

St. Jerome's University
Winter 2021
ENGL 332, Topics in Creative Writing:
"Decreation, and Ekphrasis"
Approaches to creative writing
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We'll meet on Bongo an hour and twenty minutes each week
(Friday 11-12:30).
We can also meet by appointment outside this time.

When Simone Weil coined the term

"decreation" -- posthumously published in *Gravity and Grace*-- she defined it as "to make something created pass into the uncreated," setting it against "destruction," which she referred to as "to make something created pass into nothingness, a blameworthy substitute for decreation." Weil probably couldn't predict the term would be used by a Canadian poet, Anne Carson, to describe the process of creation in which an original work of art is decreated in an effort to build another, novel, work of art -- on the ruins of the old. Anne Carson seems to be building on Simone Weil in her creative essay "Decreation," a three-part creative essay on the philosopher's originally mystical concept, showing how three women, Sappho, Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil were in fact applying the term in their life and work, practically engaging in the act of decreation. Similarly, Steve McCaffery reconstructs a little Basho poem, arguably his most famous, the frog Haiku, and reconstructs it in thirty-four different ways, offering variations some of which couldn't look more different from the original, seventeen-syllabus, frog-and-plop haiku.

Ekphrasis is usually defined as detailed description of a work of art in a literary work. In this workshop we employ the concept of decreation in our ekphrastics. The workshop takes its cue from Anne Carson, and with a nod to McCaffery and Queneau, takes decreation as its central premise; to destroy in order to create. I think this re-creation is where the novelty takes place, where the poet re-shapes the previous work to talk about his/her own life, dreams, hopes, wishes, desires, traumas, memories, to talk about his/her joys, and sorrows, any experience the poet wishes to lyricize and externalize. And don't we all aestheticize our world, our human condition in poetry? Don't we all try to create a gentle humanity through a lyric force? Another premise of this course is extreme experimentation, setting our innovative desires loose but remembering that authenticity should not be sacrificed.

The emphasis in this course is on the process of writing. We will read poetry of other poets, mostly contemporary Canadian and American poets and then we will write our own. Please note that this reading list is tentative and is subject to change. Some of the contemporary **Canadian poets we'll read include** Anne Carson (for her use of mysticism, opera, Greek drama; she brings all these together in one place), Jan Zwicky (for using classical music mostly), and Steve McCaffery (Haiku). We will also read **four contemporary American poets:** Robert Hass (painting, film, literature), Louise Gluck (Mythology), Jorie Graham (mostly mythology but also arts including painting), and Frank Bidart (theatre, opera, music and sculpture).

Note how some of these poets, still active and writing in the 21st century, are inspired by tradition creating a relationship with a past work that is changed, built upon, and transformed into a new art. Also note that due to the current situation, the current list is subject to change.

Activities

Peer critiques (14%): every week, between weeks 4-10 (7 weeks), Learn will randomly pair you up, assigning you a partner. Please read each other's work. This work should be the poem you have submitted to the dropbox for my feedback. This means every week you get feedback from two poets. Please be gracious and read your peer's work with the spirit of good will, empathy and support and expect your work to be critiqued with the same spirit. The poems you are going to critique each week should not exceed two pages. Please no fancy font; unless you are doing something with typography. Please read the poem, (you can annotate it – either in longhand or in docx. format if you wish to do so—but the requirement is to write a paragraph or two on that poem. Highlight at least one thing you like about the work, and one aspect you think the poet should aim to improve on. In your feedback you may focus on sound patterns, lineation and line breaks, rhythm and meter, diction, tone, voice, imagery, etc.

Discussions: (15% for 10 weeks): Every week starting week 1, you discuss the readings on LEARN discussion boards. I'd like to get a sense you have completed the readings and that you have also familiarized yourselves, albeit briefly, with the original works of the art, the original concept, that has inspired the poem you are reading. But the emphasis in your discussions should be on the week's creative readings/poems. These discussions help you complete your creativity exercises as well.

Responding to discussion posts (10% for ten weeks); for the first ten weeks of the term, in the weekly discussion boards where you have written a post, please also respond to two other posts by your peers. Please be critical/analytic and go beyond "I like it."

Creativity exercise (18% nine weeks): Please see the schedule to see which exercise to complete each week.

1.

A. Inventory. Can you first make a random list and then tell a story by that list? Examples: see Solmaz Sharif's "Learning Persian" and Gunther Eich's "Inventory."

