The City as Text:
Modernity and Modernism in London
PHIL 4305
Interdisciplinary Capstone Seminar
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Course Description
The theme of this course is modernity and its relation to modernism in literature and the arts. Modernity was inaugurated by and reflected in several theories that share in common a radical challenge to pre-modern assumptions about the rights, origins, and rationality of the human being. Among others, Marx’s dialectical materialism, Darwin's theory of evolution, and Freud’s account of the unconscious and its force in civilization radically transformed the Western understanding of human nature. These provided contesting theoretical frameworks in which the literature and art of what is called ‘modernism’ flourished, from the mid-19th to the early 20th centuries. These thinkers—an English biologist, a German economic theorist, and a Viennese psychiatrist—are also historically and geographically interconnected. These revolutionary theorists of profoundly modern ideas all arrived, wrote, and lived in the city of London.

For centuries, London had been a center of activity for great playwrights, poets, and philosophers (from Shakespeare and Donne to Hobbes and Locke). The poet William Blake called London ‘a Human awful wonder of God,’ and London was, by the 19th and early 20th centuries, the most dazzling, wealthy, and cultured city in the world, with its great exhibitions in Hyde Park, its museums, theatres, and galleries, its café, club, and university cultures. Marx came to London in 1849 to spend the rest of his life, and was initially employed writing about the city for an American newspaper. Darwin lived for several years in London and it remained the center of his publishing and intellectual society. The early modernist painter J.M.W. Turner was born in London, and made it the subject of some of his greatest paintings. In the early 20th century, the London art critic Roger Fry coined the term ‘post-Impressionism’ and promoted modern art in Britain. London served as a home or refuge for major modern writers such as Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf, Dylan Thomas, D. H. Lawrence, W. B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot. London was also rife with poverty and class division, and the cultural capital of a vast colonial empire, as exposed in novels by Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling, and the British-Caribbean novelist Jean Rhys. Freud, whose works were profoundly influential for literature and the arts, settled at the end of his life to practice and write in London.

The City as Text: Readings and Sources
In this course we will look at the modern city as text, where modernism—via its theories, literature, and art—has been inscribed into an historically layered cultural geography. The readings from literature, art criticism, and philosophical and scientific theory all pose the problems of human self-understanding on the basis of the history it reflects on, out of which it emerges, and from which it differentiates. The emphasis in this course is on primary texts and their interconnection, though secondary scholarship will also be made
available. For example, we can analyze D. H. Lawrence’s depictions of human instinct in light of Darwin’s description of evolution and of a higher moral sense. We can read Dickens’ exposure of the plight of the poor and the domination of London culture by money alongside Marx’s economic interpretation of history. Virginia Woolf’s exploration of an impressionist-style rendering of consciousness during her characters’ walks through London can be read alongside Roger Fry’s and T. E. Hulme’s interpretations of modern painting, while a novel by D.H. Lawrence can be illuminated through Freud’s analysis of the psyche and its role in civilization. We will also see why Freud uses the analogy of an old and yet modern city a metaphor of the psyche and its memories, where new ideas—and architecture and events—must be impressed upon the accumulations of a half-forgotten past. We will undertake our study of this city as text through readings of revolutionary theories of modernity by thinkers who found in London a centre of intellectual life, activity, and communication; through the literary works written in and about London from the mid 19th century to the height of modernism; and through considering its great visual art and the London art criticism that have become central to the story of modernism.

The City as Text: Excursions and Site Visits
Excursions, paired with readings for the course, may include visits to the Dickens Museum and the Foundling Museum; the Marx Memorial Library in Clerkenwell; the British Museum; literary walking tours of Bloomsbury, South London, and Soho; The Royal Botanic Garden at Kew Gardens; Westminster Abbey; the Freud Museum; the Tate Britain, the Tate Modern, the National Gallery, and the City of London Museum.

Readings
Habermas, The Philosophical Discourses of Modernity
Darwin, Charles, selections from On the Origin of the Species, The Descent of Man
Marx, Karl, ‘Preface’ to A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy
Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities, Oliver Twist
Sigmund Freud, Civilization and its Discontents
D. H. Lawrence, Sons and Lovers, ‘Sun’
Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway
Virginia Woolf, essays ‘Street Haunting: A London Adventure’ and ‘Kew Gardens’
T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land
William Butler Yeats, ‘The Second Coming’ and other poems
Rudyard Kipling, The Light that Failed
Jean Rhys, Voyage in the Dark
Roger Fry, essay ‘An Essay in Aesthetics’
Roger Fry, essay ‘Refining and Defining: A Post-Impressionist Era’
T. E. Hulme, essay ‘Modern Art and its Philosophy’
Richard Tames, London: A Cultural History