

Remarks by John Hollander

Connecticut Poet Laureate Installation

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Yale University Art Gallery

I speak uneasily today as a laureate of any sort [first of all, because I'm still learning what a laureate is supposed to *do* and/or what *being* a laureate might *mean*. Archibald MacLeish, an official poet of the Roosevelt era, famously asserted (and quite wrongly, in my view) that "a poem must not mean, but be". While a poem certainly must not be mean, this is probably nonsense. But I must wonder if one is to represent poetry in a public sense—to stand for it if only to write it in what one hopes will be an exemplary way (which I certainly intend to do)—then to what degree does simply to *be* Poet Laureate constitute *meaning* something thereby as well?

The maker of poetry is a maker and lover of language, and the word "laureate" and its uses are part of my concern. That word invokes the god Apollo in whose name crowns of bay-leaves symbolizing victory were placed on the heads of conquerors; poets are not victorious, save over foes so inner and dark, or so widely worshipped and adored, that to name them has always been dangerous. Which is why one likes to think of Petrarch who had himself crowned Poet Laureate in Rome in 1341, wearing a crown of ivy – associated with Bacchus – and myrtle – sacred to Venus – interwoven with the laurel of mere victory. The term "poet laureate" was used more modestly – to designate a degree – or the holder of a degree – granted by universities, so that a poet laureate in that medieval sense designated a sort of learned doctorate in poetry. After Petrarch, the term was used somewhat haphazardly and unofficially for subsequent centuries for a court poet or a designated poet of a university – Chaucer was named poet laureate and given an annual allowance of wine; John Skelton was created poet laureate of the university of Oxford; a more official post was created by James I with Ben Jonson in mind; but the first named poet laureate of England was the great John

Dryden, whose devotion to public issues made him exemplary; it was only after Dryden that it became the laureate's task to write poems for royal and other public occasions. Throughout the centuries, there were several other of the most important poets in our language – Wordsworth, who accepted subject to his refusal to write occasional poems, and Tennyson, who seemed glad to (Gray, Scott, William Morris and Philip Larkin all refused the title). And there have been vastly inferior ones – Henry Pye, Alfred Austin, William Whitehead, the Rev. Laurence Eusden – justly forgotten even by most historical scholars.

The 70-year-old position of Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress was re-titled Poet Laureate in 1985. After that, particular states thought to designate their own, and my late dear friend the wonderful poet James Merrill being the first of these. Connecticut has had its share of celebrated poets since colonial times: the so-called Connecticut Wits (“a wit” still meant “a poet” in the 18th century) – John Trumbull, Timothy Dwight, and Joel Barlow. Poets can be *from* but not *in* Connecticut, like Donald Hall or Rosanna Warren (who lived here for half her life so far). Her father, Robert Penn Warren, not from but *of* our state, was a resident for almost 50 years, during which he wrote some of his finest poetry. Other contemporary poets of distinction living and working here include William Meredith, the late Vicki Hearne, J. D. MacClatchy, George Bradley, Elizabeth Alexander, and my immediate predecessor, Marilyn Nelson.

I have been informed that I am somehow to represent poetry in Connecticut – and perhaps, in another sense of an interesting word, represent Connecticut – to be of it – in poetry's House of Representatives. And I feel that I must somehow represent not only good poetry, but good reading as well – the quality of each depends upon the other. I am certain that I've lived *in* Connecticut for a total of 39 years – just short of half my life – and continuously here for the last 30, but I must now wonder how I might be *of* it. But that's because, I suppose, the whole matter of representativeness is part of the material for poetry continually, to make ever-renewing sense of. In another way, poetry

represents reality in language, and language is itself part of that reality, which is why true poetry has to come from a peculiar love of – and fascination with – language. But one can also represent Poetry itself by being a maker of it, and by trying to make more generally plain what poems are and what they mean. This is what I can perhaps hope to do, although no longer being a professional teacher in which position I did, among other things, just that.

