



The Virtues of Poetry

James Longenbach

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An illuminating look at the many forms of poetry's essential excellence by James Longenbach, a writer with "an ear as subtle and assured as any American poet now writing" (John Koethe)

"This book proposes some of the virtues to which the next poem might aspire: boldness, change, compression, dilation, doubt, excess, inevitability, intimacy, otherness, particularity, restraint, shyness, surprise, and worldliness. The word 'virtue' came to English from Latin, via Old French, and while it has acquired a moral valence, the word in its earliest uses gestured toward a magical or transcendental power, a power that might be embodied by any particular substance or act. With vices I am not concerned. Unlike the short-term history of taste, which is fueled by reprimand or correction, the history of art moves from achievement to achievement. Contemporary embodiments of poetry's virtues abound, and only our devotion to a long history of excellence allows us to recognize them." –from James Longenbach's preface

The Virtues of Poetry is a resplendent and ultimately moving work of twelve interconnected essays, each of which describes the way in which a particular excellence is enacted in poetry. Longenbach closely reads poems by Shakespeare, Donne, Blake, Keats, Dickinson, Yeats, Pound, Bishop, and Ashbery (among others), sometimes exploring the ways in which these writers transmuted the material of their lives into art, and always emphasizing that the notions of excellence we derive from art are fluid, never fixed. Provocative, funny, and astute, *The Virtues of Poetry* is indispensable for readers, teachers, and writers. Longenbach reminds us that poetry delivers meaning in exacting ways, and that it is through its precision that we experience this art's lasting virtues.

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