

Tony Curtis

'Portrait of the Painter Hans Theo Richter and his Wife Gisela in Dresden, 1933'

A HELP-SHEET FOR TEACHERS



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BIOGRAPHY OF THE POET / CONTEXTS

(Please note that “context” is not an assessed element of this component of the WJEC GCSE in English Literature.)

Tony Curtis was born in Carmarthen in 1946, and was educated at Swansea University and Goddard College, Vermont. He has produced several collections of poetry, including *War Voices* (1995), *The Arches* (1998), *Heaven’s Gate* (2001) and *Crossing Over* (2007). In recent years, Seren published the volume of Curtis’s poetry *From the Fortunate Isles: Poems New and Selected* (2016), and in 2017 Cinnamon Press published a book of his short stories, *Some Kind of Immortality*. He currently divides his time between his home of Barry in Wales and Lydstep in Pembrokeshire.

Curtis is also a respected editor and critic who has published many books on Welsh literature and art, including *How Poets Work* (1996), and *Wales at War: Essays in Literature and Art* (2007). We can see his talents as a critic applied in full force in his poetry, which shows an interest in historical perspectives, close observational skills, and a measured openness to the complexity of human experience. The sense of restraint that often characterises his poetic voice nonetheless leaves room for a tender, emotional connection with the subject matter.

Several themes reappear in Curtis’s poetry: his family and friends, particularly his dead father; the wars of the twentieth century, and a strong affection for his native west Wales. While for some his poems seem to strike a melancholy tone, pondering on loss and memory, others have insisted that they are ‘more celebratory than elegiac’.¹ His works consider the restorative, healing capacity of poetry, its ability to retrieve beauty from horror and destruction and to imagine ‘some kind of immortality’. Although Curtis is influenced by a range of traditions, especially Western visual art, his sense of immersion in the culture of Welsh writing in English is also evident: as a child in the 1940s he briefly rubbed shoulders with Dylan Thomas in Carmarthen, and he was taught as an undergraduate at Swansea University by the poet Vernon Watkins. Curtis has emphasised the influence of Thomas on his writing, along with many other Welsh writers and artists such as Glyn Jones, Dannie Abse,³ John Ormond and Ceri Richards.

(1) ‘Tony Curtis’, in Jeremy Noel-Tod and Ian Hamilton (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry in English*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 126.

(2) Tony Curtis, *Some Kind of Immortality* (Blaenau Ffestiniog: Cinnamon Press, 2017).

(3) Tony Curtis wrote *Dannie Abse (Writer of Wales)* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1985).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Title.

'**Portrait of the Painter Hans Theo Richter and his Wife Gisela in Dresden, 1933**' was first published in *Taken for Pearls* (Seren, 1993). The poem borrows its title from that of a painting by German artist Otto Dix (1891-1969). Following the tradition of ekphrasis practiced by poets from the Classical Greeks to John Keats, W.H Auden and R. S. Thomas, '**Portrait of the Painter**' is devoted to a detailed description of, and reflection on, Dix's artwork, which depicts the German painter Hans Theo Richter seated next to his wife, Gisela Hergesell, who embraces her husband in a peaceful gesture of affection. As the poem itself will make clear, the pinpointing enacted by the painting's title in terms of time and space (Dresden, 1933) takes on a deep poignancy in light of what we now know of historical events; Hans Theo Richter and Gisela Hergesell lived in Dresden during the 1930s, where Richter practiced his art, but Gisela was killed in the devastating Allied bombing of the city on 13 February 1945, and much of Richter's work was also destroyed.

Curtis's poem appears to contemplate, perhaps even to consecrate, the beautiful, but in retrospect terribly fragile, '**moment of love**' (l. 1) and creativity enjoyed by Hans Theo and Gisela before the rise of Fascism and war. Through its subtle play of imagery and allusion, it also engages a wider historical context to explore the aftermath of war and its impact on art and human relationships.