B. Make a list of the nouns, only nouns: bodies of water, geological features, gemstones, plants, animals, anything really, just name nouns. As a poet you develop your own vocabulary. Is it easy to do? Let's try! Feel free to use a thesaurus. How many can you write?

3 marks

2.

A. Write twenty similes and twenty metaphors, using the vocabulary from last week's creativity exercise.

B. Identify these two in the poems of the week. 10 of each. **3 marks**

3.
 - A. Find aphoristic lines in the assigned poems of the week; a list of gnomic and maxim-like statements in the assigned poems, they are mostly abstract, general, philosophical interspersed between the concrete and the particular. These statements can, probably always, be used as one-liners as well.
 - B. Write ten others of your own. **3 marks**
4. (Copyright: George Elliott Clarke) The walk: Outdoors, walk with a notebook and pen, recording impressions of everything noticed, while also letting various memories and insights come to mind. The purpose is to encourage spontaneous composition. **1.5 marks**
5. (Copyright: George Elliott Clarke) The translation: Take an English translation of a foreign-language poem and rewrite it in your own words. the purpose is to develop an acquaintance with structure (form) and to think afresh about the syntax and grammatical order. **1.5 marks**
6. (Copyright: George Elliott Clarke). The collage: Write lines and images as they come up in your consciousness, partly observations, partly impressions, partly memories, partly rhetorical or political statements. Foreign phrases and even “anti-poetic” asides are welcomes. The purpose here is write meditatively, letting whatever happens happen. **1.5 marks.**
7. Re-create excerpts from Erin Moure’s *Sheep’s Vigil* with a different setting; try Kitchener-Waterloo or any other locale! Change the poem as you see fit. **1.5 marks**
8. Identify where the speaker in the week’s poems move between abstract and concrete. Focus on the ways in which poets move between the concrete/particular and the general/abstract. **1.5 marks**
9. Identify where the speaker in the poems between inside (interior reflections) and outside (nature, objects, reality etc.). Focus on the ways in which the speaker moves from the inner/internal to the outer/external, or do they? You can question this observation. I think these negotiations are key to your creativity. **1.5 marks**

Please submit to the Learn Dropbox. Linked to Learn gradebook.

Your own poems and the final portfolio (36 %): between weeks 3-10 (eight weeks), we produce our own work, we put together all our poems as a portfolio. By the end of the third week, that is, towards the end of January, please send me the name of a work of art, or a series, or a concept, you want to take as the starting point for your project. We’ll meet online as well during this week. This can be a series of paintings by an artist, a film, maybe a piece of

music, an opera, a poetry collection—old and new—a novel really, mythology, anything that you can relate to, anything that has sparked inspiration in you, anything based on which you can develop a long poem or a cycle of poems. You can write your own completely different version of that work. Your method can be decreation, or iterative translation, you can write ekphrastic poetry, or a combination of these. I encourage experimentation but at the same time cherish the established and traditional forms. You can break with the original forms. The length of your portfolio should be around 15 pages, and not longer than 20 pages, something like a little chapbook that you can later return to and revise and possibly consider publishing. This chapbook can be one long poem or a series of shorter individual poems with a central theme as I said. No particular font type or size as these can be part of the form of your poems. **16%** for posting drafts to the right dropboxes for 8 weeks and then **20%** for the final, revised portfolio. (if you don't have a weekly draft then you can't receive feedback on your poem which will affect the mark you receive on your portfolio). Linked to the gradebook.

Final reflection about the course: (7%). Please reflect back on the concepts of the course; ekphrasis, iterative translation, decreation, wabi sabi. You can critically approach these concepts or alternatively talk about the ways in which these concepts helped you write poetry. Around 600 words.. Linked to the gradebook.

Readings:

Anne Carson, “Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil Tell God,” and “Decreation (an Opera in Three Parts)” both in *Decreation*.

Frank Bidart: from *Stardust*: “The Third Hours of the Night” (on the autobiography of the Italian Benvenuto Cellini, *Vita*) and from *The Sacrifice*, “The War of Vaslav Nijinsky,” “Genesis 1-2:4.”

Louise Gluck: *Averno* (the entire collection. It can be read in one sitting but must be re-read over and over. Based on the myth of Persephone).

Jorie Graham: Poems from different collections including “Two Paintings by Gutav Klimt,” “reading Plato,” “At Luca Signorelli’s Resurrection of the Body,” in *Erosion*, and “Orpheus and Eurydice,” “Self-Portrait as Apollo and Daphne,” in *The End of Beauty*. The list to be completed.

