

GRADUATE WRITING WORKSHOP IN POETRY

English 618

Fall 2012

Jim Harms

Monday, 7-9:50 in Colson 227; Office Hours: M 9:30-10:30; by appointment

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Allegro

After a black day, I play Haydn,
and feel a little warmth in my hands.
The keys are ready. Kind hammers fall.
The sound is spirited, green, and full of silence.
The sound says that freedom exists
and someone pays no tax to Caesar.
I shove my hands in my haydnpockets
and act like a man who is calm about it all.
I raise my haydnflag. The signal is:
“We do not surrender. But want peace.”
The music is a house of glass standing on a slope;
rocks are flying, rocks are rolling.
The rocks roll straight through the house
but every pane of glass is still whole.

Tomas Tranströmer, tr. Robert Bly

Course Description/Philosophy/Requirements

Since we'll be starting with Tranströmer this semester, it seems worthwhile to look closely at one of his more famous poems (“Allegro”) for a way to think about the larger project of poetry. And to be honest, though workshops tend to focus, out of necessity, on the details--the craft--of poetry, I'd like to suggest we keep the larger project in mind this semester, that we return from time to time to what we might describe as the historical function of poetry in a culture. This isn't to say that the function of poetry hasn't evolved tremendously over the years (it has, profoundly), that a historical perspective is somehow a static one, but it's possible by looking at this poem by Tranströmer (and almost any truly important poem) to be reminded of why poetry has persisted over time, of why it has retained its centrality within the culture even as it's lost many of its central responsibilities, i.e., carrying forward the story of the tribe, functioning as a form of memory, supplying a foundation in language for entertainment (most notably, theatre), providing imaginative opportunities for empathy, enacting spiritual concerns (in other words, overtly internal and inherently mysterious realities), “furthering the image of the beloved through time” (to quote Allen Grossman). Poetry continues to do all these things (particularly the last one), but it isn't hard to argue that other media have superseded poetry's primacy, its utility. And yet here we are: giving our most valuable resource, our time, to the study and celebration of a marginalized activity. That says something: poetry isn't going anywhere; it matters. But why?

“Allegro” is an *ars poetica*, a poem that is in some way *about* poetry, or that addresses the art of

Harms/Graduate Poetry Workshop/p. 2

poetry. In this case, Tranströmer uses music to consider the solacing power of art (“After a black day, I play Haydn”), so that Haydn becomes a synecdoche for all art. Tranströmer employs all manner of poetic devices to not only meditate on Haydn’s power to comfort and sustain, but to *enact* art’s role in making the world more bearable. We’ll talk more about this poem (and how it works) in class. But most important is to recognize that the poem quietly demands to be understood, even as it successfully resists complete understanding. This is a very different stance (in relationship to the audience) than Horace was assuming in his (the most famous) *ars poetica* (c. 18 BC) where he asserts that poetry should “delight and instruct,” a notion that is likely alien to contemporary sensibilities. But let’s try this semester to articulate what the function of poetry should be right now. What does it mean to delight these days, and is it possible as writers to think enough about our audience to actually consider a greater good for what we’re producing. Yikes!

What follows is my standard spiel. If you’ve been in a class with me you’ve heard/read it before. I hope it’s worth hearing again.

Workshops are risky enterprises because they tend to sacrifice a respect for mystery for a need for clarity. But we need both in good poetry. And in a class like this we need to maintain our wonder even as we attempt to explain it. Almost certainly we will fail on a weekly basis: our comments will be imprecise or wrong; our focus will be misplaced. We will misread, mishandle, misspeak . . . you name it. But what we can’t do is stop trying. Workshopping poems is an activity, and central to that activity is a two-step process that can best be described as *attention* followed by *articulation*. We’re giving our peers our attention (one of the most valuable things we have to give) and we’re trying to explain what we see and understand in their poems. If we do that honestly and with great effort, the workshop will be productive and useful. And that’s really what I ask most of all: that you never shortchange your classmates by reading their work lazily or with a lack of enthusiasm. Show up each week prepared to talk. Make sure you’ve read every poem on the worksheet thoroughly. As I say every semester, you have far more to gain from the process of trying to articulate what you see succeeding (and failing) in another person’s poems than from hearing the same about your own work. You’ll get plenty of help this semester; trust me on that. But you’ll help yourself most by helping others. Trust me again.

