HELEN VENDLER

# The Ocean, the Bird and the Scholar

*essays on poets & poetry*

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978-0-674-73656-6 (hardcover : alk. paper)
978-0-674-42574-3 (EPUB)
978-0-674-42573-6 (MOBI)
978-0-674-42572-9 (PDF)

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*The Library of Congress has cataloged the printed edition as follows:*
Vendler, Helen, 1933–
The ocean, the bird, and the scholar : essays on poets and poetry / Helen Vendler.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Poetry. 2. Poetics. I. Title.
PN1031.V365 2015
818.1—dc23
2014040692

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# Introduction

## Intensities

In giving an account of my life as a critic, I want to begin with the three most intense episodes of my own learning: the most decisive one, the eeriest one, and the most anguishing one.[1]

The most decisive intensity accompanied my instinctive conviction that I should write solely on poetry. When I was in graduate school, one had to classify oneself as a scholar of a certain historical period in England or America. I called myself, when forced to do so, "a Victorian." Yet I had seen that many of my teachers, though officially scholars of a given period, were internally something else. These were the poetry people—Rosemond Tuve, Douglas Bush—who, no matter what their period, taught chiefly poetry rather than plays or novels. I sensed that I too belonged to that crypto-group of poetry people, and it gave me a ratifying satisfaction to vow that whatever "the profession" might think of me, I would always write only about poetry, without confining myself to a single century or a single country. (Some years ago, in the papers of a close friend who had died, I came across a letter I had written to her when I was in my early twenties, describing the poets I wanted to write about: they came from several different periods and from both England and America, so my resolve was firm even then.)

The eeriest intensity of my history was aroused by my discovery, at twenty-three, of the poetry of Wallace Stevens. It was as if my own naked spirit spoke to me from the page. I'd read dozens of poets by the

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time I came across Stevens, and I'd memorized scores of poems, but it was through him that I understood style as personality, style as the actual material body of inner being. Before I could make out, in any paraphrasable way, Stevens's poems, I knew, as by telepathy, what they meant emotionally. This experience was so peculiar that I was overcome by a desire to know how that perfusion, which somehow bypassed intellectual translation, was accomplished. All my later work has stemmed from the compulsion to explain the direct power of idiosyncratic style in conveying the import of poetry.

If the discovery of lyric as a field was the most decisive episode of my life as a critic, and the impact of Stevens, revealing to me my consuming interest in linguistic and structural idiosyncrasy, the eeriest one, the most anguishing episode came when I was thirty-four, in 1967. I was divorced, raising my son, David, receiving minimal child support ($90 per month), and working very hard teaching ten courses a year—four each term (of which one was night-school overload) and two each summer. I'd published my dissertation on Yeats in 1963, but I hadn't been able to write in a continuous fashion since then. I'd failed to make progress with a book on George Herbert, realizing that I'd have to train myself further in Renaissance poetry, a task I didn't then have time for. Instead, I had begun a book on Stevens, but my energy was flagging, and I had no money for child care or household help. One night, exhausted, I tried to think how to make my life easier. I obviously had to continue teaching and keeping house and taking care of my young son. The only way I could make my life easier was to give up writing. "They can't make me," I said to myself in panic and fear and rage. "They can't make me do that." I suppose "They" were the Fates, or the Stars, but I knew that to stop writing would be a form of self-murder. I decided to apply for a Fulbright Professorship to obtain a respite. After a year of mandarin leisure in Bordeaux in 1968–1969, teaching three hours a week, everything improved: I was tenured and had a lighter teaching load; David was a little older.

Because my son was an only child, and I thought he needed an available companion in the house, I had resolved never to work when he was at home and awake. Such as it was, my life of learning and teaching —indistinguishable to me from my life of writing—was a patchy, often fatigued, and always anxious one. As my son got older, the precious nighttime hours after he went to sleep shrank in extent; soon, like any

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adolescent, he was staying up later than I was. My life of studying and writing then began to take place, contrary to my circadian rhythm, in the early hours of the morning. I envied my male colleagues, who, in those days, seemed to have everything done for them by their spouses. Marjorie Nicolson's essay saying that what a woman scholar needed was a wife never seemed truer.

