceful in constructing paradigms of belief or doubt. Like Dostoevsky, Lagerkvist is a master of human psychology, and he paints the human condition as a tragic one, where even the most empirical and objective of data are ultimately revealed as endlessly elastic, susceptible of whatever mental manipulation our deepest drives move us to enact.

The last work of fiction, Cynthia Ozick's, is a kind of literary proof of the virtues, and possibly indispensability, of those necessary fictions we construct to give meaning to our lives. A vaguely Freudian undercurrent pervades this work, which equates the human drive for origins and emotional connection to a father with the quest for God, and that testifies to the primal urge in every community to find—or construct—a scriptural text as a roadmap to ultimate reality. The course will conclude by revisiting two classic formulations that debate the ethical implications of faith as a gesture made independently of rational grounds.

The conduct of this class, as befits a literary course, will therefore not be strictly systematic or programmatic. We will see, as I hope to have shown, that the best literature is not palliative or escapist, but provocative and unsettling in the way it deals with the questions that this course raises. In one way or another, this syllabus will force us to confront these issues: how does fiction serve to illuminate the unwritten boundaries of acceptable religious heterodoxy? How have reflective writers framed the conflict between faith and doubt, and what solutions have emerged? What is the role of human agency in belief and doubt? Is the religious impulse one that is, ultimately, amenable to the strictures of society or intellect?

By targeting the specific subject of belief and doubt as they are raised in these literary texts, I am inevitably inviting an approach to the topic that moves beyond the historical and critical to the personal and subjective. All these texts directly address the profoundly held personal and the deeply subjective in provocative and unsettling ways. The syllabus, in other words, is calculated to require that we all "skate on thin ice." The purpose of this course is, in part, to explore the power of literature to provide a stable point of reference for the interrogation of universal questions that elicit powerful individual responses. In addition to the intellectual content which I hope you will master, I also expect students to become more reflective and self-critical about their own beliefs and their own reactions to new texts and challenging ideas. One way of demonstrating this ability is in your movement from emotive responses to analytical responses, and in your grounding of argument in textual bases and logical reasoning.

Assignments and Evaluation

Students will be expected to contribute to all class discussions with text-centered questions and commentary. All will have the chance to guide at least one class using a prepared set of both. In addition, each student will prepare one brief oral report on background developments pertinent to the general topic (such as Lyell's Geology, Higher Criticism, Russian nihilism, etc). The main project in class will be a research paper of 20-25 pages prepared in consultation with myself. The final two days of class will be used for students to present abbreviated versions of their papers.

Breakdown:
 Participation: 40%
 Paper 40%
 Class presentation 20%

Syllabus

Week 1	Th Aug 25	Introduction: Eagleton/Fish essay
		Augustine to Freud; The Pulley/Dover Beach
Week 2	Th Sep 1	Pope's "Essay on Man"; Hume's "On Miracles"; Lisbon Earthquake; Paley
Week 3	Th Sep 8	Wordsworth's "Ruined Cottage"; "Ode"
Week 4	Th Sep 15	Byron's "Cain"
Week 5	Th Sep 22	Darwin; Lyell
Week 6	Th Sep 29	Tennyson's <i>In Memoriam</i>
Week 7	Th Oct 6	Tolstoy's <i>Death of Ivan Ilyich</i>
Week 8	Th Oct 13	Dostoevsky's "Rebellion" and "Grand Inquisitor"
Week 9	Th Oct 20	Bulgakov's <i>Master and Marguerita</i>
Week 10	Th Oct 27	<i>Master and Marguerita</i>
Week 11	Th Nov 3	Frederic's <i>Damnation of Theron Ware</i>
Week 12	Th Nov 10	Lagerkvist's <i>Barabbas</i>
Week 13	Th Nov 17	William Clifford; William James
Week 14	Th Nov 24	THANKSGIVING
Week 15	Th Dec 1	Presentations

Texts to Purchase (please use editions indicated)

Tennyson, *In Memoriam* (any edition will do, Norton critical recommended) 978-0393979268

Tolstoy, *Death of Ivan Ilyich and other Stories* (Signet Classic) 978-0451525086

Bulgakov, *Master and Marguerita* (Burgin trans/Vintage) 978-0679760801

Frederic, *Damnation of Theron Ware* (Penguin) 978-0140390254 (note new ed.)

Lagerkvist, *Barabbas* (Vintage) 978-0679725442