

We come to the end of our course. The introductory painting to this last session by Edward Hopper may perhaps allude to poetry. The repeating storefronts seem like stanzas. The colors rhyme from one window to another. And every once in a while something stands out, a place to hang a meaning on.



**The Embankment**

*(The fantasia of a fallen gentleman  
on a cold, bitter night.)*

Once, in finesse of fiddles found I ecstasy,  
In the flash of gold heels on the hard pavement.  
Now see I  
That warmth's the very stuff of poesy.  
Oh, God, make small  
The old star-eaten blanket of the sky,  
That I may fold it round me and in comfort lie.

T. E. Hulme, 1912

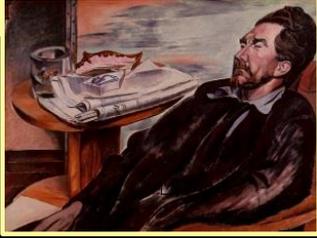
T. E. Hulme (1883-1917) wrote only a few poems. One of them was included in the first set of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Shorts. Hulme is considered by most to be the father of Imagism – a movement that promoted brief poems with emotions distilled into vivid imagery. He died during World War I. *The Complete Poetical Works of T. E. Hulme* were published as an addendum to Ezra Pound's *Ripostes* (1915). This addendum contained 5 poems. In actual fact Hulme wrote some 20 or so poems before his death in 1917. The biography of T. E. Hulme by Robert Ferguson was entitled *The Short Sharp Life of T. E. Hulme* (2002)

The embankment is the raised north bank of the Thames in London, a site for the homeless both then and now. The image of the “star-eaten blanket of the sky” is one of the most striking images in English poetry.

Erat Hora

‘Thank you, whatever comes.’ And then she turned  
 And, as the ray of sun on hanging flowers  
 Fades when the wind hath lifted them aside,  
 Went swiftly from me. Nay, whatever comes  
 One hour was sunlit and the most high gods  
 May not make boast of any better thing  
 Than to have watched that hour as it passed.

Ezra Pound, 1911



Wyndham Lewis, 1939

Pound’s early poem *Erat Hora* (that was the hour) recalls a time of intense feeling. The poem does not identify the exact trigger. Perhaps it was a chance meeting, perhaps a final goodbye, perhaps a discussion of the future. Whatever happened (and whatever comes) the emotions that arose persist: erotic, transient, beautiful – something the immortal gods would have been jealous of.

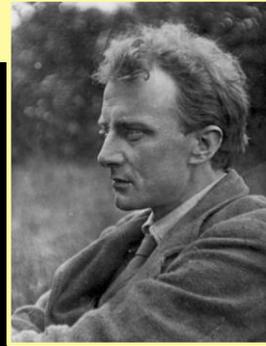
Pound has another poem that speaks of how such times might be remembered *Horae Beatae Inscripto* (Blessed times to be written down – in the sense of putting them into memory)

How will this beauty, when I am far hence,  
 Sweep back upon me and engulf my mind!  
 How will these hours, when we twain are gray  
 Turned in their sapphire tide, come flooding over us!

**In Memoriam**

The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood  
This Eastertide call into mind the men,  
Now far from home, who, with their sweethearts, should  
Have gathered them and will do never again.

Edward Thomas, 1915



Edward Thomas was the friend of Robert Frost. He sees the spring flowers in the woods and worries about the war and the young soldiers who are dying in France rather than picking flowers for their sweethearts. Despite his age, Thomas later joined the army and was killed in France.



Neville Stanikk, Dunsford Woods, Dorset, 2015

The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood

### Bach and the Sentry

Watching the dark my spirit rose in flood  
 On that most dearest Prelude of my delight.  
 The low-lying mist lifted its hood,  
 The October stars showed nobly in clear night.

When I return, and to real music-making,  
 And play that Prelude, how will it happen then?  
 Shall I feel as I felt, a sentry hardly waking,  
 With a dull sense of No Man's Land again?

Ivor Gurney, 1917



E. Handley-Read, 1915

Ivor Gurney (1890-1937) was just beginning his career as a composer when World War I broke out. He had written some highly successful settings of English poems. He enlisted in 1915 and served in the Gloucestershire Regiment until the end of the war. After the war he returned to music and wrote his preludes and some more song settings. However, he soon became severely depressed and spent much of the rest of his life in psychiatric hospitals. How much of his depression was related to the war and how much caused by an underlying bipolar disorder is not known. During the war, he wrote poetry rather than music. In this poem he remembers one of Bach's preludes while on sentry-duty.




