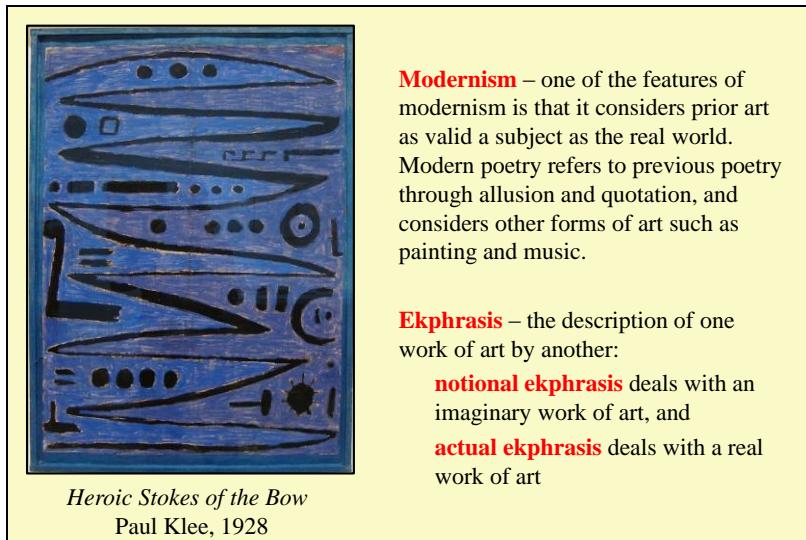


This presentation will consider how poetry in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century has looked at other works of art. One of the characteristics of modernism is that prior art and the creative process are as much a subject for poetry as the real world. The word “poetry” derives from the Greek *poiein* to make, and hence can refer to anything created or crafted. In music Liszt and Strauss wrote symphonic poems and Scriabin wrote poèmes for piano.

The illustration in this first slide is a painting by Georges Braque (1882-1963) that considers the process of painting. The artist creates a completely abstract portrait of his model. This artistic process mimics the role of the light that comes through the window to make the world distinguishable and to divide it into colored contour and flattened shadow.

The title of this session refers the gold light that is in this painting by Braque and that is mentioned in Donald Justice's poem about old paintings that will conclude the session.



The formal term for art about art is *ecphrasis*. The word comes for the Greek *ek* (out of) and *phrazo* (describe, explain). Paul Klee's painting attempts a visual representation of music.

### Richard Howard (1929- )

Howard studied at Columbia University in New York and the Sorbonne in Paris. He became a prolific translator of French poetry (Baudelaire) and prose (Stendahl, Gide, Camus). In his own poetry, he used the dramatic monologue to examine characters and situations in history. Many of his poems focus on paintings or other works of art (*ecphrasis*). He has taught at Yale, the University of Houston and Columbia.



1963 Photograph by Rollie McKenna



### My Last Duchess

In 1558, Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara, married the 14 year old Lucrezia Medici. She died three years later, and Alfonso then sought the hand of Barbara, the niece of the Count of Tyrol. Nikolaus Mardruz was the envoy in charge of negotiating the marriage.

James Mason

Portrait of Lucrezia  
Bronzino, 1560

Robert Browning was famous for his dramatic monologues. *My Last Duchess* is spoken by the Duke of Ferrara who is seeking a second wife after the suspicious death of his first wife, Lucrezia Medici. The speech is made to an envoy from the Count of Tyrol. Much of the speech concerns a painting of the late duchess by Fra Pandolf. The painting and the painter are fictitious. However, Bronzino did paint a striking portrait of Lucrezia. The story of the painting allows the duke to suggest that something might happen to the second wife if she does not grant him the respect he deserves.

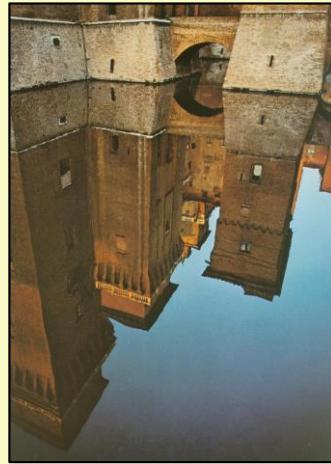
The duke also points out a bronze sculpture of Neptune by Claus of Innsbruck. This is also a fictitious work. Innsbruck was within the domain of the Count of Tyrol. The sculptor is mentioned to show that Ferrara's influence and power already extends beyond Italy. He can buy the best that Tyrol can offer.

Browning's poem displays an arrogant duke and suggests a subservient envoy. The reading is by James Mason who completely inhabits the evil arrogance of the duke.

