Sparkles from the Wheel

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number of recent critical studies that careful textual analysis is outmoded and irrelevant to anything but purely aesthetic concerns. Keach emphatically proves them wrong in this concise, thoughtful, and illuminating book.

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SPARKLES FROM THE WHEEL

Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats. By HELEN VENDLER. Harvard University Press, 2004; $19.95.

Philosophers, literary critics and others interested in the nature of aesthetic thinking have not been as unthinking about the thinking inherent to the poet's craft as Vendler's *Poets Thinking* would have us believe. Nevertheless, Vendler's aim is to disabuse us of the notion that poetry is an 'irrational genre' by demonstrating in four case studies how individual poetical styles are shaped by 'poetical thinking'. We must do 'justice' to 'the poets' by recognising their inimitable style of thinking; with this justice in mind, poetry becomes relevant by grasping a poem's 'inner form', not by reducing it to 'intellectual paraphrase', social commentary, or the vague manifestation of *zeitgeist*. Setting the tone for her argument, her lead piece on Pope, as Vendler informs her readers, emerged from her 'indignation' at an 'eminent philosopher's' dismissal of Pope's *Essay on Man* as 'outmoded' and 'irrelevant to modern thought' during an interdisciplinary panel discussion at Harvard University. Pope's essay did not fare better at the hands of a 'veteran political scientist' and a 'celebrated anthropologist' (names are discreetly withheld in the main text, yet slipped to the reader in the footnotes).

Poets Thinking attempts to rescue the significance of poetry from the provincialism of such contemporary academic discourse. Yet, detached from the institutional context of Vendler's ambition, the sense of questioning whether poets think, of whether there is 'poetical thinking', is not immediately

apparent – what would it mean to assert that thinking of some kind does not inform poetical composition? Let us therefore grant immediately, without pretending thereby to give immediate insight, that poets think in the medium of their craft (after all, Kant admired Pope greatly), for to claim otherwise would be absurd – as absurd as claiming that any art made of the human spirit could come into being without the effort of some form of thought, and retain its value without the presence of enduring intelligence.

The meaningful question is not whether, but how, poets think, what is specific – if anything – to the thinking manifest in poetry, and confronted with this burden Vendler proposes to describe poetical thinking with a host of metaphors. She speaks of poems as 'aesthetically directed fluidity', and seems, in this regard, to be interested in spelling out the 'aesthetic laws' according to which poems constitute themselves. Her preferred metaphors depict an underlying image of flux: 'inner momentum', 'force-fields', 'flickerings', and 'magnetic fields' drive her impressionistic account of poetical thinking, which she routinely opposes to the philosopher's 'invariant grid' and 'systems'. But Vendler also speaks of 'aesthetic intent', 'emotional motivation', and 'the way thinking goes on in a poet's mind', and seems bent on glimpsing what 'thinking is "really" like as it happens'. What, then, is thinking – the poem *as* thinking or the thinking which is *behind* the poem, or which the poem represents? Vendler apparently wants both: the poem as a form of thinking, or 'unending meditation', and the thinking beneath the surface of the poem, elsewhere characterised as 'anterior thinking'. Although Vendler is not in the business of proposing another 'theory' of poetry, she is keen on retaining, rightly, a distinction between 'theorising' about a poem and reading it intelligently. Poems, she writes, 'contain within themselves implicit instructions concerning how they should be read'. Fair enough, but the untenable assumption here is that knowing how to read a poem is tantamount to knowing how the poet's mind 'really' thinks – or thought. Given her emphasis on poetical style, a system or theory of poetry is neither possible nor desirable; we can only point to examples that exhibit family resemblances. Vendler chooses Pope, Whitman, Dickinson and Yeats. Each poet

exemplifies a specific style of thinking: Pope's parodying of philosophical discourse; Whitman's use of reprise; rearranged seriality in Dickinson's poetry; Yeats's employment of images.