'**Portrait of the Painter**' also uses Dix's art as an occasion to meditate on the nature of perception and the often fraught relations between history and art, war and love. The use of the word '**Portrait**' in the title self-consciously calls attention to the poet's own act of portrait-making, and in turn, the act of looking itself. In fact, the poem as a whole poses the question: how do we look at art, and can we trust what we see? The sharp contrast that is established between the speaker's golden, rosy view of the painting and the harsh realities of the times in which it was made highlights their tendency to read into the work the image of the beauty and togetherness they so desperately want to find in the past. Indeed, we are asked to consider whether, in a time after Dresden, Auschwitz and Hiroshima, we are able to see this loving scene in the same way as did its contemporary viewers. Do the events of history 'betray' the lovely dream of the portrait? (It is fitting to consider that Otto Dix was himself stripped of his honours by the Nazis, who also seized many of his works from public collections, considering them 'degenerate'.) Or does its image of '**perfect**' (l. 1) love give the lie to the harsh realities of twentieth-century history? Curtis's poem asks us to consider the role of art and the artist in relation to politics and history, and the humanising power of love in a brutalised world.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Form.

'Portrait of the Painter Hans Theo Richter and his Wife Gisela in Dresden, 1933' is an ekphrastic poem that follows in a long tradition of poems describing visual artworks. Despite its engagement with the story of the couple depicted in the portrait, the poem's central thrust is primarily visual, rather than narrative-based. The speaker constructs their picture of the painting through a series of impressions or visual observations, which are slowly built up and added to stanza by stanza. Each of its seven stanzas is carefully end-stopped, and acts as its own little vignette, standing alone just as the painting stands alone in its frame on the wall. The regularity of the poem's form, comprised as it is of three-line tercets, each with lines of similar length, mirrors the balance and composure that the speaker infers in the portrait of Hans Theo and Gisela. The patterning of imagery and sound across the poem further contributes to a sense of connection and harmony.

Rather than offering an orderly, logical description of the portrait, however, the visual impressions presented by Curtis remain dream-like, with the same words and images appearing and disappearing across different stanzas, twisted and transformed by their subtly different contexts: this is poetry as vision, history as hallucination. What we have at the end is a layered, composite view of the painting, which in turn allows for a deepened understanding of its history and significance.

Lines 1-3.

The poem begins with a declaration: '**This is the perfect moment of love** - ' (l. 1). The speaker seems to be in no doubt that the portrait not only represents, but actually *is*, an embodiment of love - a fleeting '**moment**' in time, preserved in its entirety by the artist's brush. However, in light of what we know about the terrible events that were to befall Dresden in 1945 - the Allied bombing raids over 13-15 February in which an estimated 22,700-25,000 people were killed, including Gisela Hergesell - the romantic confidence of the opening line is already undercut, adding a faint edge of irony to the speaker's celebration of '**perfect...love**'. The careful depiction of the sitters' poses - '**Her arm around his neck, / Holding a rose**' (ll. 2-3) appears matter-of-fact, but actually reveals the speaker's own desire for perfect balance and harmony.

The construction '**Her arm...his neck**' emphasises a sense of equilibrium and reciprocity between Hans Theo and Gisela. The tenderness of their affection is suggested by her gentle touch on his neck - a sensitive, vulnerable part of the body. Although it is Gisela who is '**Holding a rose**' in Dix's portrait, Curtis's use of line breaks and omission of personal pronouns in line 3 creates a sense of merging, as if both partners are holding the flower together. The pointed reference to the rose takes the scene into the mystic idealism that we associate with religious and medieval poetry; we might think of the Bible's Song of Songs, or the image of the love garden in *Le Roman de la Rose*. Art, love, spirituality: all are woven together here into a '**perfect**' whole.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Otto Dix's 'veristic' style – a realistic, 'warts-and-all' form of painting – reveals the imperfections in its subject;⁴ in his portrait, Hans Theo and Gisela are portrayed as mature adults, still young but more in the autumn than the spring of their youth; their expressions are solemn, enigmatic, satisfied yet also faintly sad. These subtleties are edited out in the first stanza by the idealising speaker, although these 'shades' will be added in later. The act of **'Holding a rose'** suggests security: the couple are holding on to each other, and keeping their love for each other safe. Yet the rose is also a traditional symbol for ephemeral beauty. Similarly, given the portrait's interwar date (1933), the dash at the end of the first line projects the sense of being on the edge or brink of something, suggesting that this **'perfect moment'** is soon to disappear in the face of the as yet unknown. In fact, even as the speaker appears to insist on the portrait as revealing a self-enclosed, untouchable moment, the final image with which it ends, that of Gisela **'Holding a rose'**, is oddly inconclusive, leaving much unsaid.