**Nikolaus Mardruz  
to his Master**



My Lord recalls Ferrara?  
How walls rise out of water  
yet to recede  
identically  
into it, as if  
built in both directions: soaring and sinking



Roloff Beny

Howard now imagines the letter sent by the envoy back to Count of Tyrol. Though the Duke of Ferrara believes himself in complete control of the situation, in Howard's poem, the duke is being played by a far more Machiavellian negotiator. The terms that are being set up will guarantee Barbara's safety and allow her free rein to conduct her own amorous affairs behind the Duke's back. The duke is the subject of mockery rather than the source of fear.

The poem is long and I shall give only its beginning and end.

But upon reflection, I suppose  
we had better take  
the old reprobate  
at his unspeakable word...

Ever determined in  
My Lordship's service,  
I remain his Envoy  
to Ferrara as to the world.



Danielo Barbaro  
Titian, 1545



There is no documentation about the Count's envoy – I have provided a portrait by Titian of Danielo Barbaro who served as an ambassador for the Republic of Venice.

Although it gives immense satisfaction to imagine the Duke of Ferrara out-manoeuvred, Howard's poem is even more fictitious than Browning's. Barbara was frail and pious and lived for only 7 more years after her marriage. The Duke subsequently married a third wife, Margherita Gonzaga. He had no children, and many have supposed that he was impotent.

**James Merrill  
(1926-1995)**

Merrill was the son of Charles E. Merrill, the founder of Merrill Lynch Investment Bankers, and his second wife, Helen Ingram. The family lived in a large house on Long Island. Merrill's parents divorced in 1939.



After graduating from Amherst college, Merrill began a lifetime relationship with David Jackson. They lived in Stonington, Connecticut and spent long periods in Greece. Merrill wrote a long epic *The Changing Light at Sandover* that derived from sessions with a ouija board. He also wrote many shorter poems, displaying a tremendous technical facility with word-games, intricate rhythms and complex rhymes. He died of complications of AIDS.

The next poem is one of James Merrill's longer poems. It tells of a period during his childhood when he was alone in the Merrill mansion on Long Island, taken care of by a French governess. Wikipedia has an excellent discussion of the poem:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lost\\_in\\_Translation\\_\(poem\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lost_in_Translation_(poem))



Ces jours qui te semblent vides  
Et perdus pour l'univers  
Ont des racines avides  
Qui travaillent les déserts.

**Paul Valéry (Palme)**



Diese Tage, die leer dir scheinen  
und wertlos für das All,  
haben Wurzeln zwischen den Steinen  
und trinken dort überall.

**Rainer Maria Rilke**



These days which, like yourself,  
Seem empty and effaced,  
Have avid roots that delve  
To work deep in the waste.

**James Merrill**



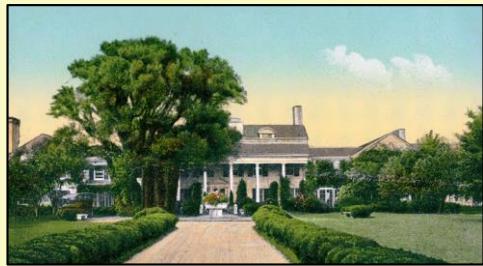
The title comes from Robert Frost: "I could define poetry this way: it is that which is lost out of both prose and verse in translation." *Conversations on the Craft of Poetry* (1959). This is often quoted as "Poetry is what gets lost in translation."

The subject of the poem is translation in all its many senses. The word derives from the participle *translatus* from Latin *transferre* (to move from one place or person to another). It most commonly means to convert a speech or a text from one language to another. Sometimes the conversion is between other modalities (e.g. from one type of art to another); and sometimes it is

between languages other than human, such as between different computer languages, or between a DNA code to an RNA code. Translation can also mean to move something from one place to another. This is often used in religious discourse to describe the entry of the blessed into heaven after death, or some miraculous movement of objects. In physics translation means direct linear movement without rotation. Translation would also be possible in time as well as space.

The poem is dedicated to Richard Howard. At its beginning it mentions a German translation by Rainer Marie Rilke (1875–1926) of a French poem by Paul Valéry (1871–1945) about a palm tree. The quoted lines talk about seemingly empty days where time unconsciously translates the past into the future, like the palm tree processes the nutrients from the ground to leaves and fruit.

In the summer of 1937,  
Merrill's parents were  
estranged. James and his  
mother lived in "The  
Orchard" in Southampton  
(part of "The Hamptons" on  
Long Island). His father was  
engaged in other affairs:



Each thirteenth year he married. When he died  
There were already several chilled wives  
In sable orbit – rings, cars, permanent waves.  
We'd felt him warming up for a green bride.  
He could afford it. He was "in his prime"  
At three score ten. But money was not time.



From *The Broken Home* (1966)

In the summer of 1937 Merrill was an 11-year old boy isolated in the family mansion. With little else for him to do, his governess has arranged for a jigsaw puzzle to be sent out from a puzzle rental shop in New York City. Puzzles were very popular in the 1930s as inexpensive entertainment. Even the rich enjoyed them.