J. S. Bach, Wohltemperierte Klavier  
 Book I Prelude in A flat major  
 Keith Jarrett



This is the sentry's view over no man's land



**Epitaph on an Army  
of Mercenaries**

These, in the day when heaven was falling,  
The hour when earth's foundations fled,  
Followed their mercenary calling  
And took their wages and are dead.

Their shoulders held the sky suspended;  
They stood, and earth's foundations stay;  
What God abandoned, these defended,  
And saved the sum of things for pay.

A. E. Housman, 1922



Alfred Edward Housman (1859-1936) was a Latin scholar and poet. His 1896 book *A Shropshire Lad* is one of the most famous book of poems in English. Housman was not familiar with Shropshire – he just used the county as a place of rural innocence. Housman published the book privately after several commercial publishers turned it down. Its concern with death, particularly at a young age, and with the transience of love may have been related to Housman's unrequited love for his college room-mate Moses Jackson. The poems' simple pessimism and their lack of any religious consolation seemed to suit the late Victorian mind. The poems evoked a nostalgia for the simple rural life of England – a life more imagined than real. In a way they also foresaw the deaths of the Great War long before they happened. The poems' simple short-line formats make them suitable for singing and they have been set to music by many different composers (e.g. Butterworth, Vaughan-Williams and Gurney). Housman wrote poems after *A Shropshire Lad* but they never attained the same popularity.

Housman wrote *Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries* in praise of the *British Expeditionary Force (BEF)*. Unlike Germany, Britain did not maintain a large army by conscription. Rather it used a small army of professional soldiers. When the Great War began, the new army of volunteers needed time to be trained. In the meantime, the BEF was sent to Belgium to fight against the Germans. Facing overwhelming odds, they suffered heavy losses at the Battle of Mons. Nevertheless, together with the French army they were finally able to stop the German advance. After German propaganda called them "contemptible," the BEF happily renamed itself *The Old Contemptibles*. The poem contradicts the idea that a professional army could not rise to greatness. They "saved the sum of things for pay." By the end of 1914, the few remaining members of the BEF were amalgamated into the new volunteer army.

More extensive notes on the poem are at

<https://movehimintotheshun.wordpress.com/2011/01/24/epitaph-on-an-army-of-mercenaries-a-e-housman/>

so much depends  
upon  
a red wheel  
barrow  
glazed with rain  
water  
beside the white  
chickens.

William Carlos  
Williams, 1923




This is the banner poem of the imagist movement. The short lines slow down the perception so that it becomes meditative. Williams wrote that he saw the red wheelbarrow and the white chickens in the back yard of an old black fisherman Thaddeus Lloyd Marshall who was a neighbor of the poet. The reader of the poem is left to determine what it is that depends on this scene, and why it is so important.

The color red has a long history in epistemology – that branch of philosophy which examines how we perceive the world. Some philosophers have proposed that our perceptions are completely inaccessible to each other. I can perceive red but someone else will never be able to perceive this color in the same way that I do. My subjective feeling of redness is called a *qualia*. Other philosophers suggest that redness is simply a set of light spectra that a community agrees to categorize as “red.”



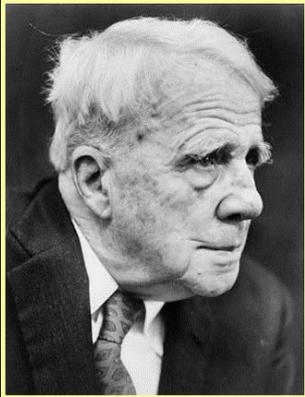

Buffalo Bill's  
defunct  
who used to  
ride a watersmooth-silver  
stallion  
and break onetwothreefourfive pigeons justlikethat  
Jesus  
he was a handsome man  
and what I want to know is  
how do you like your blue-eyed boy  
Mister Death

e e cummings, 1923



cummings' poem has many levels. At one level it is a lament for the inevitability of death – that takes even the most handsome of us for his own. At another level it is a sarcastic depiction of how we create heroes. Buffalo Bill's claim to fame was being in a circus act called *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*. Buffalo Bill (1846-1917) actually spent his early childhood near Toronto, before his family moved to Kansas.

