MA MODULE: SPRING 2011

Poetry and the Visual Arts: Victorian, Modern, Post-Modern
Tutor: Hugh Haughton

Starting from Charles Baudelaire, ‘The Painter of Modern Life’, modern poetry has had a crucial investment in the visual arts and their relationship to the culture of modernity. In ‘Relations between Poetry and Painting’, Wallace Stevens talked of ‘the paramount relation between poetry and painting today, between modern man and modern art’. The formal innovations and developments of Victorian and modern poetry were often played out in dialogue with and response to the revolution in painting. This module will look at a series of influential encounters between poets and painting from the mid-nineteenth-century to the present, moving from the time of Ruskin and Pre-Raphaelitism, or Baudelaire and Realism, through the moments of cubism and modernism, associated with Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens among other poets, through the poets of the New York School, including Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery, and on to post-modernism and the poets of today.

This was a period of technical and formal revolution and redefinition change in the visual arts – and poets were acutely conscious of parallel developments in painting, sculpture, photography, architecture and film in approaching their own medium. As a result of the transformations recorded in Walter Benjamin seminal essay on ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, this was also a period in which, as Donald Davie said, ‘the whole of the artistic past’ became ‘available to painter, sculptor, architect, musician, as never before’, and this lent a new dimension to modern poetry as well as other cultural forms. Beginning with the painting-oriented verse of Browning and the painter poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the module will investigate a series of close encounters between poets and the visual arts from the mid-nineteenth-century to the present. It will involve readings of poems and essays by a variety of representative British, Irish and American poets, including Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, W.H. Auden, Elizabeth Bishop, Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, and contemporary poets including Derek Mahon, Derek Walcott (in Another Life), Richard Howard and Jorie Graham. Poetic engagement with the visual arts takes many forms, including ekphrasis, imitation, allusion, and what Stevens calls ‘effects of analogy’. It has been used to generate cultural critique, critical commentary, essays on poetics, autobiographical reflections, and many other things, but above all, as triggers to poems as objects. The module will investigate a spectrum of poems and poets across the period, introducing students to the metamorphoses of pictorial and poetic art, reflected in the work of the poets studied.

This is very much a course on modern poetry, as it moves from Victorian through modernism to the contemporary. It will dwelling in and upon poems, though mainly poems that dwell on or reflect upon the visual arts. Expertise in Art History is welcome but not required, since we will be looking primarily at poetic form, the poetics of vision, and the linguistic medium of modern poems, rather than the plastic arts as such. The focus is on the ongoing competitive dialogue between the two art forms during a period of huge inventiveness as well as crisis in the arts (painting, photography, sculpture, cinema but also poetry).
Provisional Seminar Programme:

1) Robert Browning and the Portrait Gallery


2) D.G. Rossetti: Painting Poetry and ‘Poems for Paintings’.

D.G. Rossetti is a rare case of a poet who was also a painter. He is also the first English poet to systematically compose what he called in *The Germ* (1950) and in *The House of Life*, ‘poems for paintings’, poems that offer ekphrastic commentaries on particular works of visual art. These include what Jerome McGann calls ‘double works’, poems that are paired with particular paintings of his own, sometimes incorporated into their frame, as well as poems about the art of others – including sonnets about paintings by Titian, Leonardo, Mantegna, Botticelli and Ingres – as well as art in general. The seminar will investigate the relationship between the historically double programme of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement in the visual arts – to return to medieval and early Renaissance aesthetics and iconography and to renovate modern English art on more naturalistic Ruskinian lines – and the poetics of the sonnet in Rossetti’s great sequence *The House of Life* in relation to his *Early Italian Poets* (1861). We will look at Rossetti’s sonnets in relation to his paintings and those of Leonardo and others he wrote about – as well as his sister Christina Rossetti’s sonnet on ‘The Artist’s Studio’, and Michael Field’s *Sight and Song* (1892), with its aim to ‘translate into verse what the lines and colours of certain chosen pictures sing in themselves’. Beside the poems, you should read Pater’s essays on ‘The Aesthetic School’ and ‘D.G. Rossetti’ as well as ‘The School of Giorgione’ (from *The Renaissance*). The best modern study of the subject is Elizabeth Helsinger, *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts* (2008).


Baudelaire said his aim was to ‘glorify the cult of images (my great, unique and primitive passion)’ [‘glorifier le culte des images (ma grande, mon unique, ma primitive passion)’. His essay on ‘Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne’ is one of the classic statements of aesthetic modernity for all the arts, but takes off from visual art. The same is true of many of his poems, including ‘Bohémiens en voyage’, ‘Duellum’ (Duellum), ‘Le Masque’ (The Mask), ‘Une gravure fantastique’ (A Fantastic Engraving), ‘Le Jeu’, (The Game) ‘Sur Le Tasse en prison’ (On Tasso in Prison),
‘Don Juan aux enfers’ (Don Juan in Hell), which are all triggered by paintings or drawing. His poem ‘Les Phares’ (‘The Light-houses’) is a brief history of art, focussed around particular painters, which are viewed as beacons. Though he was an admirer of Delacroix, his essay on the painting of modern life is based on the little known sketches and drawings of the journalistic commentator Constantin Guys, and many of his essays are about caricature and the comic in art. See J.A. Hiddleston, ‘Art and its Representation’ in Rosemary Lloyd ed. Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire (CUP, 2006)


4) American Poetry and visual modernism: Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein and Mina Loy:

In 1918, Moore wrote to Pound from New York, saying: ‘Over here, it strikes me that there is more evidence of power among painters and sculptors than among writers.’ Williams said, ‘I have attempted to fuse the poetry and the painting, to make it the same thing.’ Starting with Stieglitz and the New York Armory Show, the seminar will look at the poetry of three American modernist poets, all of whom were acutely responsive to the revolution in the visual arts as well as literature. It will concentrate on poems by Moore and Williams (including Pictures from Breughel), as well as Stein’s ‘Tender Buttons’ and poems by Loy. See also, Bram Dijkstra’s The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams and Linda Leavell, Marianne Moore and the Visual Arts (1995).