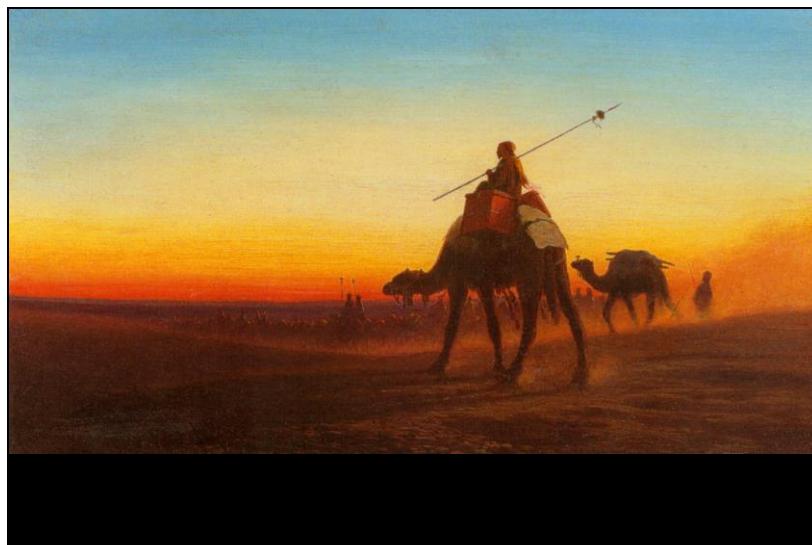
This sets up the puzzle – what is the real meaning of the poem? Various solutions are possible: all have to do with the movement of people or things – translation – and the loss of something during translation.

One superficial puzzle is the actual image of the puzzle. Merrill hints that it is a painting by some "minor lion attending on Gérôme." Yet it is impossible to identify the painting. Probably Merrill has used details from many different Orientalist paintings. Orientalism was a prominent movement in European art of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. After Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, all Europe became fascinated by the Orient. The bright colors and the intricate patterns drew artists to explore and paint the people, the landscapes and the social life of the Middle East. Delacroix painted tigers and harems. Perhaps the most prolific of the orientalists was Jean Léon Gérôme (1824-1904), who traveled widely and taught many others how to portray this new world.

To give you a sense of these paintings I have presented several examples in the following slides.



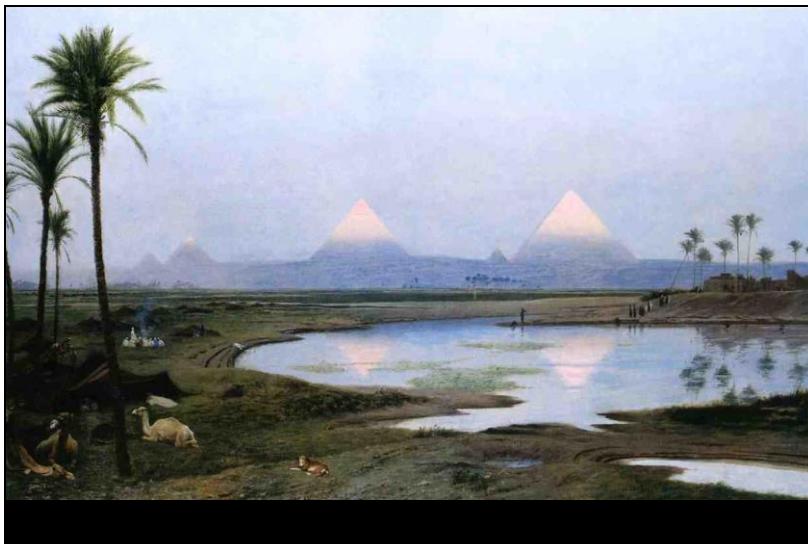
Eugène Fromentin, *Heron Hunt*, 1865



Charles Théodore Frère, *Caravan at Sunset*, 1850s



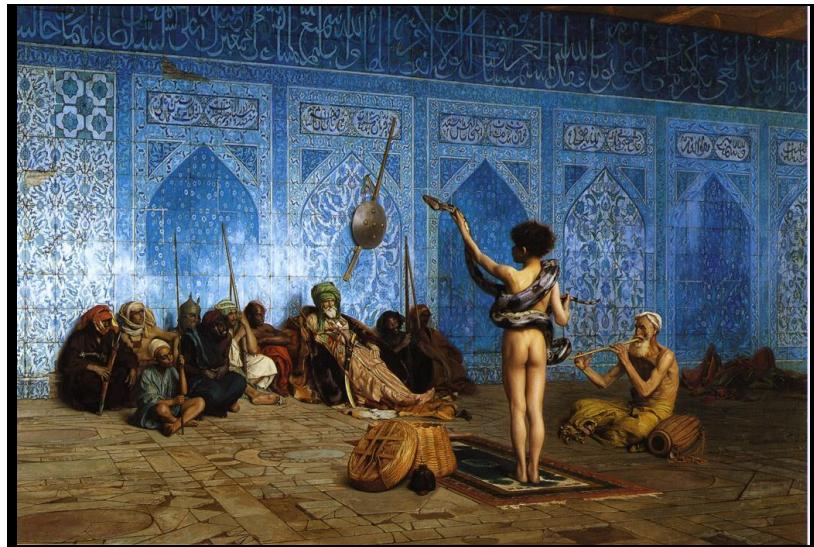
Léon Belly, *Pilgrims Going to Mecca*, 1861



Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Pyramids at Sunset*, 1895

This brings to mind Merrill's lines:

And if we'll find, as some before us did  
That piece of Distance deep in which lies hid  
Your tiny apex sugary with sun,  
Eternal Triangle, Great Pyramid!  
Then Sky alone is left, a hundred blue  
Fragments in revolution, with no clue  
To where a Niche will open. Quite a task,  
Putting together Heaven, yet we do.



Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Snake Charmer*, 1889



Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Querens Quem Devoret*, 1888

The title ("seeking someone to devour") is from the Latin Vulgate Bible 1 Peter 5:8

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour

### Jigsaw Puzzles

These puzzles were first made in 1760 by John Spilsbury, who mounted a map on a sheet of wood and cut around the borders of the countries. Puzzles became a fad during the Depression in the United States. This was perhaps related to the ability to rent puzzles from lending libraries.



Larger wooden jigsaw puzzles usually contain “whimsy” pieces that have a recognizable shape, often thematically related to the puzzle’s image. Sometimes, puzzle-makers used a stylized whimsy as their signature piece.

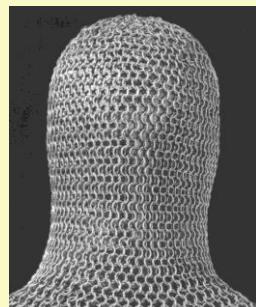
The poem very accurately describes the process of putting the puzzle together. The sensible governess does borders, then various groups characterized by particular colors or content are pieced together. Satisfaction comes from finding the particular piece that joins together two groups. Missing pieces are often found under the table.

The illustration on this slide shows a whimsy in the shape of a lighthouse – a fitting piece for a jigsaw of a seascape. One of the keys to Merrill’s poem is that he “kept back” from his puzzle one of its whimsies – an “inchling” piece of the puzzle in the shape of a palm tree. Everyone keeps something back. Mademoiselle kept back the fact that she was not really French. She was the daughter of an English mother and a German father. “Mademoiselle does borders”

### Old English Alliterative Verse

It was a paved track, a path that kept them  
in marching order. Their mail-shirts glinted,  
hard and hand-linked; the high-gloss iron  
of their armour rang. So they duly arrived

from *Beowulf*,  
translated by Seamus Heaney



Even as voices reach me vaguely  
A dry saw-shriek drowns them out,  
Some loud machinery — a lumber mill?  
Far uphill in the fir forest  
Trees tower, tense with shock,  
Groaning and cracking as they crash groundward.



Towards the end of the poem, the time shifts forward to an episode wherein a medium identifies a hidden object – the whimsy that Merrill had taken from the puzzle and put inside a tole (enameled tin) box for him to identify. The style of the poem changes – a shift denoted by a rhyming couplet:

Mademoiselle does borders — (Not so fast.  
A London dusk, December last.

The séance is described in alliterative verse, a form we have already seen in Auden's *The Age of Anxiety*

### Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

translated by Edward Fitzgerald, 1859

Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,  
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse – and Thou  
Beside me singing in the Wilderness –  
And Wilderness is Paradise enow.

Ah Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire  
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,  
Would not we shatter it to bits – and then  
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!



Dulac, 1910

This World that shifts like sand, its unforeseen  
Consolidations and elate routine,  
Whose Potentate had lacked a retinue?  
Lo! It assembles on the shrinking Green.

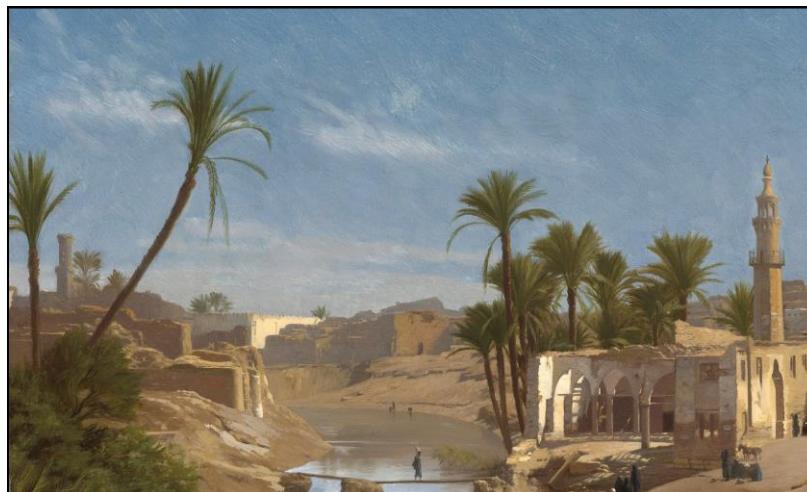


As the picture begins to show through the competed pieces of the puzzle, Merrill adopts the form of Fitzgerald's translation of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. (We have already seen this form in Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*.)