As suggested above, this class will focus primarily on student work. Most weeks will begin with a discussion of an essay, or a collection of poems published within the last few years, or a journal discovered by a student in the class, or a recitation; but the majority of our time will be spent workshopping poems written by members of the class (we’ll distribute the poems via email or eCampus: you need to email or post your poem by Tuesday if you want it workshopped the following Monday). I will come up with a couple of general assignments related to the readings, just to shake the trees a bit, but I honestly believe graduate workshops need to be almost exclusively about the poems you’re producing. The reading we’ll be doing is fodder, inspiration and a reminder of all that you don’t yet know.

Harms/Graduate Poetry Workshop/p. 3

- * **Each student will submit at least five poems over the course of the semester.** You're absolutely welcome to submit more than that. I would like to see revisions of some of these poems in conference. Writing and revising poems should be your priority. Everything else, as I mentioned earlier, is secondary.
- * Each student will meet with me for an extended discussion of his or her work. We can schedule that at any time during the semester, though preferably after the midterm.
- * As a class we will read and discuss four collections of poetry, all published fairly recently, and one book of essays. I would like to see a short (2-3 typed pages) response to each of these books; these responses are due the day we discuss the books (we'll revisit the Hass book several times, so don't feel the need to write about it until I ask you to). In addition, each of you will be assigned to a small group (or paired off); each group will take responsibility for one of the books or essays and prepare to lead class discussion. The group should be ready to assign particular poems for special attention, distribute discussion questions, etc. Group assignments will be made the first week of class.
- * I would like each of you to write an *ars poetica* this semester. You can turn the poem in at any point in the semester.
- * As always, I'd like each of you to memorize and recite a canonical poem (whatever *canonical* means to you, though you may be asked to defend your choice). When you're ready to recite it to the class, let me know and we'll begin the workshop that day with your recitation. I would suggest something short (no fewer than ten lines), but it's up to you.
- * We will also discuss the poetry publishing industry and, as a group, make a study of the literary magazine market; this will involve reporting on one particular journal in depth to the rest of the class. In other words, each of you will be responsible for introducing a journal to the rest of the class, talking briefly about its editorial orientation, its submission requirements, why you find it appealing, etc. Just let me know when you have a journal to introduce and we'll start class with your presentation (which needn't be formal and does not require any sort of written accompaniment).
- * At the end of the semester, you will turn in three revised poems (along with the original, workshopped drafts of each) and a short critical paper that discusses in depth the one poem you've written and revised during the semester that, for whatever reason, seems particularly important: a breakthrough poem, a problem poem, an unusually successful poem, etc. We'll talk more about this later.
- * Last but certainly not least (and a reiteration of sorts), you are required to participate in the activity of the workshop. That means contributing to the discussion of poems, and writing specific and helpful comments on all your classmates' poems (feel free to use the track changes function if that's easier for you). There is nothing more difficult and time consuming than preparing critical

Harms/Graduate Poetry Workshop/p. 4

comments. As I said above, you will gain more from the process of trying to articulate what you think is successful and problematic in your classmates' poems than you will from receiving such comments about your own work. That's why it's so important that you put your all into trying to help each other. Please show up with this work finished; I'd rather not watch you scribble notes during class; I'd prefer to hear you read them aloud and for you to be attune to the discussion. That's difficult to do if you're busy writing notes. So do the work ahead of time.

With this in mind, when you're reading each of your classmates' poems, remember to ask yourself what the poem seems to want to be, what its goals are, its ambitions. Try not to foist new aspirations on the poems we workshop; work with them on their own terms. I'm impatient with impatience. We're all poets here; we're all engaged in a marginalized activity: let's support each other, not draw aesthetic lines in the sand. What we're doing matters. But there is no one kind of poetry more important than any other. Aesthetic chauvinism is one of the most unimpressive hallmarks of our particular epoch; try not to buy into it.

