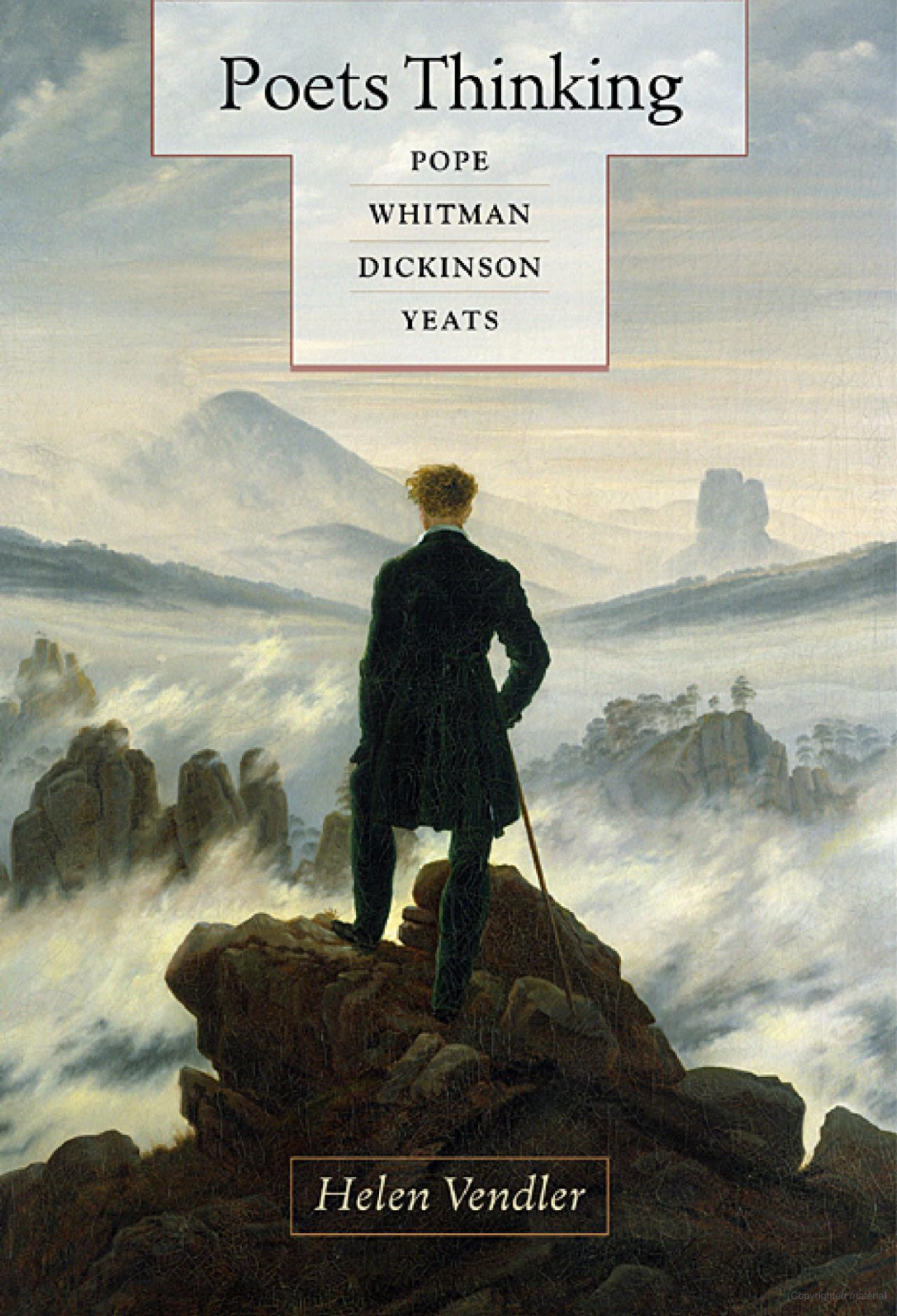
Poets Thinking

POPE

WHITMAN

DICKINSON

YEATS



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Introduction

Ashes denote that Fire was –
Revere the Grayest Pile
For the Departed Creature's sake
That hovered there awhile –

Fire exists the first in light
And then consolidates
Only the Chemist can disclose
Into what Carbonates –

Emily Dickinson[1]

THE PROCESS OF THINKING has usually been defined as a chain of argument, explanation, logical induction, or deduction. Thinking is believed to occur by way of proposed hypotheses, suggested evidence, and rational conclusions. Other mental processes—those of meditation, intuition, belief—are usually not granted the honorific name of thinking. Yet it is evident that many complex, and sometimes profound, operations of the mind must precede our final arranging of an argument, finding a path of explanation, or staging a deduction. We have names for some of these independent operations: classification, reconciling, sequencing. They are considered the underpinnings of thought rather than thinking itself, which is conceived of as an intentional set of rational linkages leading to a convincing result.