Perhaps the most famous quatrain of the Fitzgerald poem is

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,  
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,  
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.

A similar sense of time passing – all is translation – runs through Merrill's poem



Jean-Léon Gérôme, *View of Medinet el Fayoum*, (detail), 1870

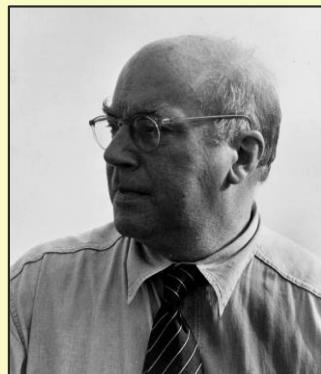
Once completed, the puzzle is then taken apart. The poem ends with thoughts on the passage of time. Memories are made, then lost, then sometimes found again. The poem ends with the palm tree that began it.

Lost, is it, buried? One more missing piece?  
But nothing's lost. Or else: all is translation  
And every bit of us is lost in it  
(Or found — I wander through the ruin of S  
Now and then, wondering at the peacefulness)  
And in that loss a self-effacing tree,  
Color of context, imperceptibly  
Rustling with its angel, turns the waste  
To shade and fiber, milk and memory.

S is not known – perhaps a term for the Southampton mansion – since converted into condos.

### Conrad Aiken (1889-1973)

Aiken was born in Savannah, Georgia. When he was 11 years old, his father, a respected surgeon, shot his wife and then committed suicide. Aiken attended Harvard University, where he became friends with T. S. Eliot. After leaving Harvard in 1912, he decided to devote his life to poetry. Though much more prolific than Eliot, Aiken never achieved his friend's popularity. He was a frequent reviewer even anonymously reviewing himself:



"It is difficult to place Conrad Aiken in the poetic firmament, so difficult that one sometimes wonders whether he deserves a place there at all ..."

Aiken described his discovery of his parents' bodies (using the third person to distance himself from the memory):

he had tiptoed into the dark room, where the two bodies lay motionless and apart, and, finding them dead, found himself possessed of them forever.



**Letter to Li Po**

Fanfare of northwest wind, a bluejay wind  
announces autumn, and the Equinox  
rolls back blue bays to a far afternoon.  
Somewhere beyond the Gorge Li Po is gone,  
looking for friendship or an old love's sleeve  
or writing letters to his children, lost,  
and to his children's children, and to us.  
What was his light? of lamp or moon or sun?  
Say that it changed, for better or for worse,  
sifted by leaves, sifted by snow; on mulberry silk  
a slant of witch-light; on the pure text  
a slant of genius; emptying mind and heart  
for winecups and more winecups and more words.



A Letter from Li Po was written in Cape Cod. The opening lines describe the clarity of an autumn afternoon in New England before shifting to the China of Li Po (Li Bai in pinyin romanization), one of the Immortals of the Wine Cup. (We read Pound's translation of a Li Po poem *The Jewel Stair's Grievance* in the first session). Late in his life Li Po was banished from the court and made his way toward western China. Beyond the gorges of the Yangtze River was a land without the sophisticated pleasures of the court, dotted with occasional temples for meditation and inns for drinking. It was a place for solitude. Li Po remembers his family but realizes his intense loneliness.

Aiken is invoking his predecessor, trying to understand the process of poetry as it was then and as it is now: the spelling down of meaning on the page

Chicory Flower



What was his time? Say that it was a change,  
but constant as a changing thing may be,  
from chicory's moon-dark blue down the taut scale  
to chicory's tenderest pink, in a pink field  
such as imagination dreams of thought.

Aiken was a master of sounds. Alliterations such as “back blue bays” and “sifted by leaves, sifted by snow; on mulberry silk” are entrancing. The repetition of “beneath the winecup moon” sounds like an incantation. The multiple l-sounds last two lines of this section brings to mind the liquid noise of falling rain.

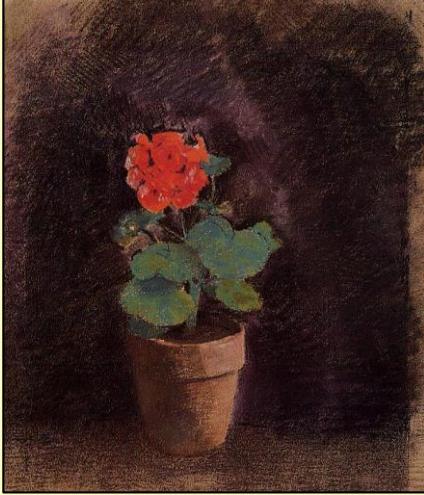
Aiken is very precise in his imagery. In the first line he mentions the bluejay wind. Bluejays do not always migrate, but they often move toward the south along the Atlantic seaboard in the fall. Sometimes there are flocks of a hundred or more. They appear as if the northwest wind had just blown them down from Canada.