Required Books (in order of appearance)

Twentieth Century Pleasures (Robert Hass), *Selected Poems* (Tomas Tranströmer), *Life on Mars* (Tracy K. Smith), *Beautiful in the Mouth* (Keetje Kuipers), *The Cloud Corporation* (Timothy Donnelly).

Tentative Course Schedule – English 618 – Graduate Poetry Workshop

Week of August 20

Introduction to class. Create essay groups for next week's discussion.

Homework: Read the assigned essays and meet with your group to prepare to lead discussion one particular essay. Type up your five most important observations about the two essays you're not leading discussion on; type up 1-2 pages on the essay you *are* leading discussion on. These will be due in the class next week. Also, start thinking about which book you want to have a hand in presenting to the class. We'll divvy up the books next week. Finally prepare to discuss poems distributed via email or ecampus.

Week of August 27

Discuss essays. Turn in response. Decide on book groups. Workshop poems.

Homework: Prepare for workshop. Begin reading Tranströmer.

Week of September 3

No Class: Labor Day

Homework: Continue to read Tranströmer as directed by Tranströmer group. Post or email a poem if you have one. Prepare for workshop.

Week of September 10

Recitation/Journal Intro. Discuss Tranströmer. Workshop. Turn in Tranströmer response.

Homework: Post or a email poem if you have one. Prepare to workshop poems. **Note:** *The deadline to apply for the Sturm Workshop is Monday, September 17th. Make sure you apply if you're interested.*

Wednesday, September 13 reading by Jonathan Coleman, Gold Ballroom, 7:30 p.m.

Week of September 17

Recitation/Journal Intro. Workshop.

Homework: Prepare to workshop. Post or email a poem if you have one.

Week of September 24

Recitation/Journal Intro. Workshop.

Homework: Post or email a poem if you have one. Prepare to workshop poems. Read Tracy K. Smith at direction of Smith group.

Week of October 1

Recitation/Journal Intro. Discuss Smith. Workshop. Turn in Smith response.

Homework: Post or email a poem if you have one. Prepare to workshop poems.

Wednesday, October 3, Reading by Katy Ryan, 130 Colson Hall, 7:30 p.m.

Week of October 8

Recitation/Journal Intro. Workshop.

Homework: Post or email a poem if you have one. Read poems by Michael Blumenthal and Bruce Bond. Prepare to workshop.

Week of October 15

Recitation/Journal Intro. Discuss Blumenthal and Bond. Workshop.

Homework: Post or email a poem if you have one. Prepare to workshop. **[Have you written your *ars poetica* yet?]**. Read Keetje Kuipers as directed by Kuipers group.

Wednesday, October 17th, Readings by Michael Blumenthal and Bruce Bond, Robinson Reading Room, 7:30 p.m.

Friday, October 19, EGO Reading by Ethel Smith, 130 Colson Hall, 7:30 p.m.

Week of October 22

Recitation/Journal Intro. Discuss Kuipers. Workshop. Turn in Kuipers response.

Homework: Post or email a poem if you have one. Prepare to workshop.

Week of October 29

No Class. Sturm Reading (Jaimy Gordon), Robinson Reading Room, 7:30 p.m.

Homework: Post or email a poem if you have one. Prepare to workshop.

Course Schedule – English 618, p. 3

Week of November 5

Recitation/Journal Intro. Workshop.

Homework: Post or email a poem if you have one. Prepare to workshop. Read Timothy Donnelly as directed by Donnelly group.

Wednesday, November 7, Reading by Ethel Smith, Gold Ballroom, 7:30 p.m.

Week of November 12

Recitation/Journal Intro. Workshop. Discuss Donnelly. Pass out new poems. Turn in Donnelly response.

Homework: Post or email a poem if you have one. Prepare to workshop.

Week of November 19

No Class: Thanksgiving Break.

Homework: Prepare to workshop.

Week of November 26

Recitation/Journal Intro. Workshop poems.

Homework: Prepare to workshop.

Week of December 3 (Last Week of Classes)

Recitation/Journal Intro. Final Workshop. Possible extra workshop at Jim's house.

Friday, December 7, EGO Lecture tba, 130 Colson Hall 7:30 p.m.

Revisions and final paper due by December 10 to Jim or his box.