Erin Moure: *Sheep’ Vigil by a Fervent Person*. A **translation** of Alberto Caeiro/Fernando Pessoa’s O guardador de rebanhos.

Robert Hass, poems from *Praise*: “Heroic Simile,” “Against Botticelli,” “Santa Lucia,” “Picking Blackberries with a Friend...,” from *Human Wishes*: “Spring Drawing,” “Museum,” Novella,” from *Sun Under Wood*: “Sonnet,” “Shame: an Aria,” Frida Kahlo: In the Saliva,” “English: an Ode,” from *Time and Materials*: “Czeslaw Milosz: In Memoriam,” “Horace: Three Imitations,” from *Summer Snow*: “Small Act of Homage,” “Notes on the Notion of a Boundless Poetics,” “Two Translations from Anglo-Saxon,” “After Xue Di”

Steve McCaffery; *The Basbo Variations* (a slim booklet which can illuminate what we mean and do in decreation and iterative translation.

Raymond Queneau, excerpts from *Exercises in Style* (This book was a source of inspiration for Steve McCaffery).

Jan Zwicky: from *Forge*: (these poems are traditionally categorized as ekphrastic but Zwicky also decreates the forms much like Anne Carson).

Tentative class schedule

Week one:

Read and write and submit all assignments and discussions any time between Jan 11-17

Reading pleasures: we read a few classical -- and classic -- ekphrastics. Classic examples: Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," William Carlos Williams's "The Dancer," "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," "The Great Figure," W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts," John Ashberry's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror."

Post to the discussion board. Respond to other posts.

@ Creativity exercise 1

A. Inventory. Can you first make a random list and tell a story by the list? Examples: see Solmaz Sharif's "Learning Persian" and Gunther Eich's "Inventory." B. Make a list of the nouns, only nouns: bodies of water, geological features, gemstones, plants, animals, anything really, just name nouns. As a poet you develop your own vocabulary. Is it easy to do? Let's try! Feel free to use a thesaurus. How many can you write?

Week two:

Read and write and submit all assignments and discussions any time between Jan 18-24

Reading pleasures: **Anne Carson**: "Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil Tell God," and "Decreation (an Opera in Three Parts)" both in *Decreation*. Also, Simone Weil's short article "Decreation." And a few more ekphrastic poems.

Post to the discussion board. Respond to other posts.

@ Creativity exercise 2:

A. Write twenty similes and twenty metaphors, using the vocabulary from last week's creativity exercise. B. Identify these two in the poems of the week. 10 of each.

Week three:

Read and write and submit all assignments and discussions any time between Jan 25-31

Reading pleasures: Raymond Queneau, excerpts from *Exercises in Style* (which can illuminate what we mean and do in decreation. This book was a source of inspiration for Steve McCaffery). Steve McCaffery; *The Basho Variations* (a slim booklet which can illuminate what we mean and do in decreation. Plus a few ekphrastic poems.

Meet with me during the week, everyone, on Bongo.

Post to the discussion board. Respond to other posts.

@ Creativity exercise 3:

The translation: Take an English translation of a foreign-language poem and rewrite it in your own words. The purpose is to develop an acquaintance with structure (form) and to think afresh about the syntax and grammatical order. **Alternatively**, you can choose a haiku and re-write it in different ways, something similar to McCaffery's style.

- Submit your poem to the dropbox. No peer critiques this week.

Week four:

Read and write and submit all assignments and discussions any time between Feb 1- 7

Reading pleasures:

Erin Moure: *Sheep' Vigil by a Fervent Person*. A **transelation** of Alberto Caeiro/Fernando Pessoa's O guardador de rebanhos. And a few individual ekphrastic poems to be added.

Meet with me on Bongo (schedule TBD).

Post to the discussion board. Respond to other posts.

@ Creativity exercise 4:

Re-create excerpts from Moure's *Sheep's Vigil* with a different setting; try Kitchener-Waterloo or any other locale! Change the poem as you see fit.

- Submit your poem to the dropbox and the discussion board. Don't forget your peer critiques.

Week five:

Read and write and submit all assignments and discussions any time between Feb 8-13

Reading pleasures: Frank Bidart: from *Stardust*: "The Third Hours of the Night" (on the autobiography of the Italian Benvenuto Cellini, *Vita*) and from *The Sacrifice*, "The War of Vaslav Nijinsky," "Genesis 1-2:4."