The poem's unusual orthography adds to the content of the poem. The stallion rears, five shots go off rapid-fire. The word "defunct" is brilliant. It is a euphemism that does not work – it sounds too much like "fucked"



**Fire and Ice**

Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.

Robert Frost, 1923

Frost's talk with the physicist Harlow Shapley led to this poem. Shapley said that the world might end either by the earth being engulfed by the sun or by the sun dying and earth becoming too cold for life. Such possible scenarios are still part of astrophysics – it depends upon whether the expanding sun (a red giant) will reach the orbit of the earth before it finally collapses (into a white dwarf). Frost likens fire to desire and ice to hate. Either of these two emotions might lead to the death of humanity long before the death of his planetary home.

**Resumé**

Razors pain you;  
Rivers are damp;  
Acids stain you;  
And drugs cause cramp.  
Guns aren't lawful;  
Nooses give;  
Gas smells awful;  
You might as well live.

Dorothy Parker, 1926



Dorothy Parker was one of America's great wits. Her wisecracks have become famous

You can lead a horticulture but you can't make her think.

Too fucking busy and vice versa.

Brevity is the soul of lingerie.

A deep sadness is more evident in the poetry than in the wisecracks.

Her epitaph was "Excuse my dust."





**The Panther**

The panther is like a leopard,  
Except it hasn't been peppered.  
Should you behold a panther crouch,  
Prepare to say Ouch.  
Better yet, if called by a panther,  
Don't anther.

Ogden Nash, 1931

Ogden Nash (1902-1971) wrote humorous verse. Part of their success was due to their unconventional punning rhymes.

read by Kathy Bates  
(original long version)



**Poetry**

I too, dislike it.  
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it, after all, a place for the genuine.

Marianne Moore, 1935

We have considered various descriptions of the nature of poetry:

what is lost in translation (Frost)

memorable speech (Auden)

a way of happening, a mouth (Auden)

what Giordano Bruno thought but did not say (McHugh)

To these ideas Marianne Moore throws out another – a place for the genuine.

The poem was originally much longer. Moore shortened the poem for her *Selected Poems*. The longer version of the poem describes how poetry can be found in many different types of writing. If the writing is precise, if it is useful, and if it conveys new meaning, it can be poetry. The long version ends with the idea that poetry should present for inspection “imaginative gardens with real toads in them.”

Tom Rapp, 1969  
Pearls Before Swine



**Epitaph on a Tyrant**

Perfection, of a kind, was what he was after,  
And the poetry he invented was easy to understand;  
He knew human folly like the back of his hand,  
And was greatly interested in armies and fleets;  
When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter,  
And when he cried the little children died in the streets.

W. H. Auden, 1940

Auden's short poem about tyranny shows how the dictators rose to power by using simple populist slogans, and manipulating the people. Those who should have known better surrendered to his whims. The last line inverts the claim about William of Orange (who led the Dutch rebellion against the Spanish and was assassinated in 1584) that "when he died the little children cried in the streets."

The poem was put to music by Tom Rapp the leader of a 1960s psychedelic folk rock group called *Pearls Before Swine*. Rapp retired from music in the 1970s to become a civil rights lawyer.



**Note to my Neighbor**

We might as well give up the fiction  
That we can argue any view.  
For what in me is pure Conviction  
Is simple Prejudice in you.

Phyllis McGinley, 1952



Although Phyllis McGinley (1905-1978) lived a life of domestic happiness, she was aware of and poked fun at the subservient role of women in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Her 1945 children's book *The Plain Princess* promoted the idea that beauty is in the behavior rather than the body.

Days

What are days for?  
Days are where we live.  
They come, they wake us  
Time and time over.  
They are to be happy in:  
Where can we live but days?

Ah, solving that question  
Brings the priest and the doctor  
In their long coats  
Running over the fields.

Philip Larkin, 1955



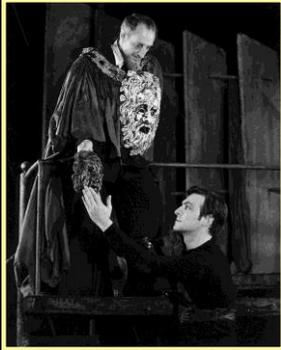
Larkin begins his poem in comfort – days are where we live. But then the poem changes and Larkin realizes that we know nothing about time, nothing about why, nothing about what is possible and what is not. The final images is of the poet falling into madness in the fields, the priests and the doctor running to his aid.



