Helen Vendler on Modern American Poets*

This collection of Helen Vendler’s essays and reviews on modern American poets, written over the past decade chiefly for the *New York Times Book Review*, the *New York Review of Books*, and the *New Yorker*, has already received—deservedly, I think—its own rave reviews from a galaxy of critics, among them Irvin Ehrenpreis, William S. Pritchard, and Monroe Spears. The energy and brilliance of Vendler’s writing, her sympathy and tact in bringing to the reader’s attention the particular qualities that make a given poem memorable, her affinities with Randall Jarrell and R. P. Blackmur—these have been remarked upon. Some, like Denis Donoghue, have taken issue with Vendler’s peremptory dismissal of the later Eliot (of *Four Quartets*, she remarks, “Can nervousness be cured by ethics?”); others, like Donald Hall, have questioned her adulation of Lowell’s last book, *Day by Day*. I do not propose here to debate these particular issues or others like them once again. It is perhaps more important, at this stage, to try to define what are, beneath the glitter of the individual essays, Vendler’s central critical assumptions, assumptions that are not only unstated but probably quite unconscious.

Helen Vendler has always avoided theory. What she says of Randall Jarrell could just as well be said of her: “... he was, for better or worse, a member of no school of criticism; he was no theorist; he felt happier writing about the nineteenth and twentieth century than about earlier periods where what you see in what you read depends radically on historical information; he wrote always to

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to show to others' and not to muse to himself. He was not, in short, a Frye, an Auerbach, an Blackmur, an Auden" (p. 115). And further, "Jarrell, in his criticism had three special talents. He thought naturally in metaphor. . . . he wrote, in almost every account, an implicit suspense story; and he saw books constantly as stories about human beings" (p. 116). This deftly defines Vendler's own way of looking at contemporary poetry. An impatience with history as well as with theory, a natural gift for metaphor that makes Vendler herself something of a poet ("Ginsberg's avalanche of detail is like the rain of dust and lava that preserved Pompeii—here lies America, in literally thousands of its emanations. . . ."); or again, with reference to Merwin's *The Miner's Pale Children*, "Is it ill-will in a reader to want to force-feed these pale children till they, when cut, will bleed?"); and above all, a concern for poems as "stories about human beings."

What kind of stories? Vendler likes them best when they are, in the words of one of her titles, "Apollo's Harsher Songs." Thus she says of Stevens:

Many of Stevens' poems—read from one angle, most of the best poems—spring from catastrophic disappointment, bitter solitude, or personal sadness. It is understandable that Stevens, a man of chilling reticence, should illustrate his suffering in its largest possible terms. That practice does not obscure the nature of the suffering, which concerns the collapse of early hopeful fantasies of love, companionship, success, and self-transformation. As self and beloved alike become, with greater or lesser velocity, the final dwarfs of themselves, and as social awareness diminishes dreams of self-transcendence, the poet sees dream, hope, love, and trust—those activities of the most august imagination—crippled, contradicted, dissolved, called into question, embittered. This history is the history of every intelligent and receptive human creature, as the illimitable claims on existence made by each one of us are checked, baffled, frustrated and reproved—whether by our subsequent perceptions of their impossible grandiosity, or by the accidents of fate and chance, or by our betrayal of others, or by old age and its failures of capacity. (pp. 41–42)

The shift, in the last sentence, from third to first person, from the particular "I" of Stevens' late poems to the generalized "we" who read them quite takes one's breath away. The implicit moral judgment, the concern that the poet's values are also the critic's is profound. Many of us will agree that the late poems do call into question the poet's dream of love and self-transformation, but does
it really follow that Stevens' history is "the history of every intelligent and receptive human creature"? Do we all live to see our "early hopeful fantasies" "crippled" and "contradicted"? It is an assumption that Vendler makes again and again. Here she is on Lowell: "Lowell's late practice is profoundly irreligious, reality-bound, ordered not by any structural teleology but by a confidence in free association, addressed not homilectically to an audience, but painfully to the self, private rather than public, closer to the epistolary than to the oratorical, as various as conversation in its tonal liberty, free to seem desultory and uncomposed, and, above all, exempt from the tyranny of the well-made" (p. 158). Such poetry, says Vendler, is not "comfortable," but "it has the solace of truth in its picture of the misery, sense of stoppage, and perplexed desultoriness of middle age" (pp. 135-36). If it cannot quite speak to the young, "it sums up another phase of life, no less valuable, no less moving, no less true" (p. 173).