Lines 4–6.

Gisela becomes the focus of the speaker's attention in this stanza – a move that goes against the grain of the title, which places **'The Painter Hans Theo Richter'** in prime position. That the speaker dedicates this stanza to describing **'Her wisps of yellow hair'** (l. 4) and **'Her face [as] the moon to his earth'** (l. 6) is suggestive of the poem's developing concern with femininity and gender relations in love and art. The language here is natural (**'light'** (l. 5), **'gold'** (l. 5), **'moon'** (l. 6) and traditionally Romantic, drawing on well-worn poetic epithets for describing female beauty. The stanza's elemental pairings (light/dark, sun/moon, masculinity/femininity) evoke the symbolic patterning of light and dark that cadences the poem as a whole, and point to a spiritual and philosophical concern with 'yin and yang' – the balance between forces which seem opposed but are in fact interconnected.

Yet in spite of the beauty and vitality of Gisela, the reference to **'wisps of yellow hair'** are suggestive of insubstantiality. Furthermore, while the observation that she is **'moon to his earth'** might seem romantic, it also indicates the gender inequality inherent in the couple's positioning in Dix's painting. As Curtis's speaker indicates, Gisela, dressed in a worldly, elegant manner in black and gazing lovingly at her husband, is shown to revolve around the image of her husband the artist, who sits in the immediate foreground, thoughtful and saintlike in his gleaming white smock. While Gisela is perceived here in her stereotypical role as artist's muse, this view of the artist's wife will be subtly challenged later on in the poem.

(4) John Pollini, *From Republic to Empire: Rhetoric, Religion, and Power in the Visual Culture of Ancient Rome* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), p. 39.

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 7-9.

Here the speaker takes a step back from the dreamlike **'moment'** of the portrait to consider the material conditions that produced it – namely, the light glowing on the wall of Otto Dix's studio. This light is transformed by the painter into the **'warm wheat glow'** (l. 8) emanated by the couple in the portrait, suggesting the human warmth and domestic intimacy that they signal to the troubled artist in that particular moment. The sudden shift to the world beyond the canvas here is reminiscent of *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez (1599-1660), which similarly calls self-conscious attention to the perspective of the artist and what is left out of the traditional portrait.

Wheat is a traditional symbol of fertility, and **'warm wheat glow'** has an archaic ring to it, as if recalling an earlier, rural life when such nourishing human relations were possible. Ample use is made here of sonic effects, such as repetition (**'glows...glow'** (ll. 7-8)), alliteration (**'wall...warm...wheat'** (ll. 7-8)), and assonance (**'glow...loving'** (ll. 8-9)), and there is an element of Terza Rima to be found, where the final words of the first and last lines of the stanza (**'glows...couple'** (ll. 7-9)) display half-rhyme with the middle line of the previous stanza (**'gold'** (l. 5)). The overall effect is one of abundance and healthy growth. **'[G]low'** could even allude to the Welsh *glaw* (rain), balancing the warming fireside **'glow'** of the couple in a vision that contrasts and connects nature and art, inside and outside. The repeated 'ow' sound, when read aloud, imitates the pursed-lips movement of a kiss. We might again note that Dix's art went on to be deemed 'against nature' by the Nazis, who confiscated some of his works, and many other modernist artists were targeted. This stanza puts up a passionate defence of the humanity of his portrait, weaving a protective halo around the characters at its centre.

Lines 10-12.

