

Preface

Fifty years ago I published my first essay for the *Hudson Review*, an omnibus poetry chronicle that attempted to come to terms with fifteen or so poets, whose books ranged from undistinguished slim volumes to the collected poems of Louis MacNeice, which I admired. I had taught poems, mostly twentieth-century ones, in various courses, had completed a dissertation on Robert Frost, but had scarcely gone public with my critical wares and was nervous about the venture. The worry was not assuaged when the head man in Amherst College's Department of English, a man who regarded publication by his colleagues with some suspicion, asked me why I felt I had to do this. He professed himself sorry for the poor poets I had taken exception to and extended his sympathies to me in case they should respond with physical threats of harm. But his lack of enthusiasm for my decision to be a public critic—not just an English teacher at a small New England college—failed to deter me from pursuing a career of writing essays, reviews, and a few books, often about poets and poetry. Over the years I found myself dealing less often with contemporary poets, but rather seeking opportunities to write about older ones. These “older” ones can now include the American and English array of modernists and traditionalists who flourished in the fifty years stretching roughly from 1914 to 1965 (just before my reviewing career began), from Frost and Eliot to Larkin and Lowell.

Many of the pieces that follow here issue from the invitation to review a book, most likely a biography of a poet or a collection of his poems. The foremost literary critic of the last century, T. S. Eliot, wrote hundreds

of such reviews, most of which have never been available in book form (that situation will gradually be corrected) with the result that one must search out the pages of magazines like the *Egoist* or *Athenaeum* to read what he had to say about Stendhal, Henry Adams, Kipling, and numerous others. At the peril of inviting comparison with Eliot, it appears to me that, unlike the scholarly essay which must justify itself by bringing out a new aspect of a writer's work or correcting the inadequate interpretation of earlier critics, reviews are bound by no such rules. The reviewer is not only free but expected to take the book at hand as a chance to direct attention to central issues. As a critic he may speak to large matters of a poet's achievement, comparing the writer with contemporaries and predecessors in an effort to capture his or her distinctness. Under the confines of a thousand-word limit—or in more spacious situations double or treble that length—he can embrace limits as a provocation to speak out, sometimes doubtless recklessly, in order to elicit something essential about his subject. The great reviewer Randall Jarrell put it most extravagantly in “The Age of Criticism” when he declared that “taking the chance of making a complete fool of himself—and, sometimes, doing so—is the first demand that is made upon any real critic: he must stick his neck out just as the artist does, if he is to be of any real use to art.”

The contents of this book are divided into three sections: the first consists of seven essays, two of which—on Dryden and Hardy—are reconsiderations of a poet's achievement; but so in a smaller way are those provoked by a book for review, on Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson. The attempt in all of them, indeed in all the pieces in this collection, is to address an audience wider than an academic one. In my classrooms the students with whom I read and discuss poems are not by a long shot exclusively “English” oriented; similarly, I would presume that not all readers of my criticism are subscribers to academic periodicals like *Modern Language Notes* or *English Literary History*. The notion that one can address a broader-based, if still small, audience of intelligent nonspecialists—however vain a notion—helps keep me going. Frost once said about his poems that he had no desire for them to be “caviare to the crowd. . . . I want to reach out, and would if it were a thing I could do by taking thought.”

Reaching out to the “crowd” of intelligent readers is even more evident in the book’s second section where I take up, in brief reviews, a number of important English and American poets of the last century. Over the past few decades poets such as Frost, Stevens, Auden, Lowell, and Larkin have been preserved and more fully presented through collections of their work, biographies, letters, and other prose, or by canonization in the Library of America. My notion is that the poets considered in part 2 can be thought of as in conversation with one another, helped along by my juxtapositions and judgments.

In the third section I consider three twentieth-century critics who figure for me as among the most exciting and valuable commentators on poets and poetry from that century. Two of them, Eliot and Donald Davie, were indeed poet-critics; the third, Hugh Kenner, did not write poetry, although it looks from his writing as if he did just about everything else. William Empson once said about Eliot that he, Empson, couldn’t say just how much of his mind Eliot had invented; Eliot, Kenner, and Davie surely invented much of my own. In his invaluable, long-out-of-print anthology of poems, *The Art of Poetry*, Kenner wrote, “The chief requisite for criticism is not analytic skill but a trained sensibility.” Those three critics trained my sensibility.

What keeps it in training is still the classroom, where I continue to make the attempt to know literature—to know a poem—freshly. Early in my career as a teacher and a writer, I discovered the following sentences of R. P. Blackmur, ones I have returned to frequently. Blackmur is speaking of how we go about, in Pound’s phrase, making it new, and claims:

The institution of literature, so far as it is alive, is made again at every instant. It is made afresh as part of the process of being known afresh; what is permanent is what is always fresh, and it can be fresh only in performance—that is, in reading and seeing and hearing what is actually in it at this place and this time . . . the critic brings to consciousness the means of performance.

Those final words always seem to demand rereading, as with so many of Blackmur’s sentences, but I take it that the teacher likewise “brings to consciousness”—to his students and himself—“the means of performance”:

the verbal invitations to our eyes and (above all) our ears that issue from the poem. Selfishly, the classroom is central to my life because it is the only place where something like a conversation can be started about a poem of Ben Jonson's, Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, or a novel by Henry James. One doesn't expect to have such a conversation when dining at a friend's or even when passing the time with a professional colleague. They might not have read or been reading the right book at the right time; for that to happen, something like a captive audience of more or less agreeable students is necessary.

Denis Donoghue, who has reflected much on the teaching of literature, recently took a gloomy look at those students and their relation to "English." As a beginning teacher, he said, his assumption was that the merit of reading great works consisted in the access they gave to "deeply imagined lives other than their own." He thinks this assumption no longer has broad currency, its appeal having lost its persuasiveness:

Students seem to be convinced that their own lives are the primary and sufficient incentive. They report that reading literature is mainly a burden. Those students who think of themselves as writers and take classes in "creative writing" to define themselves as poets or fiction writers, evidently write more than they read, and regard reading as a gross expenditure of time and energy.

However things go on at NYU, where Donoghue has long been established, his charge has the ring of overstatement; at least I know that neither my better nor my more ordinary students would sign on to such a declaration. Donoghue, however, has a point when he goes on to say that many people feel confident enough in talking about fiction—novels and stories—but are more or less tongue-tied when it comes to poetry. Doubtless this condition has something to do with their desire, as he says, to "come to themes and issues directly, without the hesitations enforced by considerations of form, structure, and style."

This bears out my experience that students come from secondary school prepared to think of poetry as a very deep art indeed, and that their task is to penetrate its depths and arrive at something called the real meaning. Thus Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,"

with its snowflakes and harness bells, is “really” about death, perhaps about suicide. In other words, the poem’s enchanting surface (“The only other sound’s the sweep / Of easy wind and downy flake”) exists only to be seen through to something beyond or under it. If there is a single principle holding these essays on poets and poetry together, it is that style needs to be attended to, not just at the beginning of our reading but continuously, and that readers should invest in an engagement, sometimes a prolonged one, with the surface of a poem—with its events that can be seen and heard as they reveal themselves over time.