In Pope's *Essay* Vendler identifies an underlying strategy that she prizes as an example of 'poetical thinking'. Deflecting Samuel Johnson's criticism ('the poet was not sufficiently master of his subject'), Vendler argues that Pope masterfully submits 'every genre and received idea' of philosophical discourse to subtle parody; ideas and arguments become 'miniaturised' in Pope's verse. As one example, she cites Pope's treatment of the senses, stressing his omission of taste from the traditional inventory of five: rather than offer his readers an 'exhaustive' account, Pope's aim is to create the 'appearance of exhaustiveness', and to offer a 'reframing' of traditional discussions of the five senses that is strikingly apparent in the arrangement of Pope's verse. In lines 193-204, Pope 'creates a chiasmus in the bestowing of proportion: while the first and last senses (sight and hearing) are awarded four lines each, the two middle ones (touch and smell) receive only two, creating the pleasing "pre-arrangement" of 4:2:2:4'. Here, as elsewhere in the *Essay*, Pope constructs a 'simulacrum of philosophical discourse' with a host of devices: 'miniaturization of argument, re-schematizing (four senses in lieu of five) and lexical vivifying of sober expository sources'. In this manner, Pope transforms ideas into 'wonderful artifacts of human mentality', and abandons the received view of considering these ideas as 'guides for life or as philosophical axioms'. Vendler also notes other manifestations of Pope's 'subversive thinking' in which ideas are *not* parodied. The idea of a Golden Age, for example, treated in the *Essay* at III. 147-58, is shown to be a 'nostalgic myth confected from our fallen present'. A reader might well ask, however, whether Vendler lapses from her own suspicion towards 'intellectual paraphrase' when she summarily concludes this brief discussion with the hurried claim: 'If we were to discuss Pope's "thinking" in this passage, we would describe it as an insight into the social construction of original idylls'.

In Vendler's view, Pope's rhetorical strategies have the purpose of shifting his readers' attention away from ideas in

order to bring into focus 'his own more vivid form of thinking'. For his part, Pope tells us that his thinking seeks 'concision and memorableness'. Vendler seeks to flesh out Pope's 'more vivid form of thinking' with her own descriptions, which, presumably, are meant to help the reader grasp the 'inner form' or 'aesthetic laws' of his poetical thinking. Whereas philosophical discourse is formulaically characterised by Vendler as 'thought embalmed', Pope creates a 'cinematic flow of living thought'. But what does this *cinéma vérité* look like? Vendler strings together a series of uninspiring characterisations: living thought is said to be 'quick and mobile, ever darting to extremes and polarities'; it 'must also jump up and down, over and under, left and right'; it 'must swell and contract, leap from register to register, joke and feel pangs'. Living thought must do a great many things, but above all 'the reader must hang on for the ride, bouncing to the next hurdle hardly having recovered his seat from the last'. In grappling with the difficult task of getting right our descriptions of 'poetical thinking', the reader needs more assistance than Vendler provides with her rhapsodic claims about what living thought 'must be'. Regrettably, we walk away from the first essay not knowing what it means to think poetically, for us or for Pope, when handed lines – neither concise nor memorable – such as 'thought . . . can always bring an edge to the mind and a smile to the lips'.

Vendler next turns to Whitman, who enjoys a reputation among many as a poet of 'retinal innocence'. The focus of Vendler's exhibition of poetical thinking in Whitman's poetry is on the movement from perception to what she terms perception-as-thought. Vendler sees such transformation in the reprise, which she identifies as a central device in Whitman's poetical oeuvre. In a 'reprise-poem', an initial statement of perceptual transcription is taken up again by way of a 'refocusing', giving form to a perception-as-thought. Her suggestion is illuminating: semantic and syntactic parallels ('I celebrate myself, and sing myself') abound in Whitman's poems, and form layered structures of meaning at every level (individual lines, stanzas, and so on). From this perspective, three poems are examined: 'Sparkles from the Wheel', 'A Noiseless Patient Spider', and 'Come Up from the Fields Father'.