From the golden tones of the previous three stanzas, here we notice a turn to something wholly darker and more disturbing. We are reminded that, rather than depicting the youthful beginnings of love, what we are seeing is an aftermath – the aftermath of the First World War and the trauma of the trenches. Otto Dix served as a German soldier on the Western Front, and he was forever changed and embittered by the horrors he saw there. The **'dark etchings'** (l. 10) and **'blown faces'** (l. 11), while making reference to Dix's painterly techniques (which included etching, aquatint and drawing in thin tempura), recall his obsessive depictions, as in his 1924 series *Der Krieg* (The War), of 'the aftermath of battle: dead, dying and shell-shocked soldiers, bombed-out landscapes, and graves.'⁵ This connection is borne out by the reference to **'Bapaume'** (l. 11): the name and location of one of the last, major offensives of the First World War, which took place from 21 August 1918 to 3 September 1918. (*Der Krieg* also includes an aquatint etching entitled 'Wounded Man, Autumn 1916, Bapaume'.)

(5) New York Museum of Modern Art, 'German Expressionism', [moma.org/s/ge/collection_ge/objbyppib/objbyppib_ppib-12_sov_page-37.html](https://www.moma.org/s/ge/collection_ge/objbyppib/objbyppib_ppib-12_sov_page-37.html) [accessed 18 May 2020]

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

While the contrast established between the beautiful faces of the lovers and those of Dix's anguished soldiers, with their skull-like gas masks and eyes grotesquely large and round in horror, is shocking, it is also telling; it is as if war and violence are looming up to break up and distort the redeeming humanity that Hans's and Gisela's portrait represents. The adjectival **'blown'**, suggesting as it does 'blown up', offers a deforming, unsettling echo of the luminous **'glow'** in stanza 3. Language is weighed and chosen carefully here to show how history reveals itself in the **'etchings'** and tones that can only be discerned by close observation.

The speaker's continued use of the present tense (**'This is...This is'**) collapses past and present within the **'moment'** of observation; the reiterative nature of this stanza is also perhaps suggestive of disbelief, as if the speaker is signalling their struggle to reconcile the divergent realities of love and war. The **'sickly greens'** (l. 12) and **'fallen browns'** (l. 12) conjure deadened vegetation, mud and khaki uniforms; hinting at the moral sickness or 'degeneration' of which Otto's art was accused, Curtis repurposes the term to describe war's attack on both natural and human flourishing.

Lines 13-15.

The fifth stanza turns away from war to consider the loving pose of Hans Theo and Gisela, which is conjured through a series of natural and Romantic images. Gisela is described as **'a tree, her neck a swan's curved to him'** (l. 13), while her husband's hands **'enclose her left hand / Like folded wings.'** (ll. 14-15) The avian imagery conjures the faithful partnering for life of birds such as turtledoves; the partners' two hands are portrayed as two wings on the same beautiful bird. The idea of the artist or poet as a bird is invoked here (and applied as much to Hans Theo as to his wife Gisela), a trope that signals a freedom of voice and spirit. The biblical narrative of Adam and Eve, as presented in Genesis, is reversed by Curtis: here we find angelic purity **'after'** (l. 11), not before, the **'fall'** (l. 12) from grace – although the hints of sorrow remain. The images of the swan's neck and the woman as a tree have mythological associations. In the classical myth of Leda and the Swan, the god Zeus appears in the form of a Swan and rapes Leda, an Aetolian princess (a 1923 poem by W.B. Yeats explores the lasting trauma of the rape for the female members of Leda's family). In the *Metamorphoses* of Roman poet Ovid, female characters such as Myrrha and Daphne are changed into trees either to escape male desire or due to their own suffering in love. We can note, too, that Hans Theo's grasp **'enclose[s] her left hand'** in a gesture that could also be read as suggestive of possessiveness. All this begs the unsettling question: what is the nature of the power relations between the genders here? What signs of control or possession are revealed or concealed by their apparently tender gestures?

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 16–18.