Nickles' Song

I heard upon his dry dung heap  
That man cry out who cannot sleep:  
“If God is God He is not good,  
If God is good He is not God;  
Take the even, take the odd,  
I would not sleep here if I could  
Except for the little green leaves in the wood  
And the wind on the water.”

Archibald MacLeish, 1958



Archibald MacLeish wrote a play *JB* based upon the Book of Job. In the play *J.B.*, a rich and observant banker, is tested by God. In the original Broadway production, the character Mr. Zuss (cf Zeus) was played by Raymond Massey and Nickles (Satan, or Saint Nick) was played by Christopher Plummer. Like its biblical source, the play brings up the issues concerning

- God's omnipotence – if God is omnipotent and benevolent why is there suffering in the world?
- Justice – why is goodness not always rewarded and why do the evil prosper?
- Understanding – how can finite minds comprehend the actions of an infinite God?
- Consolation – how can we alleviate the sufferings of others? (Not by telling them that it is all their own fault)

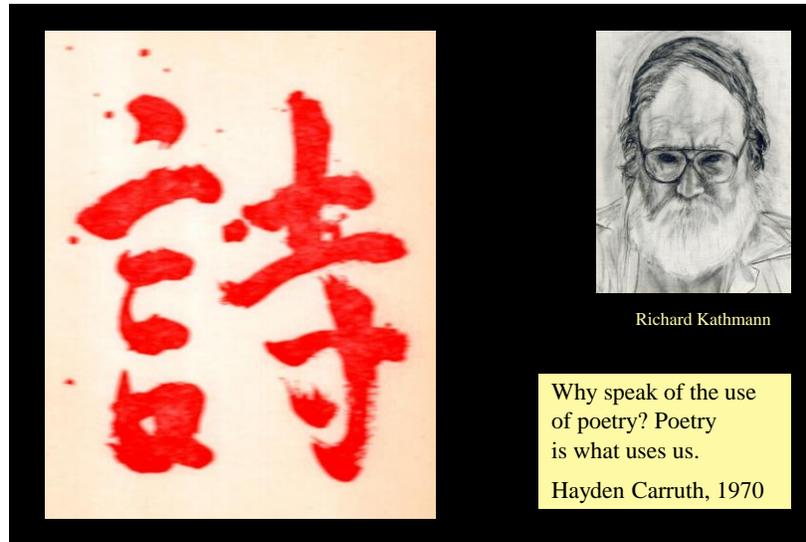
Nickles' song deals with God omnipotence? Either God is not omnipotent or He is not benevolent.

In the picture the characters take up their masks to play the roles assigned to them.



Gwendolyn Brooks' poem was written in 1959. It was addressed to the seven young men at the Golden Shovel pool hall – young black men who had given up on society and were rebelling in various ways. In the reading of the poem, the repeating "we" is rapidly passed over as though the speakers are not sure of their own existence.

The broadsheet was published in 1966.



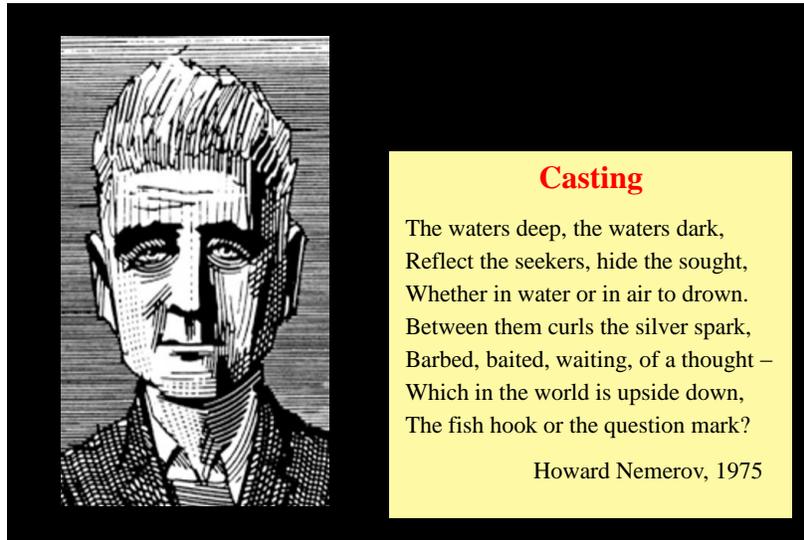
Hayden Carruth wrote this haiku for his book the Clay Hill Anthology. The illustration is from a broadsheet of Carruth's poem illustrated by the calligrapher Stephen Addis. It shows the Chinese character for poetry – shī.

