

Cambridge Poets Through the Ages

(Seminar)

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. An important aim of the course is to introduce all readers, even those well-versed in English poetry, to new and unfamiliar poems and poets. No prior knowledge is required.

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, elaborating and articulating their thoughts through group discussion, without being led from the outset by a lecturer's own interpretations.

Each session will include brief contextualising introductions 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. Instead of a synoptic overview of the history of 'Cambridge' poetry, the course will aim first and foremost to offer and develop a group experience of 'close' reading of poetry. We will be considering *how* the poems work, how our experience of them is altered by the ways in which we approach them and the questions we ask about them, and what assumptions we each make about what a poem is (or ought to be).

Poems and passages to be considered will be supplied during or before the sessions. There will be no expectation that anyone has already read the texts under discussion, nor that they will have read widely in any of the relevant areas of literary history. All that is required is a curiosity about the intricacies and subtleties of language.

Students taking this course can expect to encounter 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-ended critical conversation under a supervisor's guidance.

Outline (Provisional):

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 Hugh Sykes-Davies: **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, Ted Hughes, Kamau Brathwaite, Geoffrey Hill, 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, Alice Meynell and Thomas Hood.

Alex read English at Cambridge from 2007-10 and went on to complete a master's degree and 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 nearly fifteen years, as well as acting as Director of Studies. He has also been a Royal Literary Fund Fellow and a Hawthornden Fellow. He has a particular devotion to 'Practical Criticism' and continues to enjoy supervising undergraduates for the English Tripos in Cambridge.