## Being a Critic

Over time, I've written books on poets from Shakespeare to Seamus Heaney, with Herbert and Keats and Yeats and Stevens and Dickinson in between. The choice of a single genre as a field of expertise is still hardly acknowledged in job advertisements, yet how many scholars or critics can teach—or write about—all the genres equally well? The fundamentally different structures of literature—linear in narrative, dialectic in drama, and concentric in lyric—and the historical failures (except in unusual cases) of great poets to write workable plays or novels (or great novelists to write memorable lyrics) suggest basic incompatibilities among the genres. I only once, in want of money, agreed to review a novel (Mary McCarthy's *Birds of America* for the *New York Times Book Review*), and although I don't think the review was mistaken, I felt such guilt at falsifying my competence that I never again consented to write on fiction.

I must say something about the vocation that separates me from the "scholar"—at least from what the typical scholar is thought to be. I'm a critic rather than a scholar, a reader and writer more taken by texts than by contexts. From the time I was very young I continually asked myself, as I read through the works of poets, why some texts seemed so much more accomplished and moving than others. Why was Milton's "L'Allegro" more satisfactory than his "On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of a Cough"? I believed, and still do, that anyone literate in poetry could see that the one was superior to the other. (Those who suppose there are no criteria for such judgments merely expose their own incapacity.) Still, to clarify to oneself and then to others, in a reasonable and explicit way, the imaginative individuality of a poem and to give evidence of its architectural and technical skill isn't an easy task. I've been brought to mute frustration by it when I know intuitively that something is present in the poem that I haven't yet been able to

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isolate or name or describe or solve. In chapter 12 of *Lord Jim*, Joseph Conrad remarks on "that mysterious, almost miraculous, power of producing striking effects by means impossible of detection which is the last word of the highest art." I wanted, hardly knowing how, to detect the means of that power.

A critic of my sort is, I suppose, "learned" in a way—that is, she has a memory for stories, styles, and structures she has seen before, and she understands the expressive possibilities latent in writing (from the larger forms of myth and narrative to the almost invisible arrangements of prepositions and articles). She remembers the combinations and permutations of words and syntax that she has come across, and is curious about the power of new assemblages. Against the background of known structures, she recognizes and defines original ones, finding names for them and inventing taxonomies in which they might be arranged. Her "learning" resembles the "learning" of poets, which, though deeply etymological and architectonic, is often unsystematic and idiosyncratic. She often fails at the most elementary undertakings of "scholarly" life, such as remembering facts, entering polemical debates, and relating works to the political or philosophical history of their era. She has—at least I have—no capacity for broad synthetic statements.

Since every generalization needs an anecdote, I recall here the time I was hastily asked to substitute for a colleague in a term course in Romantic Poetry. I knew and loved the work of the six poets that I was to teach, but I felt some obligation, since I was preparing a "period course," to make some general remarks, to evoke some synthetic connections among the poets. I mentally tried out every sentence I could think of beginning "The Romantic poets are" or "The Romantic poets do" and, finding none of them true, descended to looking for smaller sentences that began, "Wordsworth and Coleridge both" or "Byron and Keats equally," and so on. Any completion I could think of was either otiose ("wrote blank verse") or thematic ("responded to the French Revolution"). Looking into scholarly books didn't help me. I told the students that I would teach them about the poetry of each poet individually, but that poets are entirely too idiosyncratic to be compared with each other, and when poems are considered under gross thematic rubrics, all generic and linguistic originality vanishes from sight. My end-of-term evaluations came back saying, "She was fine on individual poets, but she didn't tell us anything about Romanticism." (I learned not

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to apologize to students beforehand.)

Like all writers, I've had to accept the limits of my own capacities: the intricacies of poetic style and imagination are to me as compelling as the labyrinths of ideology or history to others. And just as I would be incompetent as a theorist or a new historicist, I've seen that many scholars are incompetent as interpreters of poetry. To understand a poem it's necessary above all to understand its functional stylistic elements; when a scholar—without a profound knowledge of the poet's work—swoops in on a single poem to illustrate an ideological point, he or she tends to falsify both the poem and the poet in question. There is no ready and easy way to take the measure of a lyric: it must be seen in itself and as part of an individual oeuvre and as part of a literary tradition before it can be used to support any scholarly point at all.