Meet with me on Bongo (schedule TBD).

Post to the discussion board. Respond to other posts.

@ Creativity exercise 5:

Week eight

Read and write and submit all assignments and discussions any time between Mar 8-14

Reading pleasures: Robert Hass, poems from *Praise*: “Heroic Simile,” “Against Botticelli,” “Santa Lucia,” “Picking Blackberries with a Friend...,” from *Human Wishes*: “Spring Drawing,” “Museum,” “Novella,” from *Sun Under Wood*: “Sonnet,” “Shame: an Aria,” Frida Kahlo: “In the Saliva,” “English: an Ode,” from *Time and Materials*: “Czeslaw Milosz: In Memoriam,” “Horace: Three Imitations,” from *Summer Snow*: “Small Act of Homage,” “Notes on the Notion of a Boundless Poetics,” “Two Translations from Anglo-Saxon,” “After Xue Di”

Meet with me on Bongo (schedule TBD).

Post to the discussion board. Respond to other posts.

@ Creativity exercise 8

A. Find aphoristic lines in the assigned poems of the week; a list of gnomic and maxim-like statements in the assigned poems, they are mostly abstract, general, philosophical interspersed between the concrete and the particular. These statements can, probably always, be used as one-liners as well. B. **Write ten others of your own.**

- Submit your poem to the dropbox and the discussion board. Don't forget your peer critiques.

Week nine

Read and write and submit all assignments and discussions any time between Mar 15-21

Reading pleasures: Jan Zwicky: from *Forge*: (these poems are traditionally categorized as ekphrastic but Zwicky also decreates the forms much like Anne Carson).

Meet with me on Bongo (schedule TBD).

Post to discussion board. Respond to other posts.

@ Creativity exercise 9:

The collage: Write lines and images as they come up in your consciousness, partly observations, partly impressions, partly memories, partly rhetorical or political statements. Foreign phrases and even “anti-poetic” asides are welcomes. The purpose here is write meditatively, letting whatever happens happen.

- Submit your poem to the dropbox and the discussion board. Don't forget your peer critiques.

Week ten

Read and write and submit all assignments and discussions any time between Mar 22-28

Reading pleasures: a few contemporary Ekphrastic poems.

Meet with me on Bongo (schedule TBD).

Post to discussion board. Respond to other posts.

- Submit your poem to the dropbox and the discussion board. Don't forget your peer critique.

Week eleven

Meet with me on Bongo during this week (Schedule TBD). Second meetings.

Week twelve.

Meet with me on Bongo during this week (Schedule TBD). Second meetings.

Portfolio submission and a reading event one week after the last Friday meeting. We'll schedule a meeting later in the term.

Academic Integrity: In order to maintain a culture of academic integrity, members of the University of Waterloo community are expected to promote honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. Check www.uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/ for more information.

Grievance: A student who believes that a decision affecting some aspect of their university life has been unfair or unreasonable may have grounds for initiating a grievance. Read the St. Jerome's University Policy on [Student Petitions and Grievances](#). When in doubt, please be certain to contact the St. Jerome's Advising Specialist, Student Affairs Office, who will provide further assistance.

Discipline: A student is expected to know what constitutes academic integrity, to avoid committing an academic offence, and to take responsibility for their actions. Check www.uwaterloo.ca/academicintegrity/ for more information. A student who is unsure whether an action constitutes an offence, or who needs help in learning how to avoid offences (e.g., plagiarism, cheating) or about "rules" for group work/collaboration should seek guidance from the course instructor, academic advisor, or the Associate Dean. When misconduct has been found to have occurred, disciplinary penalties will be imposed under the St. Jerome's University Policy on [Student Discipline](#). For information on categories of offences and types of penalties, students should refer to University of Waterloo [Policy 71, Student Discipline](#). For typical penalties, check the [Guidelines for the Assessment of Penalties](#).

Appeals: A decision made or penalty imposed under the St. Jerome's University Policy on Student Petitions and Grievances (other than a petition) or the St. Jerome's University Policy on

Student Discipline may be appealed if there is a ground. A student who believes they have a ground for an appeal should refer to the St. Jerome's University policy on [Student Appeals](#).

Note for students with disabilities: [AccessAbility Services](#), located in Needles Hall (Room 1401) at the University of Waterloo, collaborates with all academic departments to arrange appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities without compromising the academic integrity of the curriculum. If you require academic accommodations to lessen the impact of your disability, please register with AccessAbility Services at the beginning of each academic term.