The listing technique used here (**'This is before the fire-storm, / Before the black wind, / The city turned to broken teeth'**, ll. 16–18) conveys an accumulative sense of the almost unbearable horrors of war. Again, the imagery skilfully picks up on, and distorts, the previous images of love depicted in terms of nature and human faces. In the poem's first direct reference to the bombing of Dresden, the **'fire-storm'** and **'black wind'** reference a tendency among writers of the 1940s to express the spectacle and devastation of aerial warfare in terms of natural phenomena; see for example Lynette Roberts's poem about the bombing of south-west Wales, 'Lamentation' (1944), in which 'a storm of sorrow drowned the way.'⁶ To a contemporary reader, these images have a distinctly ecological resonance, too: we might think of the black ash-filled wind of the Australian bushfires of early 2020. Notably, while **'fire-storm'** might conjure the Nazi use of the term 'Sturmabteilung' (*Storm Detachment*) to describe its paramilitary wing, the bombing of Dresden was carried out by British and American forces – another unsettling ambiguity in this poem that contrasts good and evil.

Lines 19–21.

The speaker returns again to seek solace and healing consolation in the beautiful details of the portrait. Although the line **'It is she who holds the rose to him'** (l. 19) appears to closely echo the opening lines of the poem, there is a subtle difference; Gisela is here presented as the more active party, as suggested by the emphatic **'It is she'**; the 'gift' of the rose reverses traditional gender relations, at least in literature (where often men, in their gendered guise of courtly lover, are imagined as giving gifts of flowers to their female beloved). It is suggestive of an equality between genders, as well as a different form of relation between the lovers to the one summarised by an economy of possession (we might note Gisela's representation by Dix as a modern woman dressed in an androgynous style, and the fact that Gisela was a craftswoman in her own right, from which she earned her livelihood). The **'surgeon's smock'** (l. 21) worn by Hans Theo to paint is an endearingly eccentric detail, that alludes to the healing, reconstructive qualities of art (we might think back to the **'broken teeth'** of the previous stanza). Read in another way, however, the **'surgeon's smock'** could refer again to the godlike pretensions of the artist and the 'bloody' nature of portrait painting, with its tendencies to get 'under the skin' of its subject.

(6) Lynette Roberts, 'Lamentation' (1944), in *Collected Poems*, ed. Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), pp. 8–9 (p. 9).

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 22–24.

The reiteration of **'This is the perfect moment'** (l. 22) turns the phrase into a kind of refrain, an affirmation to which the speaker returns. Yet this repetition, in light of what we now know, also has an unsettling, uncanny quality, and signals that the speaker is critically distancing themselves from this **'perfect moment'** that cannot last. Dix's painting and its female subject, Gisela, are conflated and *become* love itself: **'the perfect moment'**. Gisela is a **'painted'** (l. 23) woman: woman as idea, woman made eternal, and eternally beautiful by art. Yet she is also **'painted'**, wearing makeup, signalling a kind of artificiality, for all the poem's allusions to naturalness. 'Painted woman' is also an idiomatic term for a prostitute – perhaps a nod toward Otto Dix's more grotesque portrayals of human social behaviour – evoking the antifeminist idea of art as like a prostitute: that is, seductive yet unstable.⁷ A jarring separation between art and life opens up here, which is experienced as the pain of loss (**'She will not survive'** (l. 24)), the almost clinical brevity of the statement highlighting the human tragedy to which it refers.

Lines 25–27.

The imagery used to imagine Gisela's death skilfully flows from the previous images of nature, war and love found in the previous stanzas. As in a nightmare, familiar images are altered and made frightening: the **'wisps of yellow hair'** described in the second stanza become **'hair that flames'** (l. 25); where once she was like a tree with a white neck like a swan, now **'Her long arms blacken like winter boughs'** (l. 27), as if reaching out for help that doesn't arrive. By turning bodily horror into an artistic image, the allusion to the woman as a kind of dying nature goddess distances us slightly from the scene, containing its emotion. **'[W]inter boughs'** signal death and sterility, but also the hope of regrowth through art and memory.

Lines 28–30.