Or again, here is Merrill, whom Vendler calls "one of our indispensable poets": "What is in the American mind these days—the detritus of past belief, a hodgepodge of Western science and culture, a firm belief in the worth of the private self and in the holiness of the heart's affections, a sense of time and space beyond the immediate—is here displayed for judgment" (p. 231). Merrill is further praised for "locat[ing] value in the human and everyday rather than in the transcendent" (p. 217). Such concern for the human with the attendant realization that transcendence is not possible is also a theme in Vendler's essay on Adrienne Rich. Of "Trying to Talk with a Man" (it begins "What we've had to give up to get here—/ whole LP collections, films we starred in"), Vendler writes: "Which of us, at forty, will not wince at the fluoroscopic truth of that list: we can name our own LP's, our fantasy PTA neighborhood self-projections, our parents' cookie jars, our dramas of love and self-pity, our slides into regressive and delusory role-playing. Critics who represent Rich's recent poetry as the utterance of exaggerated feminism alone seem not to have read these plainspoken passages, returning throughout this book, passages showing (in the jargon of today) where we are all at" (pp. 245-46).

But suppose "we" do not feel that this is "where we are all at"? Suppose we cannot quite identify with what Vendler calls "the whole long trip that has brought them (Rich and her husband and, by extension, Everywoman and Everyman) to this ghost town"?
What then? Is the poem still an important one? Is Rich still an important poet? Or, to put it another way, is the moral value of the poem its aesthetic value as well?

Vendler is nothing if not sensitive to the language of poetry, but the fact is that her first concern is always with the moral imperative. Accordingly, if one doesn’t happen to share her particular values—to sympathize, for example, with the plight of the married woman who is "Trying to Talk with a Man"—it is difficult to concur with many of the judgments made in the course of these reviews. For Vendler’s particular moral norms preclude at least the following:

(1) religious poetry, the poetry of transcendence, probably Vendler’s greatest bugbear: witness her strong dislike of "Ash Wednesday" and Four Quartets; (2) poetry of intense erotic celebration, as in the exuberant and mystical lyric of Goethe’s West-Ostlicher Divan; (3) poetry in which the “private self,” far from being at the center, becomes just one item in the large mythographic collage of the present; here I am thinking, of course, of Pound’s Cantos, a text that Vendler has always admittedly avoided; (4) the poetry of play, of intellectual game that values ideas for their own sake as in Auden’s late great paysages moralisés like “Bucolics” (“Surely,” says Vendler in what I take to be a real error in judgment, “the Auden that will last is the prewar Auden—the irreverent, vivid, daring and thoughtful”); and (5) poetry that subordinates the articulation of detachable meaning to the creation of artful structures, that prefers the play of signifiers to the “importance” of the signified; the linguistic construct to whatever truth may lurk behind it; here I would place Gertrude Stein and Williams’ Spring and All, the Dada and Futurist lyric, or indeed a text like Ashbery’s “Litany.”

But for Vendler it is the private self that must be squarely at the center of the poem, and that self must come to terms with its past and future, must see, as did Stevens, its “dreams of self-transcendence” crumble, its imaginative activities curtailed and crippled. The demand for suffering leads the critic into certain odd inconsistencies. Thus Lowell’s Day by Day is praised for being so unabashedly true to life, for its willingness to conclude a poem with the line “Yet why not say what happened?” “Lowell,” says Vendler, “to whom every word in the language has by now its distinct musical value, can, with an accuracy to within a feather’s weight, ‘say what happened’” (p. 149). Having renounced his “former panoplies,” he is left with the quotidian: “a wife, children, the seasons, ill health, acquaint-
ances, friends living and dead, a walk, a photograph, a poetry reading, a dinner out, shaving, making love, insomnia, fishing” (p. 146). Curiously enough, Frank O’Hara is criticized for precisely the same refusal to separate art from life: “Two aspects of his work tended to do O’Hara in: his radical incapacity for abstraction . . . and his lack of a comfortable form. . . . The longest poems end up simply messy, endless secretions, with a nugget of poetry here and there, slices of life arbitrarily beginning, and ending for no particular reason. “Dear Diary,” says O’Hara, and after that anything goes. The perfect freedom any diarist enjoys—to put anything down that happened on a certain day only because at the head of the page there is that hungry date saying June 13, 1960—is what O’Hara claims for himself in his long poems” (pp. 179–180).

I find this very puzzling. Why is Lowell’s renunciation of formal constraints so attractive, O’Hara’s a test on “the limited attention span of the poet or his reader”? If Lowell can record, in diary fashion, “what happened,” and still maintain fidelity and precision, why can’t O’Hara? The answer, I think, is that Vendler intuitively prefers “what happened” to Lowell to “what happened” to O’Hara; she is deeply moved by Lowell’s “heartbreaking” “fragment of an autobiography,” which records “his late, perhaps unwise, third marriage; the birth of a son, the very worst memories suppressed from Life Studies, memories of having been an unwanted child and a tormented adolescent; exile in Britain and Ireland; the death of friends; clinical depression and hospitalization, lovemaking and impotence; distress over age; fear of death. Against all this is set the power of writing” (p. 165).