## Beginnings

What makes a critic? Parental legends of my childhood all had to do with words: that I began to talk at nine months; that by the time I was one, I knew a hundred words (that story is true; we found, after my parents' death, a list in the desk headed "Words Sister knew at one"); that at two, hearing my four-year-old sister say the "Our Father" in Latin, I asked from my crib, "Daddy, can I say it too?" and did. (Why any father would *want* to teach his four-year-old to recite the *Pater Noster* is another question.) My mother (who by the rules of the Boston school system had to relinquish at marriage her work as a primary-school teacher) was the fount of poetry in the house, quoting it frequently in conversation; my father was the (often unreasonable) pedagogical experimenter, seeing how far he could press us to learn new languages. From working as a paymaster for the United Fruit Company in Cuba and later teaching English in Puerto Rico, my father was fluent in Spanish; he added French and Italian during postgraduate study to qualify as a high-school teacher of Romance languages. So we children too (my sister and I, that is; my brother, refusing, simply fled the house after school) were to learn first Spanish, and then French, and then Italian at home. At the same time, Latin was being purveyed to us at church and at my Catholic elementary school (we sang high and low Mass, the standard Latin hymns, and such "extras" as the Holy Week *Tenebrae*, as well as the Psalms in antiphonal chorus). Classical Latin—

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Caesar and Virgil—was added in high school. Language took on, under these many forms, a strange and inexplicable shimmer, and I soon saw the disparate poetic effects possible in different linguistic and prosodic systems. My father gave us simple poems in Spanish—Bécquer, Darío—and I added them to the store of English poems I was finding in the anthologies in the house. In high school it was French poets that drew me, especially Ronsard (because I had discovered Shakespeare's sonnets) and Baudelaire (because I had discovered T. S. Eliot). The natural act of a critic is to compare, and I was always comparing.

I was always writing, too. When I wrote my first "poem" at six, I thought that a poem was something that scanned and rhymed. It wasn't until I was fifteen, when I read and memorized a whole batch of Shakespeare's sonnets, that I saw that a poem could tell the truth about one's inner being. In a night of what then seemed visionary insight, I wrote, at one sitting, five Shakespearean sonnets, and launched myself into a steady and secret writing of verse. It was for the following ten years the only honest part of my life.

## Impediments

Most of my life was not honest. I was raised in an exaggeratedly observant Catholic household; my mother took us with her to daily Mass. From the time I went to school at four, my every day except Sunday began with a sung Requiem Mass, since in a large parish every day was necessarily the monthly or yearly anniversary of someone's death. With the Mass and the *Dies Irae* as daily bread, my imagination was never deprived. Against the disappointments and losses of her life, my mother shored the comforts of religion, which included writing conventional devotional verse that was faultless in prosody if in nothing else; it was occasionally published in Catholic journals. (My mother's mother, whose North Carolinian father had been a public scribe in Boston, had written verse, too, my mother told me.) As soon as I began, at eleven, to ask questions of my mother about matters of doctrine that I found incredible—from the Virgin Birth to the Resurrection—or matters of practice that I found intolerable—such as the prohibitions on birth control and divorce—she simply reiterated her belief in the Church as guide in matters of faith and morals, and closed off discussion. I began to feel both heretical and isolated.

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I pleaded to be allowed to go to the Boston Girls' Latin School, as I was later to plead to be allowed to go to Radcliffe, but in both cases my parents denied me my wish. (In the second case, they were obeying Cardinal Cushing's forbidding from the pulpit, under pain of mortal sin, education at godless, atheistic, secular universities—it was the era of McCarthy.) In Roman Catholic elementary school, high school, and college, I couldn't ever publicly reveal what I was thinking. In college, two friends and I heard that certain nuns had warned other girls against us as a "bad element." We were innocent virgins, living soberly at home with our parents and getting A's; and we didn't understand. Much later, when I told this story to Czesław Miłosz, he laughed and said that one of the Jesuits in his high school had said to him at fifteen, "Miłosz, you have a criminal face." They knew us before we knew ourselves.