The statement **'This is the harvest of their love'** (l. 28) is bitter: the speaker is seemingly rueing that all that love and living and art should have come to this. But the stanza that includes it also offers a kind of resolution, achieved not so much through rational thought as by the mental development and change enacted by the poetic images. The **'perfect moment'** of love is not the traditional spring, nor is it an autumn (**'harvest'**); rather, it is a **'summer in the soul'** (l. 29), a moment of flourishing poised just before the point of decline; love is inevitably shaded, and given meaning and intensity, by loss. Art is not 'degenerate', as the Nazis would claim of Dix's paintings, but rather, like love, something that is inherently generative and germinating – strong enough, in fact, to combat even those powerful forces of destruction that annihilate the loving **'moment'**. Art and love, the speaker concludes, are a collaborative, communal effort: **'The moment they have made together'** (l. 30).

(7) French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) in his early journals wrote 'What is art? Prostitution.' See [bbc.com/culture/article/20150910-courtesans-and-street-walkers-prostitutes-in-art](https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20150910-courtesans-and-street-walkers-prostitutes-in-art) [Accessed 4 June 2020].

LINE-BY-LINE COMMENTS ON THE POEM

Lines 31-33.

We move in this final stanza from sight and vision to sound, here associated with the material elements of daily life. Coming as they do – in the poem’s chronology, if not in historical time – after the Dresden bombing raid, they also have a ghostly feel to them, signalling emptiness and loss as much as they do continuation: **‘The baker’s boy calling, a neighbour’s wireless / Playing marches and then a speech.’** (ll. 32-3). The painter himself is personalised through the reference to his first name, suggesting a kind of familiarity on the part of the speaker: **‘From Otto’s window the sounds of the day’** (l. 31). We are returned to the moment when, traumatised by his experiences in the First World War, Otto Dix picks up his paintbrush and begins to paint his beautiful portrait. Emotion is controlled to the very end of this poem: the final three lines have an odd bathos to them. The sense afforded by the speaker of the continuation of life in complete indifference to the private tragedy of Hans Theo and Gisela is reminiscent of W.H. Auden’s famous ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ (1939), especially its opening lines: ‘About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Masters: how well they understood / ... how it takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along.’⁸

(8) *The Collected Poetry of W.H. Auden* (New York: Random House, 1945), p. 3.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

The poem's representational framework is complex, featuring as it does a late twentieth-century speaker depicting an early twentieth-century artist's portrait of another artist and his partner. But its language is lucid and precise, evoking, perhaps, the clarity of observation traditionally prized by the art critic.

Both Hans Theo Richter and Otto Dix embraced a mode called 'New Objectivity', a style of painting that, described by one of its founders as 'new realism bearing a socialist flavour', favoured close observation, everyday settings and human imperfections,⁹ exhibiting the concern with art's relation to people's ordinary social lives that we also see in many Welsh writers, especially those of the 1930s and 1940s. While Dix's Portrait draws on some of the tenets of religious Renaissance art, Curtis's poem also has a spiritual and Romantic tone, evidenced by its frequent allusions to mythology and nature. A distinctly 'poetic', elemental diction could seem clichéd, but is deployed here in such a thoughtful way that it appears newly revealing and meaningful.

The flexibility afforded by the poet's use of free verse allows us to become gradually aware of the observing perspective of the speaker; dashes, full stops, and the use of asides (e.g. **'This is after Bapaume'** (l. 11)) convey the rhythms of a mind thinking, pausing, trying to make connections as the speaker grasps after the portrait's deeper meanings.

The painter and his subjects – Hans Theo Richter and Gisela Hergesell – are endowed with a universal significance, while also remaining embodied individuals that, like Otto's room at the end of the poem, remain elusive. The artful simplicity of Curtis's style, together with its use of pathos and understatement, make us think of the writing of soldier-poet Alun Lewis, who is similarly concerned with human love and the fragility of beauty in war.¹⁰ The poem's constant weaving together of rose and fire imagery also gestures to the redemptive spiritual vision of T.S. Eliot in his own wartime poem, 'Little Gidding' (1942). Like 'Little Gidding', Curtis's poem rejects linear chronologies for a more circular, hopeful sense of time, suggesting, like Eliot, that 'The end is where we start from.'¹¹ Otto Dix's portrait of the artist and his wife, this poem seems to suggest, shows the power of art to rescue beauty and meaning from the ravages of time and twentieth-century history.