Is the “power of writing” about such suffering innately valuable? In writing of Stevens and Lowell, Bishop and Rich, Vendler implies that it is. Measured against these poets, O’Hara appears too insouciant, although he is, of course, not nearly so jaunty and cheery as Vendler would have us believe, and he too has his depressions and fears of death. But his poetic strategy is to treat feeling with bemused detachment, to refuse to take himself too seriously. His poems suggest, at least indirectly, that the “Personism” he seems to dwell on is not perhaps the primary thing. As his friend John Cage put it in an essay on “The Future of Music”: “. . . more and more this concern with personal feelings of individuals, even the enlightenment of individuals, will be seen in the larger context of society. We know how to suffer and control our own emotions. If not, advice is
available. There is a cure for tragedy. The path to self knowledge has been mapped out by psychiatry, by oriental philosophy, mythology, occult thought, anthroposophy, and astrology. We know all we need to know about Oedipus, Prometheus, and Hamlet. What we are learning is how to be convivial. ‘Here Comes Everybody.’”

I am not saying that Cage is right and Vendler wrong when she declares, in talking of Stevens, that “feeling—to use Wordsworthian terms—is the organizing principle of poetry” (p. 42). But I do think she should perhaps be more aware of the foundations of her own judgments, of why she believes that poem x is “transarently beautiful” or poem y “bores.” By the same token, the reader should be aware that the map of modern poetry presented in these pages is a highly personal one; its shapes and forms are dictated by a central faith in the holiness of the heart’s affections and the maladies of the quotidian. We are not, it seems, meant to be happy except for brief moments. And even these occurred long ago. Life is always a struggle and most of us find it hard to survive.

Given these premises, however, Vendler succeeds time and again in giving her reader the precise graph of a poet’s consciousness, his or her successes and failures. I think her finest essays are those on Stevens and Merrill; the latter’s sensibility has not been explored by anyone as discerningly as it has by Vendler, and she has a wonderful way of explaining the poet’s arcane images and allusions, making even the difficult Mirabell: Book of Numbers a radiant and reasonable whole. In evaluating Merrill’s achievement, Vendler maintains perfect poise and toughness of judgment; she is not swept off her feet.

If her essays on Lowell and Rich are somewhat less successful, it is because here she becomes a shade defensive; she is the one who suffered, she was there. In itself, the essay on Rich is both moving and convincing, but the cited passages never quite live up to Vendler’s commentary on them. Thus she says of the following lines:

but this
after all
is the narrows and after
all we have never entirely
known what was done to you upstream
what powers trepanned
which of your channels diverted
what rockface leaned to stare
"The ending may be sentimental, but the river and the mind to which it corresponds are heavy with truth" (p. 256). I remain unconvinced that the river metaphor can be "heavy" with any truth, and I am even less convinced by what I take to be Vendler’s one real lapse in this book: her encomium on Dave Smith. Of a poem called “On a Field Trip at Fredericksburg,” Vendler writes: “the poem takes shape, beautifully following the drift of experience and reflection . . . ” (p. 297). Then she quotes the entire poem, which begins:

The big steel tourist shield says maybe
fifteen thousand got it here. No word
of either Whitman or one uncle
I barely remember in the smoke
that filled his tiny mountain house.

If each finger were a thousand of them
I could clasp my hands and be dead
up to my wrists. It was quick
though not so fast as we can do it
now, one bomb, atomic or worse,
one silly pod slung on wing-tip,
high up, an egg cradled
by some rapacious mockingbird.

Vendler praises Smith’s “daring flashes” in this poem, the demotic beginning,” modulating first into the “surrealistic fantasy” of lines 6–8 and then into the “dismissive meiosis for the atomic bomb (‘one silly pod’)” (p. 298). Perhaps it is my own blindness that leads me to regard the beginning of the poem as contrived rather than “demotic” and to dismiss the passage about the atom bomb as the most tired of clichés. There is, of course, no way to prove that Smith’s poem is either as good as Vendler thinks it is or as bad as I take it to be. It is the nature of subjective criticism to make such proof impossible, indeed undesirable. Vendler cites Jarrell’s definition of the critic as “an extremely good reader—one who has learned to show to others what he saw in what he read” (p. 115). It is in this sense that Vendler is an exciting—if sometimes irritating—critic; she does show to others, with astonishing economy, vigor, vividness, and penetration, what she has seen in the poems she has read.
of Nature, Part of Us is certainly a remarkable achievement, even if there are those of us who will wonder whether the Arnoldian—and ultimately Romantic—norms implicitly governing Vendler's evaluations (and even the selection of poets she discusses) still make sense as we approach the fin de siècle of our own postmodern age.

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