Aiken’s description of the petals of the chicory flower changing from “moon-dark blue” to “tenderest pink” made me aware of colors that I had not previously noticed. As shown in the illustration on the right, the central origin of the blue petals can be a very light pink.



**Dorothy Livesay  
(1909-1996)**

Livesay was born in Winnipeg and studied at the Universities of Toronto, Sorbonne and British Columbia. She worked as a social worker, journalist and teacher. In her poetry she was a passionate advocate of women's rights, social justice and peace. After the second world war she wrote a radio-play *Call my People Home* about the internment of the Japanese in British Columbia.



Bartok Violin Concerto 2  
played by Gil Shaham,  
and conducted by  
Claude Boulez

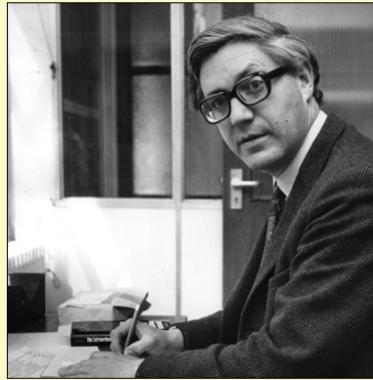
Odilon Redon  
~1910

Speaker icons indicating audio clips.

In this poem Bartok and the Geranium I have intertwined the poet's words with brief excerpts from Bartok's concerto.

### Peter Porter (1929-2010)

Born in Brisbane, Australia, he became a journalist after leaving high school and then travelled to London in 1951. He worked in advertising for a while and then became a reviewer for the Times Literary Supplement. He began to publish poetry in the style of Hardy and of Auden. He married Jannice Henry and they had two daughters. The marriage was not happy, and when Porter began an affair with another woman Jannice committed suicide in 1974. Porter was wracked by grief and by guilt.



At his office at the Times Literary Supplement, 1973

One of the poems that Porter wrote during his intense grief links the deep sadness of the letters still arriving for his late wife with one of the most beautiful of Puccini's operatic arias.

**Non piangere, Liu**

A card comes to tell you  
you should report  
to have your eyes tested.

But your eyes melted in the fire  
and the only tears, which soon dried,  
fell in the chapel.

Other things still come –  
invoices, subscription renewals,  
shiny plastic cards promising credit –  
not much for a life spent  
in the service of reality.

You need answer none of them.  
Nor my asking you for one drop  
of succour in my own hell.

Do not cry, I tell myself,  
the whole thing is a comedy  
and comedies end happily.

The fire shall come out of the sun  
and I shall look in the heart of it.

<p>Non piangere, Liù se in un lontano giorno io t'ho sorriso per quel sorriso, dolce mia fanciulla m'ascolta il tuo signore sarà, domani, forse, solo al mondo.</p>	<p>Do not cry, Liù If on a long-ago day I smiled at you For the sake of that smile, My dear child Listen to me Your lord will be, tomorrow, perhaps, alone in the world</p>
---	---

Placido Domingo

Giacomo Puccini's opera *Turandot* was unfinished at the time of his death in 1924. It was first performed in 1926 with the final music added by Franco Alfano. It is the complicated story of a icy-cold Princess Turandot who is finally melted by the fire of love. Liu is a slave-girl who is in love with Prince Calaf. She entreats Calaf not to attempt the three riddles that must be solved to win the hand of Turandot. He tells her not to cry.

He solves the riddles:

- What is born each night and dies each dawn? *Speranza* – "Hope."
- What flickers red and warm like a flame, but is not? *Sangue* – "Blood"
- What is ice which gives you fire and which your fire freezes still more? *Turandot*.

As an act of love Calaf then grants Turandot his life if she can tell his name. Turandot cannot find anyone other than Liu, whom she tortures trying to find out Calaf's name. Liu commits

suicide rather than reveal the name, and Turandot is struck by the power of Liu's love. Calaf puts himself completely in Turandot's power by telling her his name. When asked to tell his name and send him to his death, Turandot capitulates and says that his name is Love.

Any sensible person cries out at the story. What is the attraction of the icy princess? Liu is the heroine of the tale.