But I suppose I shall myself always think of there being one eternal poet laureate. Wallace Stevens of Hartford is, of course, for the 20th century The Poet of Poets in Connecticut, representing poetry and our state in a number of different ways. Stevens himself wrote marvelously *about* representativeness and what it might entail. In one part of his great poem called “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” he considers what he calls major man or central man – not an idea *of*, much less an idea *about* – humanity, but a powerful metaphor that would be a metonymy as well. One moment in the poem rejects the kind of dubious importance or nobility or centrality embodied in an equestrian statue (of a figure of “the General du Puy”) – instead, it goes on to consider

One figure in his old coat,
His slouching pantaloons, beyond the town,
Looking for what was, where it used to be . .

And then Stevens addresses a representative reader whom he calls “ephebe” – the Greek word for a young man (over 18) – enjoining him with respect to the figure he has just designated:

The man in that old coat, those sagging pantaloons,
It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect
The final elegance, not to console
Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound.

It is of him, ephebe of him: something made of him and – with that wonderful ambiguity of the preposition – *about* him as well. The Charlie Chaplin tramp rather than the bronze General Du Puy--

the complex relation between the another (the general in another sense) and the particular: the ephebe is urged to consider the way in which poetry, almost uniquely, can keep faith with the respective power and authenticity of each of these in a discursive world which so easily and so often betrays either – only poetry can make an idea of humanity that can have the vigor and presence of particularity. True poetry will neither officially proclaim – as in sancification – nor personally console – as one person does another – in any literal sense. *Plainly to propound* meaning not only “clearly” but then “unfancily”; “propound” is derived from the Latin *Pro-ponere*--to put forth. And thus plainly propounding – in verse, in prose, or more generally in imaginative thought – poetry is always non-literal literal, so that writing down what you feel or even describing with accuracy what you’ve noticed -- which is far better for you to do and everyone else to read – simply isn’t poetry. You have to do something else by way of doing that (or perhaps also doing that by way of doing something else). Poetry is in itself representation. *Poesis* in Greek means making, and a poem is first of all a thing made – made of language, but – in an array of senses--by and with and in and, I believe, *for* language as well. It is not, as many people seem mistakenly to believe, expression of emotion. If it were, then the purest poem one could imagine might be my cry of “OW!!” after dropping something heavy on my foot. But if we mean by *feelings* not just physical sensations, simple or complex, and the emotions which can produce them from within us as well as responding to stimuli from outside us, but knowledge, beliefs, opinions, inferences – this is another matter. They cannot be expressed by involuntary arias composed by our physiology like “OW!!!”, but just be represented in language. And it is these that can help shape the form and the fiction which make for real poetry. Poetry calls attention in various tones – summoning, urging, beckoning, inviting, seducing, cozening – to the ever-renewing particularities of the known world. And it does this by the constant but varying light of the imagination.

And yet poetry can only do this by means of its own remarkable particularities. These are of course the infinite resources of language – not ordinary language, even if written down in short unjustified lines without logical or rhetorical responsibility (this is what most people have come to believe poetry is; and that belief comes from not having read and listened to enough great and very good and rather good poems). For real poems are all written in some sort of extraordinary language, in which truths are shaped by the fictions propounded in it, and meaning is created by the unusual patterns in which words and phrases are cast. The best poems are all written in language whose extraordinary particularities can be heard. Real poets and real readers of poetry alike hear what they read – both in prose and verse. They have all learned early to hear what Robert Frost called ‘the sentence sound’ – the accentual and tonal shaping of a string of words so that the grammar and syntax make a frame for whatever the words signify, and the sounds of those particular words themselves make verbal patterns by which real poems become songs of their own, set themselves to their own music. That figurative music – a music of the sounds of spoken, and the patterns of written, language – provides the energies and control of the act of poetic propounding. Poetry is thus – as its name in Greek suggests – a making: of language, in language. It may well be a kind of unmaking as well, an unmaking by of what used to be called stock responses, of mental and emotional knee-jerks, automatic pieties, false consolations, empty sanctifications, habit-formed ideologies, brutalities of thought and feeling of all sorts that sincerity continues to smuggle so successfully across the borders of our discursive realm. But it can leave in their place the objects of continuing wonder, speculation and the deepest pleasure that rewarded attentiveness can provide.