(9) New Objectivity, Tate Art Terms, [tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/n/new-objectivity](https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/n/new-objectivity) [Accessed 20 May 20]

(10) We find echoes of Lewis's 'Raider's Dawn', which describes the aftermath of a bombing raid, where 'Blue necklace left / On a charred chair / Tells that Beauty / Was startled there.' Alun Lewis, 'Raider's Dawn', in *Poetry 1900-2000*, ed. Meic Stephens (Cardigan: Parthian, 2007), p. 175.

(11) T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 197.

COMMENTS ON THE POEM AS A WHOLE

'Portrait of the Painter' is also a poem about looking – and how we look at art. Dix's portrait of that name engages a long tradition in Western art of portraying notable male figures with their wives (we might think of Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini portrait (1434), or Thomas Gainsborough's 'Mr and Mrs Andrews' (c. 1750). While these traditional portraits – and to some extent, Dix's painting too – are designed to emphasise the status and identity of the male sitter over and above that of his wife, in Curtis's poem, it is Gisela's appearance, gestures and tragic story that are brought to the fore. There may well be a sense in which the speaker (and possibly the poet himself) is more comfortable with contemplating a female figure in the traditional aesthetic way, turning her into a symbol of lost beauty and love. But, arguing for the shared, collaborative nature of love and art between different genders, Curtis perhaps also subtly comments on how war and Fascism act to control and destroy the traditionally 'feminine' domains of human experience (love, sensitivity, human connection) that allow art to flourish.

FOUR QUESTIONS STUDENTS MIGHT ASK ABOUT THE POEM

How many images relating to nature can you find? Pick an interesting one. What is the significance of this nature image?

How many images relating to war can you find? Pick an interesting one. What is the significance of this war image?

How does the poem portray Hans Theo Richter and his wife Gisela? How is their relationship presented by the speaker?

How does the speaker feel about the painting they are viewing? How do we know?

SECTION 5
(links active May 2020)
All links are clickable

PHOTOGRAPHS



Tony Curtis
Photograph © Literature Wales.

Otto Dix, 'Portrait of the Painter Hans Theo Richter and His Wife Gisela in Dresden, 1933'
wikiart.org/en/otto-dix/portrait-of-the-painter-hans-theo-richter-and-his-wife-gisela

LINKS TO USEFUL WEB RESOURCES

Biography, Books, Reviews

tonycurtispoet.com

Seren Books: Review and Video of Curtis Reading his poem 'Megan's First Snow'

serenbooks.com/productdisplay/crossing-over

Carol Rumens's Review of Tony Curtis's Poem 'Coram's Cloth', from his Anthology *Tokens for the Foundlings* (2012), 30 April 2012

theguardian.com/books/2012/apr/30/poem-week-corams-cloth-tony-curtis

Poetry Book Society, Review of *From the Fortunate Isles: New and Selected Poems* by Tony Curtis (2016)

poetrybooks.co.uk/products/from-the-fortunate-isles-new-selected-by-tony-curtis

Seren Books Blog, Guest Post: Tony Curtis Marks International Conscientious Objectors Day, May 15 2020

<https://serenbooks.wordpress.com/2020/05/15/guest-post-tony-curtis-marks-international-conscientious-objectors-day/>

FURTHER READING

Relevant criticism by Tony Curtis:

How Poets Work (Bridgend: Seren, 1996).

Wales at War: Essays in Literature and Art (Bridgend: Seren, 2007).

Welsh Painters Talking (Bridgend: Seren, 1997).

Relevant criticism on Tony Curtis:

Barry, Peter, 'Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 31/2 (2002), pp. 155-165.

Peach, Linden. *Pacifism, Peace, and Modern Welsh Writing* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2019).

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