### Appointment in Samarra

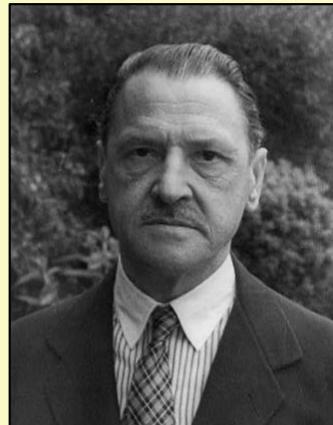
There was a merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me...



told by Boris Karloff



adapted by Donald Justice



W. Somerset Maugham  
(1874-1965)

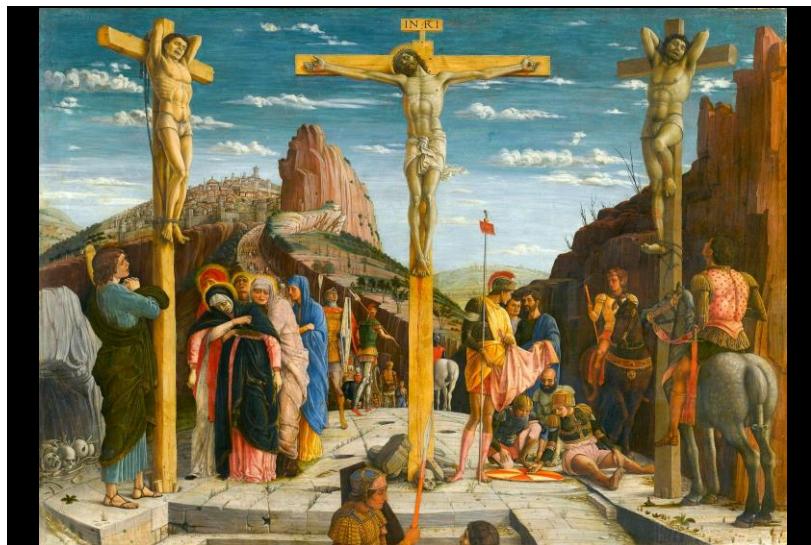
This brief story was first told by Somerset Maugham in his 1933 play *Sheppey*. John O'Hara used the story as an epigraph to his 1934 novel *Appointment in Samarra*. Samarra is a city in Iraq with a famous mosque.

Boris Karloff gave this reading as part of the 1968 movie *Targets* (Peter Bogdanovich's first commercial film)

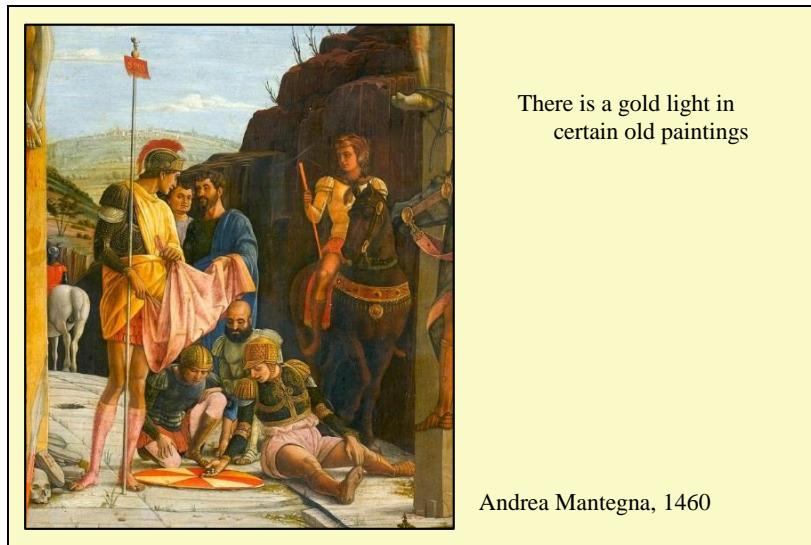
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu9ZIRB79xk>

In the movie he plays an aging horror-film icon. While discussing an upcoming promotional appearance, he tells the agents that they do not understand the subtlety of true horror and recites the Somerset Maugham story to demonstrate this.

Donald Justice' poem *Incident in a Rose Garden* provides a variation on the original story.



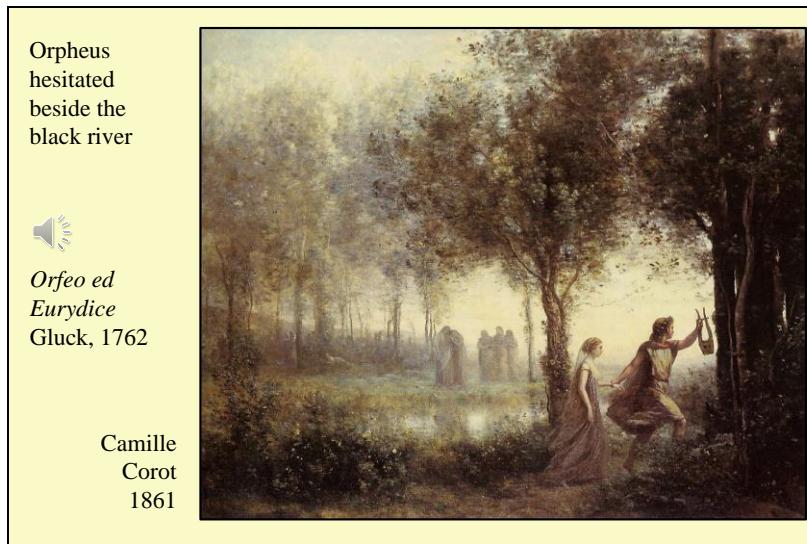
The final poem in this session was published after the death of Donald Justice. It is his farewell to art and poetry. The poem is profoundly simple. It has three stanzas: the first concerns painting, the second music and the third theatre. Justice uses identical rhymes. This is usually considered an inferior form of rhyming, but in this poem its very simplicity gives it tremendous weight. The first and third lines of each stanza rhyme with words that are identical in spelling but not in meaning, e.g. "looked back" and "her beloved back". This would be true *rhyme riche*. The rhyming couplet at the end of the stanza uses words that are identical in both spelling and meaning.



