YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE
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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2018 Volume II: Poems about Works of Art, Featuring Women and Other Marginalized Writers

Introduction

by Paul H. Fry, William Lampson Professor Emeritus of English

For this seminar I returned to the subject of ekphrastic poetry, which I have worked with in the National Initiative several times before, but I think not to the exclusion of other sorts of poem, and not with an emphasis on gender and race. This year's Fellows came from a great many different classroom situations: there were three art teachers together with an English language teacher who is also an artist; there was a middle school Spanish teacher; and there was a teacher of high school-age and even older students considered unfit for ordinary public schools; there was a teacher in an all-Black classroom in Washington, D. C.; and there were a kindergarten teacher and a middle school teacher of students on the Navajo Reservation of the Diné Nation--students quite different from each other, as the kindergarten students are ESL learners from the interior of the reservation who speak Navajo at home and the older students from near the edge of the reservation are in danger of losing touch with the culture of their parents and ancestors. The other three teach in perhaps more normative circumstances. There are also curious overlaps in interests. For example, three teachers, none of them the art teachers, are working with poetic, visual and other responses to the public art of murals. Of these three the two from Chicago are participating in the groundswell of interest in the murals of ethnic neighborhoods that is also going on at the university level there. Because of these overlaps, I have chosen not to arrange these units alphabetically but according to subject matter.

Also unusual about the ten Fellows in my seminar is the fact that apart from the experienced Coordinator the other nine were participating in an Institute model seminar for the first time. Considering that fact, it is remarkable that they could all write, with efficiency and clarity of purpose, units that will make wonderful springboards for the various kinds of teaching they hope to do. Many were attracted chiefly to the chance to compare verbal and visual works, often remarking that in the electronic age there are more and more visual learners; and in some cases one could sense them feeling constrained by the need to channel their goals entirely through poems about works of art. But as they saw soon enough, there was really no such need, despite the seminar emphasis, and most of the Fellows drew upon ekphrastic poems among many other ways of bringing the verbal and the visual into conjunction.

The first three units engage, as their primary focus, with the interpretation of ekphrastic poems, focused on seeing the work of art as the poem sees it while also training students to "read" the work of art on their own, and in their own poems. Two of these three units have in common close attention to Robert Hayden's "Monet's Water Lilies." **Anita Galloway** of Washington, D. C. selects this poem for her high school students together with Blake's illuminated and very complex "The Little Black Boy" and a poem from Natasha Tretheway's *Bellocq's Ophelia*, a series that responds to photographs of New Orleans prostitutes taken over a century ago. **Elizabeth Mullin** of Richmond has a special interest in emotional responses to art and poetry, and builds on this interest for her middle school students with a pedagogical contrast between "objective"

reading (of Longfellow's "The Cross of Snow") and "subjective" reading, modeling her own private response (to Edward Hirsch on Hopper's "House by the Railroad"), before blending the two in her way of reading Hayden's poem. The seminar's excellent Coordinator **Krista Waldron** focuses on the confessional poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, feeling that her socially marginal students will respond most readily to a personal emphasis—one that admits pain--and chooses for the purpose Lowell on Vermeer's "Girl by a Window," Plath on De Chirico's "Disquieting Muses," and Sexton on Van Gogh's "Starry Night."

One of the three units with an emphasis on murals points toward the whole class's production of a mural—and then writing about it—as a culminating exercise. **Stephany Jimenez** of Chicago, an art teacher, teaches eighth graders and will warm them to the task of visual-verbal comparison with U. A. Fanthorpe's hilarious poem, especially funny to adolescents, on Uccello's "St. George Killing the Dragon," "Not My Best Side," then get them to think about compositional form with Williams on Bruegel's "Fall of Icarus" and about the public reception of controversial art with E. B. White on a Diego Rivera mural before turning to the mural project, for which, as an artist, she is well suited to give instruction. (I paint, and I took notes!) **Laura Gillihan** of Chicago teaches in an elementary school that is surrounded by three proud and wholly distinct Chicago neighborhoods featuring works of public art. Having introduced her students to ekphrasis with a neighborhood poem, Dan Masterson on Hopper's "Early Sunday Morning," she then moves them into the back and forth of imaging poems and writing about images, all in response to repeated neighborhood walks. The Spanish teacher **Holly Bryk** of Delaware, who shares Jimenez's interest in Diego Rivera, will devote her unit to a poem in the target language by Xánath Caraza called "Catrina," the skeletal Mexican "grande dame of death," which responds in part to Rivera's great mural "Suena de una Tarde Domical in Alameda" (Catrina its central figure) with the purpose of simultaneously teaching the Spanish language, Mexican cultural mythology, and Mexican history.

As I indicated, the two Diné teachers face opposite challenges, yet they share the ultimate purpose of cherishing traditional culture. **Desiree Denny** will encourage her Kindergarteners to learn English vocabulary through the mnemonic means afforded by rhyme and augmented by illustration. For this purpose she has chosen four Mother Goose rhymes with fine Edwardian illustrations, rhymes with subjects familiar to the children-- sheep and other animals—allowing them to make connections with their own traditions while learning the exotic language of a distant time and place. **Ella Earl** encourages her ninth graders to reflect on tradition and their sense of place, first with Georgia O'Keefe's "Red Hills and Bones" and Laura Kasischke's poem about it, and then with a poem that Navajo artist Shonto Begay wrote about his own painting, "My Mother's Kitchen." She then encourages the students to write poems about traditional objects, such as bowls and baskets, which have acquired aesthetic value.

The other two art teachers are devoted to their students' sense of personal well-being, to be realized through psychological activism and political activism, respectively—not that these are wholly distinct approaches. **Leigh Hall** of Pittsburgh has engaged in research showing that the leading cause of students' disruptive behaviors is household and neighborhood trauma. To make her fifth graders more comfortable with themselves, she encourages verbal and visual self-portraiture. The ekphrastic poems she chooses to familiarize them with the possibilities of the genre are Bobbi Katz's pantoum on Mark Rothko and John Stone's poem on Hopper's "Early Sunday Morning," a poem strikingly different in attitude from Dan Masterson's, studied by Laura Gillihan, who also urges neighborhood activism. **Nina Ford** of Richmond**,** finally, uses a remarkable visual archive ranging from images of Blacks in the Jim Crow era to the complex cultural statements of today's African-American avant-garde artists to get her ninth through twelfth graders to recognize the pervasiveness of micro-aggression in white culture, turning eventually to the work of Black poets from June Jordan to Claudia Rankine expressing this same theme.

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