Auden’s poem is perhaps the first fully-fledged twentieth-century ekphrastic poem, as well as the first (alongside Yeats’) to be named after a gallery. Taking off from Auden and Yeats, we will largely focus on selected poems by Wallace Stevens. Stevens’ ‘The Man With the Blue Guitar’, written after Picasso, notes that ‘things as they are/ Are changed upon the blue guitar’, and as Bonnie Costello observes, while his painting ‘abounds in references to particular artists and their works’, ‘it is finally the idea of painting, its struggle to define an imaginative space with a presence to rival natural experience, that attracts him.’ We will also look at In ‘Relations between Poetry and Painting’ (1951), Wallace Stevens talked of ‘the paramount relation between poetry and painting today, between modern man and modern art’, and his poetry is pervaded by an awareness of the analogy between the visual arts and poetry (he has another essay entitled ‘Effects of Analogy’). See Bonnie Costello, ‘Effects of Analogy: Wallace Stevens and Painting’ in Albert Gelpi ed, Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism (1985).
6) Frank O’Hara and the New York School:

Frank O’Hara worked as a gallery curator, operated as an art critic, and wrote as friends of artists, and his poetry is caught up in a vortex of relationship to painting, painters, and aesthetic theory. The seminar will look at his poetry in terms of his art criticism on contemporary American painting by Jackson Pollock and others, and the context of the art of the New York School more generally. ‘Picasso made me tough and quick, and the world’, he wrote in ‘Memorial Day 1950’, an early poem that also speaks of ‘collages’, and ‘perfect mobiles’, ‘Fathers of Dada’, and guitar strings that ‘hold up pictures’. Though he later wrote a poem entitled ‘Why I am Not a Painter’, many of his poems are responses to paintings (such as ‘On Seeing Larry Rivers’ Washington Crossing the Delaware at the Museum of Modern Art’) or to his painter friends in New York. Focussing on a reading of ‘In Memory of My Feelings’ (for Grace Hartigan) and other poems exploring the relation between contemporary painting and culture, it will explore the relationship between O’Hara’s ‘I do this poems’ and the new painting of the Abstract Expressionists and their successors in New York. The main texts will be taken from Frank O’Hara, Selected Poems ed Donald Allen (1974) and Frank O’Hara, Art Chronicles (1975, 1991). See also: Marjorie Perloff, Frank O’Hara: A Poet among Painters (1977, Revised 1998), and Russell Ferguson, In Memory of My Feelings: Frank O’Hara and American Art (1999). Robert Motherwell ed The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology (Cambridge, 1951)

7) John Ashbery: ‘The Double Dream of Spring’ and ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’

Like O’Hara, Ashbery combines the role of poet and art critic, and has written numerous poems in response to painting and adopting techniques borrowed from the visual arts. We will consider his poems in relation to his relationship to European Surrealism and Dadaism – his bpoem ‘The Double Dream of Spring’ alludes to De Chirico - as well as to American painters such as Joseph Cornell and Fairfield Porter. The seminar will concentrate on his long master-piece ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’, which reads a work of sixteenth-century mannerism by Parmigianino, in terms of museum experience, art-historical documentation such as Vasari’s Lives of the Artists and contemporary art criticism and practice. Texts will be taken from Selected Poems and Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles: 1957-1987 as well as his Selected Prose. See also A.W. Heffernan, The Museum of Words: The Poetry of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery (2004).

8) Contemporary Poets in the Gallery.

The seminar will look at the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott’s long poem Another Life and Tiepolo’s Hound alongside selected poems by contemporary American, British and Irish poets, including Richard Howard, Derek Mahon, Paul Durcan, Eavan Boland and others, drawing on students’ particular interests.

H.H.
Reading List: Poetry and the Visual Arts: Victorian, Modern, Post-Modern

Charles Altieri, Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry (Cambridge: CUP, 1989)
John Ashbery, Self-Portrait in a Complex Mirror (1975)
Guillaume Apollinaire, Apollinaire on Art: Essays and Reviews, 1902-1918 trans. Susan Suleiman (New York, 1972)

Rebecca Beasley, Ezra Pound and the Visual Culture of Modernism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)


Yves Bonnefoy, Writings on Art

Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, Part of the Climate: American Cubist Poetry (Berkeley: UCLA Press, 1991)


Donald Davie, The Poet in the Imaginary Museum (Manchester: Carcanet, 1977)


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Marianne Moore, *Complete Prose* ed Patricia Willis (1986)


Frank O’Hara, *Jackson Pollock* (New York: George Braziller, Inc. 1959)

Frank O’Hara *Robert Motherwell: with selections from the artist’s writings* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1965)


Wallace Stevens, ‘Relations between Poetry and Painting’, *The Necessary Angel* (1951)