The poem is recited by Stephen Dunn, a poet who had studied with Justice. This reading and a discussion of the poem is available at

<http://www.newyorker.com/podcast/poetry/stephen-dunn-reads-donald-justice>

The first stanza describes the gold light in old paintings and likens it to divine love. Like the love of Christ which descended upon even the Roman soldiers who cast lots for his garments.



The second stanza considers the music of Orpheus. After he looks backward and Eurydice is taken back to the Underworld, Orpheus laments. In Gluck's opera Orpheus' lament (sung by the countertenor Derek Lee Ragin) is

Che farò senza Euridice?  
Dove andrò senza il mio ben?  
Euridice, o Dio, rispondi!  
Io son pure il tuo fedele.

Euridice! Ah, non m'avanza  
più soccorso, più speranza  
ne dal mondo, ne dal ciel.

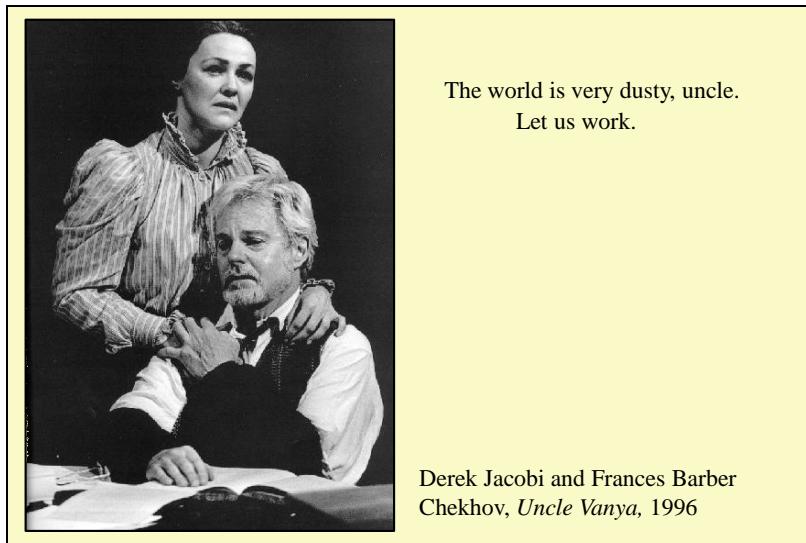
Translation

What will I do without Euridice?  
Where will I go without my beloved?  
Euridice, oh God, answer me!  
Yet I still belong to you faithfully.

Euridice! Ah, no help comes to me anymore,  
No hope anymore,  
Neither from this world, nor from heaven.

Justice thinks the song would be different  
*O prolong*  
*Now the sorrow if that is all there is to prolong.*

Orpheus wishes never to lose his thoughts of Eurydice even if these thoughts are painful.



The world is very dusty, uncle.  
Let us work.

Derek Jacobi and Frances Barber  
Chekhov, *Uncle Vanya*, 1996

The final stanza refers to the ending of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. The idea is life will go on. There will be suffering. But ultimately those who work perhaps will be rewarded.



This is the ending to *Uncle Vanya* (1897) by Anton Chekhov. The clip is from Louis Malle's 1994 film *Uncle Vanya on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street*. Brooke Smith plays Sonya and Wallace Shawn plays Uncle Vanya. The visitors have left. Sonya and Vanya will continue to manage the estate. In this final speech Sonya becomes reconciled to her life – they will work and they will suffer but when they die they will be rewarded in heaven. The greatness of the speech lies in trying to determine how much Sonya believes what she is saying and how much she is just pretending, and the main question is whether this really matters.

The clip is available on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDbESHU4MBg>



We come to the end of this session with a painting of the artist and his model by Picasso. It is more abstract than the painting by Braque that began the session. In this painting the artist and his picture are inextricably intertwined. The artist cannot be understood outside of what he or she creates. Modern art and modern poetry are deeply involved with the process of creation.