The left part of the character is yán. This carries the meaning of “word” or “speech.” The character begins at the bottom with the open-square radical for “mouth” and perhaps the lines above it are the waves of sound coming from the mouth.

The right part of the character is sì which means temple or court. The lower radical of this means “small” – it seems to represent a thumb (the small dash on the left). The upper radical tǔ means “earth” – perhaps a cross stuck in the earth. The idea of a temple comes from a small piece of earth.

Taken all these ideas together gives the sense of poetry as “temple speech.” This fits with Hayden Carruth's idea that poetry is “what uses us” – how the divine becomes manifest in the human.

Another of Carruth's haiku is  
 The Sanskrit root word  
 for “war” means literally  
 “desire for more cows”

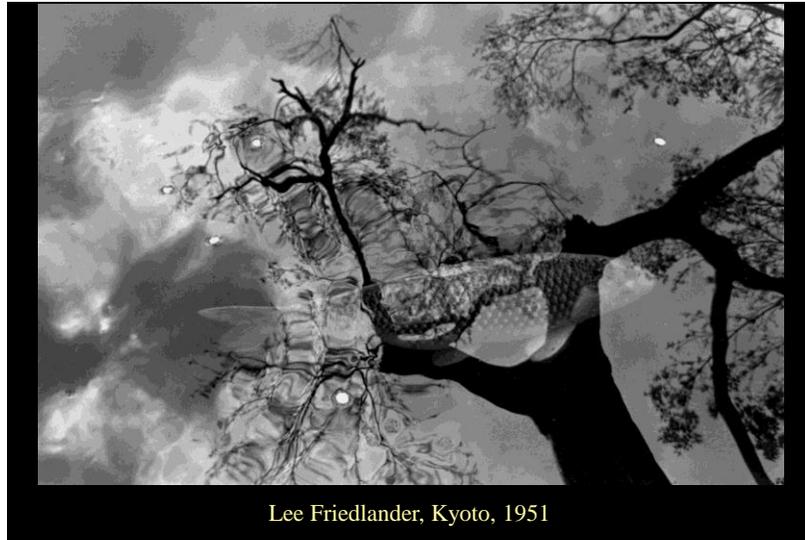


Howard Nemerov (1920-1991) graduated from Harvard University and then served during World War II as a pilot in the Royal Canadian Air Force (later transferring to the US Army Air Force). After the war he taught literature and wrote essays and poetry.

The poem is a precise description of searching for a thought - like casting a fly upon the surface of the water. The image becomes vivid with the final comparison of the fish hook to the question mark.

### **Because You Asked about the Line between Prose and Poetry**

Sparrows were feeding in a freezing drizzle  
That while you watched turned to pieces of snow  
Riding a gradient invisible  
From silver aslant to random, white, and slow.  
There came a moment that you couldn't tell.  
And then they clearly flew instead of fell.



Lee Friedlander, Kyoto, 1951

Howard Nemerov's sister was the photographer Diane Arbus (1923-1971), famous for her pictures of unusual persons – mentally retarded patients, dwarfs and giants, dwarfs, circus performers.

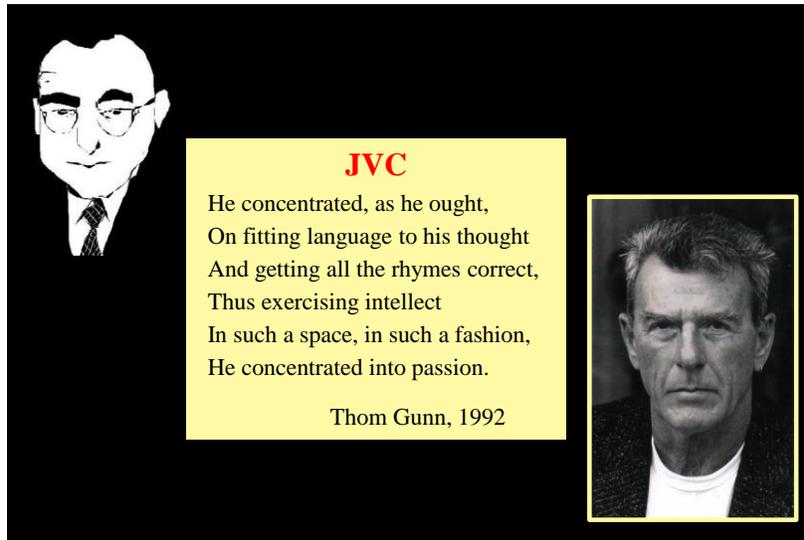
So we might perhaps use a photograph by Lee Friedlander (1934 - ) to illustrate Nemerov's poem. Friedlander has published many sets of photographic images – reflections in store windows, street scenes, war memorials, scenes from an automobile. This is from a series of Japanese images. Everything is seen on the surface of the water – the high clouds, the tree, the carp below the surface. The image is thus captured in this surface. Water drops from the tree onto the pond and picks up the sunlight. On the print these drops are so light that it seems as if they are holes in the surface.

