

## **Cambridge Poets Through the Ages**

### **Overview:**

In the eight hundred years since the founding of the University of Cambridge, an extraordinary number of literary thinkers have passed through and made their mark on the city, whether as students, lecturers, visitors or residents. This course will focus on a very varied selection of poets who lived, studied or worked in Cambridge. We will consider some of the ways in which the city and the university of their time influenced their work, as well as how their work influenced the vibrant intellectual community we have inherited. We will range between some of the most celebrated names in English literature, such as Milton and Wordsworth, and a gathering of lesser-known and neglected writers whose work will prove variously brilliant, strange and revealing.

This course will be conducted in the form of a series of seminars (rather than lectures). In this way, students will be encouraged to encounter each poem for themselves, without being led from the outset by a lecturer's own interpretations. Each session will begin with a brief contextualising introduction to the authors and texts at hand, situating them within the history and urban geography of Cambridge as well as the larger tides of literary history. This will be followed by group analysis of poems, in the format of a classic Cambridge 'Practical Criticism' class. The seminar-leader, responding to the thoughts and feelings expressed in the discussion—and drawing out important elements of the debates and ambiguities that emerge—will gradually introduce further contexts, suggestions and questions as they become relevant.

Poems and passages to be considered will be supplied during or before the sessions. Students may wish to look at the works of some of the poets mentioned in advance, but there will be no expectation that anyone has already read widely in any of these areas of literary history. Students taking this course can expect to experience an eclectic range of poems in a setting that gives a taste of the core, time-honoured form of Cambridge teaching in the humanities: learning through open critical conversation under a supervisor's guidance.

### **Outline:**

1. George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, John Milton: Religion, Politics and War in the Seventeenth Century
2. Thomas Gray, Christopher Smart, Henry Kirke White: The 'Long Eighteenth Century'
3. William Wordsworth and Alfred, Lord Tennyson: Romanticism

4. Rupert Brooke, William Empson and Others: Poetry in Cambridge in the Early Twentieth Century (and the Rise of the Study of English)

5. A Choice of Post-War Poets: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, Kamau Brathwaite, Nicholas Moore, Veronica Forrest-Thompson

**Dr Alex Wong** is a poet, scholar and critic with close ties to Cambridge. He has published two books of poetry, *Poems Without Irony* and *Shadow and Refrain*. He is also the author of an academic book on *The Poetry of Kissing in Early Modern Europe* and has edited and introduced selections from the works of Algernon Charles Swinburne, Walter Pater and Alice Meynell. Alex read English at Cambridge from 2007-10 and went on to complete a doctorate, also in Cambridge, before becoming a Fellow at St John's College (2015-2023). In Cambridge he has taught a wide range of topics over a dozen years, as well as acting as Director of Studies. He is currently a Royal Literary Fund Fellow and continues to enjoy supervising undergraduates for the English Tripos in Cambridge. He has a particular devotion to 'Practical Criticism'.