Poetry has often been considered an irrational genre, more expressive than logical, more given to meditation than to coherent or defensible argument. The "proofs" it presents are, it is judged,

more fanciful than true, and the experiences it affords are emotional and idiosyncratic rather than dispassionate and universal. The additional fact that poetry is directed by an aesthetic imperative, rather than by a forensic or expository one, casts suspicion on the "thinking" represented within and by poetry. Since poems often change their minds as they proceed, they seem unreliable as processes or products of thought (Whitman: "Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself; I am vast; I contain multitudes"). By contrast to the more "permanent" assertions of philosophy or science, poets seem nonchalant about the durability of their affirmations (Yeats: "Things thought too long can be no longer thought"). The poets themselves have sometimes disparaged "consequitive reasoning" (Keats). And the waywardness of the lives of the poets seems to give the lie to their credibility as purveyors of wisdom. For these and perhaps other reasons, the word "thinking" is not often found in close relation with the word "poetry."

It is not obvious where "thinking" as such (by contrast to "inspiration") occurs in poetry. Is it part of "inspiration?" (But that word means "breathing in," a process hardly comparable to thinking.) Is thinking evident in the finished poem? A poem, after all, need not make an obvious argument; it need not adduce evidence; it need not assert a visibly new insight; it may be independent of a received cultural "system" (Blake: "I must create my own system or be enslaved by another man's"). A poem can be more lighthearted than the usual "thinking" process; it can be satiric, or frivolous, or mischievous. High seriousness may attend it—or may not. Bizarre imaginative fantasies may be what a poem has to offer; or "nonsense"; or some reduction of language that would normally be considered inadequate to "adult" thinking (Blake: "Little lamb, who made thee? / Dost thou know who made thee?"). Unlike the structure of a perspicuous argument, the structure of a poem may be anything but transparent, at least at first glance.

In short, the relation of poetry to thought is an uneasy one.

Some law other than the conduct of an argument is always governing a poem, even when the poem purports to be relating the unfolding of thought. On the other hand, even when a poem seems to be a spontaneous outburst of feeling, it is being directed, as a feat of ordered language, by something one can only call thought. Yet in most accounts of the internal substance of poetry, critics continue to emphasize the imaginative or irrational or psychological or "expressive" base of poetry; it is thought to be an art of which there can be no science.

There have been in the past exceptions to this generalization. I. A. Richards (principally in his teaching) exemplified a philosophically and philologically informed "close reading" of individual poems (without, however, referring the phenomena he described to characteristic authorial patterns); Northrop Frye helped to elucidate the order of thought manifested in literature, especially in the narrative and dramatic genres, but he did not often pursue the process of thinking within a single lyric; Randall Jarrell stressed the feeling and expressivity of individual word-choice; William Empson (although his focus on ambiguity rather militated against a defense of poetic clarity) found the thinking mind intent on creating multiple levels of expression in complex words rather than on evolving a line of inference or argument. One could cite others among the New Critics who wrote cogently on lyric poetry, but whose interest was not centered on the poet's ongoing thinking within a poem: W. K. Wimsatt spoke for the force of rhetoric and for the cognitive echoes (congruent and opposing) between words that rhyme; Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom argued for the psychological complexity that produces "tension" and "paradox" in both the substance and the texture of poetry; Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren emphasized unity of structure and image and the autonomy of the work of art. When a critic such as Kenneth Burke focused on a single poem, it was to demonstrate a theoretical point (such as "symbolic action") rather than to remain with the poem as an object, unique in itself, but participating in iden-

tifiable (and characteristic) authorial aesthetic patterns. More recently, we have seen the urgently voiced theory of Harold Bloom, whose practical criticism employs a discourse relying more on exalted assertion than on assembled evidence.

I learned, of course, from these admired critics (and was taught in my youth by Richards and Frye). I see in retrospect that my predecessors normally viewed a poem as an essentially static object, an entity that could be seen as a "verbal icon" (a stylized picture to be gazed upon) or as "a well-wrought urn" (an object with weight, solidity, and finite boundaries), or (in the case of R. P. Blackmur) as a "gesture" formed out of language, arrested in its signification. Although subsidiary notions of the poem as a "stream of consciousness" can be found in some of these critics (Burke and Bloom especially), in no case was the poem depicted primarily as a fluid construction that could change its mind as it proceeded. Nor was the poem seen principally as a work bent on following the lead of a law of aesthetic thinking, a work mimicking, in its motions, distinctive mental operations characteristic of its author. (The most comprehensive theorist of the fluid view of lyric has been the contemporary poet A. R. Ammons, not only in his poetry but also in his enlightening essays.)

I was, and am, more interested in developmental questions pertaining to an author's poetic oeuvre as a whole, and in single poems as examples of aesthetically directed fluidity, than I am in pursuing an all-purpose theory of lyric or a single aspect (rhetorical, imagistic) of technique. When, as a young student, I read literary critics, I longed for them to dwell on, and above all to explain, the aesthetic intent governing the unfolding of an individual poem, and wanted as well to see them track the aesthetic determinants of an entire oeuvre. What I did not find, I have tried to create—a criticism guided by the poem as an exemplification of its own inner momentum rather than as an illustration of a social, philosophical, psychological, rhetorical, or theoretical thesis. Criticism, I believe, while being alert to the smallest nuances of language-use, ought to

style—extending to all planes of the poem from the imaginative to the musical—it follows that on the plane of thought poets will not resemble each other, that they will devise characteristic and recognizable patterns of thinking, which may themselves change over time, of course, but will also exhibit within each poet a psychological continuity. Because each poet is so distinctive in patterns of mental expression, my topic—poets thinking—cannot be generalized, but must be approached poet by poet. My case histories here are four.