I wonder if you've ever seen a  
*Willow* sheltering a *hyena*  
 Nowhere in nature can be found.  
 An opposition more profound  
 A sad tree weeping inconsolably  
 A wild beast laughing uncontrollably.

Richard Wilbur, 1991



We considered Richard Wilbur's poem *Once* in the first session and his rhyming haiku about *Flowering Thyme* in one of the middle sessions. Wilbur wrote and illustrated several books for children. This poem is from *More Opposites* (1991). Underneath the humor is the idea of the opposite. Things can only be considered opposite if they are in some way the same. The sameness in this poem is the sound and rhythm of the last two lines.



This poem was written by Thom Gunn in memory of J. V. Cunningham (1911-1985). Cunningham was the master of the brief poem and the epigram. We read one of Cunningham's poems in the first session of this course, an epigram about death:

When I shall be without regret  
And shall mortality forget,  
When I shall die who lived for this,  
I shall not miss the things I miss.  
And you who notice where I lie  
Ask not my name. It is not I.

The two poets could not have led more different lives. Cunningham was austere and restrained, Gunn was wild and flamboyant. What impressed Gunn was Cunningham's intensity and poetic precision.



**b o d y**

Look closely at the letters. Can you see,  
entering (stage right), then floating full,  
then heading off — so soon —  
how like a little kohl-rimmed moon  
*o* plots her course from *b* to *d*

— as *y*, unanswered, knocks at the stage door?  
Looked at too long, words fail,  
phase out. Ask, now that *body* shines  
no longer, by what light you learn these lines  
and what the *b* and *d* stood for.

James Merrill, 1995

The last poem of our course provides a set of associations for the letters in the word *body*. The *o* is a little kohl-rimmed moon like an eye – which both reminds you what you are using to look at the word and sounds like the “I” who is doing the perceiving. If you stare at something for a long time it starts to fade (“Looked at too long, words fail”). This is one of the reasons that we keep moving our eyes around.

**The Twentieth Century in Short. Part II**



Alex Colville, *Horse and Train*, 1954

Ekphrasis usually describes a poem about a painting. Here the process is reversed. Coville’s painting was inspired by two lines from a 1949 poem by Roy Campbell

Against a regiment I oppose a brain  
And a dark horse against an armoured train

Roy Campbell (1901-1957) was born in South Africa. He was in Toledo when the Spanish Civil War broke out. A devoted Catholic, he sheltered several Carmelite monks in his house during the uprisings. However, communist militia men finally rounded up the monks and shot them. Campbell supported the Nationalist side in the Civil War, wrote dispatches from the Nationalist frontlines, and attended Franco's victory celebrations in 1939. However, when World War II broke out, he denounced Nazism and served in the Intelligence Corps of the British Army. He also made several fine translations of the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca, the Spanish poet who had been murdered by the Nationalists in 1936. Campbell was a man of contradictions. A freedom fighter of the right.

The couplet that precedes the one already quoted is

I scorn the goose-step of their massed attack

And fight with my guitar slung on my back,

Campbell was attuned to guerilla warfare, whether left or right.

Colville (1920-2013) differed from most of his Canadian artistic colleagues by being a staunch member of the Progressive Conservative Party. His service during the Allied Invasion of France and his work at the Concentration Camps, however, depleted him of any religious feeling and his paintings view the world with an austere Realism. He rebelled against the Abstract Expressionism of his age.

The Twentieth Century was a period of conflict and contradiction. Poetry is a way of reconciliation. It finds the similarities between different things. Sounds with disparate meanings are found to rhyme. Images are linked that before were never thought the same.