

## Poetry and What Is Real

*Richard Tillinghast*

Poetry and  
What Is Real

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*This book is dedicated to Alan Williamson,  
remembering conversations on poetry  
that have continued for over forty years,  
in Cambridge, Berkeley and elsewhere*

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## Preface

Things that can never be sustainable and thus “real” in everyday life, fantasies of one kind or another, wishes that can never come true, are often the meat and drink of the poetry written by the authors I write about in this book: Allen Ginsberg, James Dickey, W. H. Auden, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and others. Robert Frost writes in “Spring Pools”:

The trees that have it in their pent-up buds  
To darken nature and be summer woods—  
Let them think twice before they use their powers  
To blot out and drink up and sweep away  
These flowery waters and these watery flowers  
From snow that melted only yesterday.

No one expects the trees to “think twice,” or even once; but the appeal Frost makes to them satisfies something in us, as it no doubt satisfied something in him. “I Was Born in Lucerne,” begins a poem by Philip Levine. “Everyone says otherwise. They take me / to a flat on Pingree in Detroit / and say, up there, the second floor.”

Moving from these inner struggles to the public realm, I believe that poetry can still, despite all that has been written about its marginalization in American culture, make a contribution to the common good. That contribution begins with the poet’s refusal to accept the world as defined by received opinion. In “Seeing Things” Seamus Heaney asserts: “whatever is given // Can always be reimagined, however four-square, / Plank-thick, hull- stupid and out of its time / It happens to be.” Heaney has used his poetry as a way of helping move contemporary Ireland toward a redefinition of its divided cultural heritage, toward

reconciliation and an integration of the conflicting strands of its history. The current book restricts itself, with one or two exceptions, to a consideration of how poetry is practiced in the United States. But Ireland, as a parallel English-speaking literary culture, exists as a kind of shadow presence in my book, because it offers an example of how poetry might ideally function within our own culture if we could become less fixated on “celebrity” and popular entertainment. America is too young and too important in the world for us to give up on it just yet.

The title of this collection is from the title of an essay on Robert Lowell, whom I have written about more than about any other poet. If Heaney’s career demonstrates the strength of poetry as a healing force within society, Lowell’s poetry dramatizes an internal struggle for wholeness. For him “what is real” was both an ontological and a personal problem, because he often found himself in a state where he could not distinguish between fantasy and the phenomenological world. “The cat walks out—” he wrote during one of his manic phases, “or does it?” He continues, addressing his wife: “You can’t be here, and yet we try to talk; / Somebody else is farcing in your face . . .” In connection with Lowell my title implies a different and extreme statement of the issue. Yet a subject I explore in “Quincy House and the White House” is that for all his personal turmoil, Lowell never gave up on poetry’s responsibility to the *res publica*.

A poem is best read, at first anyway, on its own—with no need of biographical or historical background, no guide other than a dictionary. But throughout my life as a reader, I have consistently wanted to learn about the authors of my favorite books and poems. For me it would in fact be a very strange reader who did not want to know things about the authors of his or her favorite books. Many of my essays have a biographical dimension. One thing we all have in common is that each of us is living this mysterious thing called life, and we want to know how other people manage it—what their conflicts and compromises, failures and triumphs have been. Unlike Jacqueline Rose, the author of a book about Sylvia Plath that I examine in my Plath essay, who states, “This book starts from the assumption that Plath is a fantasy,” the biographical parts of my essays make the attempt, even if the attempt is ultimately futile, to

come as close as possible to getting the most accurate picture of my subjects.

Of all the poets I write about here, only Bob Dylan is an exact contemporary of mine. I have avoided writing about the poets of my own generation. This book presents, unsystematically, a small portrait gallery of poetic ancestors and guides. Though my emphasis is on American poets, I have included essays on a major English and a major Irish writer, Auden and Yeats. Since I count more than a few of these poets among those on whose example I formed my own taste in the art, this book is a retrospective of my life as a reader. It sketches a tradition within which I place my own poetry. While writing essays that I hope will illuminate the work and the lives of some of my favorite poets, I live a life in poetry myself, and I have woven into these pages some observations on the life, the craft, and the culture (or subculture) of poetry. “In Praise of Rhyme” and “Household Economy, Ruthlessness, Romance, and the Art of Hospitality: Notes on Revision” address technical aspects of the art. An autobiographical narrative I was asked to write for the Contemporary Authors series rounds out the book. Though I wrote it almost ten years ago, it seems complete enough in itself to keep me from wanting to revise it here.