I'd expected to concentrate in English literature in college, but literature, I discovered with disgust, was taught as a branch of faith and morals. (This experience inoculated me forever against adopting any "ism" as a single lens through which to interpret literature.) I thought perhaps the French Department would be different, but there the study of French literature jumped more or less from Molière to Péguy, because Diderot, Pascal, Voltaire, Flaubert, Zola, Proust, and so on, were all on the Index of Forbidden Books and could not be assigned for reading. In desperation, I turned to the sciences, where faith and morals could not corrupt intellectual life. In my classes in chemistry, biology, physics, and mathematics, not only did I come upon a new way of looking at the world but I also learned the useful logic of sequential and evidential exposition, which helped form the way I write. Unsure of what I should do with my major in chemistry, I took the Medical College Admission Test and applied for a Fulbright in mathematics. I was awarded the Fulbright, shelved the idea of applying to medical school, and went to Belgium. On realizing that I was for the first time in my life out of my parents' power, I changed from mathematics back to literature (with the permission of the Fulbright authorities), and wrote to Harvard requesting admission to the PhD program in English.

During all this time of unwilling incarceration in religious environments, my poems were the only place I met myself. I submitted one to the college poetry contest; it won but wasn't allowed to be printed in the college magazine, because it was thought by the nun-advisor to be indecent. It began:

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The mind's a prostitute at heart,
Knows no joy until the hour
The innocent curtains are blown apart,
Olympus presses a golden shower.

Nor fastidious, either—as welcome is
A bull as swan, if Jove's beneath.
The willing girl is first to kiss
The milky horn, the orange beak.

I meant every word of it; the only simile I could find for the appetitiveness and promiscuity of the mind in the presence of whatever would carry it off to a new place was a sexual one. It was longing and then elation that I felt when hunting down truth and having it burst upon me, but I was too ignorant at that time to know that prostitution had no longing or elation in it.

My verse writing continued sporadically in graduate school. I felt, though, that there was something my poems didn't have, though I tried to make them both emotionally accurate and formally competent. At last, as I happily wrote my dissertation, I found my true genre, the more prosaic one of criticism, and my desire to write poetry slipped away. (I much later realized that I don't possess the Coleridgean "continual reverie" of imagination; I don't live life on two planes at once as imaginative people do.) I felt some guilt about ceasing to write poetry, and wondered whether I had betrayed a vocation. In my thirties, I was at a party where Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Elizabeth Bishop were present, and one of them asked me if I wrote poetry. I confessed to my lingering guilt and self-questioning about stopping. They laughed me to scorn, telling me that if I'd been meant to be a poet and had tried to stop, I'd immediately have found myself prey to migraines, indigestion, insomnia, or something worse, that the Muse will not be balked of her own. I felt much better.

The familial and educational impediments I've described helped, I suppose, to make me a critic. I was always having, as an adolescent, to inquire into what I *did* think if I didn't think what everyone without exception around me did; and then I had to ask *why* I thought such things; and then I had to look for verification in other sources (operas, poems, autobiographies, never novels) of the attitudes I'd adopted. My first external action stemming from independence of thinking came

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when I was fifteen. It was customary, once a year at Sunday Mass, for the congregation to stand en masse and "take the pledge of the Legion of Decency," promising publicly not to attend any movies rated C ("objectionable") or D ("condemned"). My family—along with everyone else in the parish church—stood up to take the pledge. I remained grimly, obstinately, and conspicuously seated. Of course nobody said a word to me about it: the practice of the house was never to air anything. But from then on my parents knew that I had set my will against theirs, powerless though I was in every practical way. After I left my parents' house, I never again went to church. In spite of the grandeur and pathos of the Christian myths, I couldn't square them with my young and fierce worship of truth. Writing, I think, became in my adult life a compensation for all the years of mutinous silence at home and at school.