In 'Sparkles from the Wheel' Vendler recognises an 'impeccable example' of Whitman's refashioning of 'initial perceptions' through a process of thinking into 'perception-as-thought'. This transformation of perception, Vendler writes, is the work of 'reflective thinking' and has its lyrical correlate in the reprise as a process of self-revision. Whitman's poem is composed of two stanzas, both of which end with the line 'Sparkles from the wheel'. In the first, we are given a 'description of the world when one is emotionally distant from it'; in the second, by contrast, we are given a modified perception-as-thought that takes up the themes of the initial transcription of perception in the first stanza. Vendler advances the implausible suggestion that Whitman's description of experience in the first stanza is largely 'sociological': the crowd is 'merely a numerical abstraction-in-motion' and the knife-grinder's activity is deemed 'mechanical'. Vendler's choice of characterisations is here not justified by the poem under scrutiny; on my reading, she breaks her own rule of allowing a poem to tell us how we should read it. Nothing in Whitman's initial description of the knife-grinder suggests a 'mechanical' process ('With measur'd thread he turns rapidly, as he presses with light but firm hand') – quite the contrary is evoked; the entire body of the knife-grinder must be exerted ('foot', 'knee', 'firm hand', 'measur'd thread'), indicating attentive, absorbing physical application. It is clear, however, why Vendler would want to mis-characterise the perceptions of the first stanza as 'mechanical' and 'non-poetical': it allows her to make a forced contrast with the second stanza, in which themes and incidents of the first are 're-cast' into 'perceptions-become-thought'. In this reinvented, poetical description, we have the 'effusing' of the poet into the scene and his emotional participation.

Even if we accept the reprise of the second stanza as a modification of perception, we need not follow Vendler's further step in calling this 'effusing' a product of thinking. She insists that this 'second-order formation of an aesthetic and linguistic *gestalt* from a first-order perception is an act to which one cannot refuse the name of thinking'. But is this really the product of *reflective* thinking? At times, Vendler betrays a degree of uncertainty when she adopts the more

appropriate vocabulary of sympathy and imagination. One line above the line just cited, Vendler brushes against what I take to be the crux of the matter when she writes of a 'distinct imaginative recasting, by means of poetic thinking'. Unclear, however, is whether the 'imaginative recasting' of perception is done by means of reflective thinking or whether the thinking (the logic of the poem's composition as a reprise, as the 'formal sign of distinct imaginative casting') is in fact made possible by means of an underlying imaginative re-casting. More evidence that this transformation may not be, as Vendler would have it, from perception to perception *as thought* is suggested by her own emphasis on the 'self-annihilation' and 'effusing' of the poet by which he (as a 'phantom') is able to permeate the beings of others – but nothing here indicates that such a transformation is the product or purview of 'intense poetical thinking'. Contrary to her intention, Vendler's reading may provide an implicit confirmation of Santayana's observation: 'We find the swarms of men and objects rendered as they might strike the retina in a sort of waking dream'. Indeed, there is a hypnotic quality to Whitman's 'Sparkles from the Wheel'. We are drawn into the scene as if into a dream in which we are oddly awake, 'absorbed' yet also 'arrested', entranced from a distance.

The reinvention of 'plots of time' in the poetical work of Emily Dickinson is the third specimen of poetical thinking investigated in *Poets Thinking*. Vendler recognises the creation of temporal structures as intrinsic to Dickinson's craft and as revealing of her 'imaginative thinking'. Whereas Dickinson's early poems exhibit a 'natural style of thinking about serial plot', her later poems exhibit more complicated forms of temporal organisation. The serial 'unscrolling' of her early poems progresses 'chromatically', moving stepwise through a scale of emotional registers. For example, in 'The Heart asks Pleasure – first –', the repetition of 'And then' marks the 'ratcheting of the wheel on which the victim is stretched'. In Dickinson's later poems, however, serial chromaticism undergoes significant transformations as both a response to and an exploration of the crisis of 'all serene or predictable forms of serial plot'. Rupture, fracture, and fissure now drive the rearrangement of temporal

plot. By carefully cataloguing a number of these rearranged forms of seriality in poems such as 'I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –' and 'There's a certain Slant of light', Vendler convincingly shows how Dickinson 'changes her thinking on the adequate temporal shape by which to mirror life'. These inventions by means of poetical thinking are different responses to and reconfigurations of 'raw experience'. In Vendler's concluding assessment: 'By thinking through such models of temporality, by constructing so many versions, evasions, and revisions of the seriality that was her original defense against anxiety, Dickinson makes us conscious of the extent to which examining a poet's intellectual models of experience is indispensable to the understanding of art'. A reader may nevertheless wonder whether in Dickinson's miniatures we are given the temporal orchestration of a single thought, rather than a 'model' or process of thinking. The chromaticism of Dickinson's poems, I suggest, unfolds stepwise across a thought or mood, moving on a scale just beneath the threshold of fully developed thinking, yet richer in articulation than a simple, fleeting intuition.