Finally I come to the role of travel in my writing life. Experiencing other cultures firsthand helps the traveler see his or her own culture more clearly. At least I hope so. But travel is, above any other claim I would make for it, a form of intoxication. Thus it is intertwined with poetic inspiration, and often acts as such in my life as a writer. The exotic is a suspect category at this moment in our cultural history. But the word and the idea have been with us since the time of the ancient Greeks: *exotikos*, from *exo*, “outside.” Thus “different,” “not like us” except in essential human ways: these are areas I like to explore, particularly in an age when computer technology is redefining and shrinking our concepts of travel. When I “go to” a place on my computer desktop, when I “visit” someone’s website, including my own (<<http://www.personal.umich.edu/~rwtill>>), I’m not really going anywhere; I’m still sitting in front of my computer. Real travel is something entirely different. The first time I visited—really visited—Yeats’s tower, Thoor Ballylee in County Galway, I learned immeasurably about the difference between the tower

Yeats lived in and the tower he made a symbol in his poetry. This told me a lot about the inner and outer worlds of both Yeats and myself.

In *The Living House: An Anthropology of Architecture in South-East Asia*, Roxana Waterson makes the following observations: “‘Tradition’ . . . describes a process of handing down, and as such is just as dynamic and historical as any other social process. . . . Tradition, like history, is something that is continually being recreated and remodelled in the present . . .” I hope that *Poetry and What Is Real* will become for some readers a book that embodies a living tradition—how what we learn from the past becomes transformed in the present and transmitted to the future.

### Acknowledgments

*Poetry and What Is Real* represents the distillation of a quarter-century of my work as an essayist and literary journalist. In citing the publication history of these pieces, I would like to acknowledge the extremely pleasant and productive relationships I have had with a number of editors, some of whom I have known primarily through correspondence, fax and email, and through telephone conversations where interpretations, sentences and paragraphs have been weighed and debated.

Earlier versions of these essays have appeared in a number of periodicals. “Allen Ginsberg and His Generation” combines a piece by the same name that appeared in the *Boston Review* with one called “Birdbrain!” from an issue of *Parnassus* edited by Bill Harmon. “Donald Hall: Top of the 11th, Top of the Order” and “W. B. Yeats: The Labyrinth of Another’s Being” first came out in the *New Criterion*, whose editors Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball have been consistently encouraging and supportive of my endeavors as an essayist. I was particularly pleased with their enthusiasm for my essay on John Crowe Ransom—hardly a fashionable poet in 1997, when the essay appeared, or even now. The *New Criterion* has welcomed almost every proposal I have made to them for new work—though Hilton Kramer once rejected a Irish piece he had assigned me to write on the grounds that my view of Irish history was “somewhat to the left of the IRA.”

“James Dickey: The Whole Motion” first saw the light of day in the *Southern Review* under the editorship of Dave Smith. “The Life and Fables of Bob Dylan” reworks an article from an issue of the *Missouri Review* where poets were asked to write about musicians, in combination with a longer piece called “Nothing Is Revealed: The Life and Significance of Bob Dylan” from the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, whose editor, Larry Goldstein, has been a longtime friend and colleague. I wrote the Elizabeth Bishop piece, “How Different I Am from What They Think,” and “Philip Levine: Working the Night Shift” for the *New York Times Book Review*; D. J. R. Bruckner, my editor there, I know only as a dry, sardonic voice on the phone. “W. H. Auden: ‘Stop All the Clocks’” and “Digging for the Truth about Sylvia Plath” were published in the *Gettysburg Review*, where they benefited from the exacting editorial eye of Peter Stitt. “Blueberries Sprinkled with Salt: Frost’s Letters” was written for the *Sewanee Review* when the late Andrew Lytle was its editor. As a senior at Sewanee I was Mr. Lytle’s editorial assistant, and I think my year in that office gave me my sense of what a literary magazine should be. “Louis Simpson: The Poet of the 5:51” was written for the *Nation*.

“In Praise of Rhyme” was written for the twentieth anniversary of *Ploughshares*, another journal I have been closely associated with since its early days of publication. I was asked to write about a subject of my own choosing, and I find few people writing about rhyme these days. When Chase Twichell and Robin Behn were assembling their indispensable book, *The Practice of Poetry*, they asked me for a contribution, and it was enjoyable to address the subject of revision. Both the Robert Lowell essays were published in the *Kenyon Review*, which felt right to me, since Kenyon College was so important in Lowell’s development as a young poet. Thanks to *Kenyon*’s editor, David Lynn, for his interest in these pieces. They are rather different: “Quincy House and the White House” addresses the public stances Lowell took at the height of his career; “Early and Late” is about Lowell’s style and how it changed from his early days as a poet into his maturity. Maire Mhac an tSaoi was kind enough to publish “Travel and the Sense of Place” in *Poetry Ireland Review* during the year my family and I lived in Ireland in the early 1990s.



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