In the case of Alexander Pope, I show a poet thinking (as he composes the *Essay on Man*) about a certain genre (the philosophical essay) and its characteristic form of discourse (assertion followed by exemplum). Pope asks himself how to create a poetically interesting version of the exposition of received "philosophical" ideas, with the aim of revealing (as philosophical essays decidedly do not) what thinking is "really" like as it happens. By miniaturizing and parodying intellectual discourse, he makes visible the sort of thinking that vividly occurs within his own mercurial and satiric mind.

In the case of Whitman, I focus on the genre of reprise (a frequent one in his poetry), in which something is articulated once, and then articulated again. This genre is provoked by a rethinking that motivates and enacts a second, aestheticized and more intellectual presentation of an earlier-sketched perceptual scene. I consider in passing both the advantages and the dangers of the reprise form: its advantage in representing the supervening of the aesthetic on the impressionistic; its disadvantage in sometimes creating a withdrawn observer of life rather than an intimate participant in it. Whitman's struggle between these two positions creates the drama of his reprise-poems.

In the case of Dickinson, I observe the way thinking can be continued through, and processed by means of, a repeating series. To this end, I examine in Dickinson's poetry a single template—the short narrative "plot"—as it appears in various modulations. I as-

sume that the narrative structure of a poem testifies to the thinking (and feeling) antecedent to its expression, and I contrast Dickinson's "ideal" temporal structure (a serial step-by-step progress) with the abrupt and even chaotic rearrangements of temporal sequence that she is forced to invent in order to be faithful to her developing perception of what life's "plots" have actually turned out to be.

Finally, in the case of Yeats, I look at the way a poet can pursue the process of thinking by substituting for a second-order philosophical argument a montage of first-order images which supplement, or in some cases replace altogether, discursive statement. The mistrust of propositional statement as the sole means of intellectual accuracy reaches its height in some late poems of Yeats, in which identity itself is conceived as process, and a succession of images becomes the only way to disclose the truths, temporary and permanent alike, of identity.

There is nothing especially significant about the choice of cases here. My question—by what means does a poet reproduce an individual and characteristic process of thinking?—can be addressed to any work. I wanted, in planning the lectures which occasioned this book, to exemplify styles of poetic thinking that resort to various means: parody, reprise, serial sequence, and images. I also wanted to choose cases from a fairly long span of time, and to include examples from England, the United States, and Ireland. I ruled out, as cases, those poets who seem especially "philosophical" (Donne, Eliot, Stevens), because to discuss their relation to thinking would require an argument different from the one I am pursuing here: it would require distinguishing the nature of ruminative meditations in verse from ruminative meditations in prose.[4] Although it is self-evident that no philosopher ever wrote like Pope, it is possible to align the more reflective writings of Donne (the *Anniversaries*), Eliot *(Four Quartets),* or Stevens ("Sunday Morning") with certain fashions of religious or philosophical expression (scholastic philosophy, Anglican theology, Santayana's essays). Such parallels may il-

luminate the absorptive consciousness "behind" the poems, but the aesthetic specificity of each poem tends to disappear under the pressure of arguing for a common ideology. I have encountered this problem most disturbingly in reading philosophically oriented work on Stevens, in which the invoked philosophical parallels tend to suffocate the poet's aesthetic originality. I decided, therefore, to take as examples of lyric thinking forms of poetic discourse that could not possibly be closely analogized to the discourse of philosophical thought.

In poems, thinking is made visible not only to instruct but also to delight; it must enter somehow into the imaginative and linguistic fusion engaged in by the poem. While retaining its fierce intelligence, poetic thinking must not unbalance the poem in the direction of "thought." Yeats said (in "The Phases of the Moon") that at the aesthetic moment "all thought becomes an image," reminding us that poetry abstracts "reality"—including the reality of human thinking—into symbolic forms. The image itself, as both the product of thought and the bearer of thought, becomes thought made visible. Pope's spider feeling along the line, Whitman's spider sending out filaments, Dickinson's inventive night-spider ("A spider sewed at night"), Frost's albino spider ("Design") are not so much natural phenomena as images embodying thought. It is not enough to say that they are "emblems" with an allegorical "meaning": such labeling removes them from their participation in the ongoing thought-process which, as it produces the poem, summons them forth. By embedding such "emblems" in the intellectual and emotional turbulence within which they originate and which they help to clarify, I hope to establish poets as people who are *always* thinking, who create texts that embody elaborate and finely precise (and essentially unending) meditation. From the "Carbonates" that poets leave behind, we can deduce, as Dickinson asserts, the "fire [that] was," a fire as intellectual in its light as it is passionate in its heat.