Order and time are also the salient features of Yeats's poetic thinking examined by Vendler in her fourth case study. Vendler gives what amounts to an *explication de texte* of two poems written in Yeats's later years, 'Among School Children' and 'The Circus Animals' Desertion'. Both are examples of Yeats's 'retrospective poetry', which deals with thinking back to the past by means of 'scrolling' through an arrangement of 'significant images'. Emotionally 'charged' and imaginatively 'alive', a poetical thinking in images rises above the deficiencies of thinking in assertions. In Yeats's thinking, Vendler observes, images are usually packaged in the form of antinomies, yet in his later poems, such as the two examined here, the structure of opposition becomes slackened, and ultimately abandoned in the Circus poem. Vendler shows how Yeats structures these two poems with the creation, arrangement, and layering of images, and pinpoints 'the active thinking of the poet' in the 'modulation of genre' by way of such 'finding and arranging of images'. 'Among School Children' is a composition of six main image-diptychs, placed in a sequence that Vendler

characterises as 'devastating'. These 'bitter' diptychs are overlaid upon each other so as form a 'densely written palimpsest'. In 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', Yeats confronts the question of how 'the poet who thinks in images' can 'write without images'. Vendler remarks that, because Yeats's images have 'deserted him, he gives us, perforce, a poem of assertion rather than a poem of images', yet as Yeats – 'the imageless poet' – struggles against the sterility of his Muse during the course of this poem, his imagination finally bursts forth 'with a shattering cascade of ten images'. The lesson learned from this double reading: 'Yeats shows us the clearest proof that for him it was indispensable not only to think in images but to arrange chains of images in such a way as to make them become the structural, and revelatory, principle of much of his poetry'.

Throughout her studies, Vendler's repeated use of the terms 'active' and 'living' to characterise poetical thinking remains ambiguous, despite its significance for her argument: is the activity referred to the 'actual thinking in the poet's mind' during the process of a poem's composition? Or is it the thinking we must ourselves engage in by grasping a poem's inner form? Vendler is adept at describing the function of individual poetical lines and their contribution to the structure of the poem as a whole; her discussions of Dickinson and Yeats contain especially instructive readings. But to offer a description of a poem's style or inner form is not in any evident manner a reconstruction of 'the anterior thinking that generated its surface, its "visible core".' Vendler claims, in addition, that if we grasp the thought-process of poems, we come to participate in the 'process they unfold'. This 'process' is no longer (just) a process of thinking but an emotional response: 'as we are dropped from the funeral coffin with Dickinson, we sense Reason's giving way'. Yet what is it about poetical thinking that makes emotional participation unavoidable ('we are made')? It cannot be like assenting to a conclusion by way of a logical argument. Nor can it be whimsical, like going along for a ride. It remains unclear whether this emotional response-cum-active thinking *must* coincide with the poet's 'anterior thinking' or whether, on the contrary, it remains independent from it. Is there a distinction to be made between what a

poem allows us to think about and feel on its own terms (according to its degree of poetical intelligence) and whatever 'actual' thinking – to be sure a more complicated affair than is suggested by Vendler's characterisations – gave rise to a poem?

Poets Thinking lacks a set of both fine- and coarse-grained distinctions needed to track the crafting of poetical intelligence. Vendler might simply plead guilty: since poetical thinking 'flickers' and moves with speed, we should not expect to get very far with the 'invariant grids' of the philosopher. Yet Vendler's giddy proliferation of unconvincing metaphors often prevents a reader from discerning precisely how we should describe 'poetical thinking' in any given poem (where, indeed, are the 'aesthetic laws' of poetry?). A study of poets thinking should help us become *clear* about the tangle of intelligence in a poem. Like the knife-grinder, we must attend to the sharpness of thought, not only to the sparkles from the wheel.

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F. W. BATESON MEMORIAL LECTURE 2006

The F. W. Bateson Memorial Lecture 2006 will be given on Wednesday 8 February 2006 at 5 pm in the Examination Schools at Oxford by Rachel Bowlby.

Professor Bowlby's title is 'Family Realism: Freud and Greek Tragedy'.

The lecture will appear in the April 2006 number of *Essays in Criticism*.