## Furtherings

The first sustained and positive experience that helped make me a critic was a year spent at Boston University as a special student when I was twenty-two. Harvard, in the person of the chairman of the English Department, had replied, when I wrote from Belgium wanting to apply to the PhD program, that I had no qualifications. I wrote back, asking what I would have to do to be qualified. An equally dismissive letter said, "Well, you could take English courses, and then apply." I came back from my Fulbright, lived uneasily at home, went to Boston University, enrolled in six English courses each semester, took the Graduate Record Examination, and applied to Harvard, which admitted me. At BU, my teachers led me from my literally medieval upbringing into the expansive precincts of secular thought. (I recall a teacher in a Renaissance course beginning his opening lecture by explaining that once upon a time people actually believed in such things as Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell; I felt like gesturing in the general direction of my parents' house.) One of my teachers at BU, Morton Berman, gave me my first permanent model of delightful and thought-provoking teaching. In his quick-witted, vivid, and penetrating lectures, he entered with entire sympathy into the minds of the writers he taught, from Carlyle to Hopkins, from Newman to Tennyson. And he took his students seriously. To write about literature for such a teacher was to feel all the

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old constricting bonds unloosed, to see vistas of possible Elysian fields of the mind. (I dedicated my third book to him.) And Boston University —after my sequestration and confinement in all-female religious schools—seemed an intellectual Utopia, proving that students of all ages, races, sexes, classes, and religions could learn together. I had at last found a world I could live in, and I've never regretted the world I left.

The hatred, frustration, and fear that had dominated my emotions in adolescence gradually drained away as I experienced two of the great blessings of adult life, friendship and motherhood. These new dimensions made me conscious of what I'd found lacking in most of the scholarly and critical prose to which I'd been exposed: that is, a rich sense of the passions underlying and motivating literary expression. The base of poetry in the emotions was tacitly ignored in scholarship and criticism, and yet I felt one couldn't understand the way a poem evolves stylistically without acknowledging that base. If there was any conscious drive in me to alter the field of criticism as I encountered it, it was to insert into the analysis of lyric an analysis of its motivating emotions and convictions, and to demonstrate their stylistic results.

By thirty I had found, finally, freedom and affection, and had left what I saw as falsehood and repression in a search for truth and expressiveness. When I dedicated my first book of essays to my son, I did it with a quotation from Ben Jonson which expressed at its close the qualities I wanted both for us as a family and for my work: "Freedom and truth; with love from those begot."

## The Profession

My first professional experience as a graduate student was to hear the chairman of the English Department of Harvard say to me warningly, as he signed my program card during the opening week of classes, "You know we don't want you here, Miss Hennessy: we don't want any women here." I left his office trembling. (Thirteen years later, he apologized.) There were still professors in 1956 who would not admit women to their seminars. Almost all of the women admitted to the English PhD program at Harvard left. In those days, the structural difficulties in the way of women's success were hardly understood: women PhD's followed their nonacademic husbands to towns where

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there was no university or college; or to colleges where rules concerning nepotism prohibited their working where their husband worked; or to colleges restricted to male teachers and students; or to universities unwilling to hire a woman who was a wife and mother. The social pressure to have the "normal" number of children, and to stop working after children were born, was strongly felt. Doubts about women's intellectual powers were still widespread. And as women PhD's, defeated by these factors, fell by the wayside, the professors who had trained them became increasingly skeptical of the worth of investing in students who would probably never practice their profession. Women entering the Graduate School at Harvard felt their secondary status.

On the other hand, there were several professors in the department of English who were as eager to support women as men, and I had the luck to be taught by some of these. One (John Kelleher, who, as a literary historian and poet, never forgot the link of literature to life) recommended my thesis on Yeats to the Harvard University Press; another (Douglas Bush, who, like John Kelleher, knew the poems he taught by heart) sent my name the year after I earned my PhD to the Guggenheim Foundation; and a third (Reuben Brower) later invited me to co-publish with him. Perhaps the most important influence on me at Harvard was I. A. Richards. I had wanted to take his course (I already knew his work), but the chairman, with a scornful remark in that first interview ("He's not even a member of the department!"), forbade it, scratching out the course number himself on my program card and writing in a course in Chaucer. But he couldn't prevent me from auditing Richards's course, and I found in his lectures how meditation on a poem could open into further and further depths of perception. Rosemond Tuve came to Harvard for a year as a sabbatical replacement for Harry Levin; her seminar on Spenser taught me to think of poems in terms of genre, and we became lifelong friends. Northrop Frye visited, too; I was one of the crowd that had the thrilling experience of hearing *The Anatomy of Criticism* delivered orally before it saw publication. When I came to write my dissertation, I asked myself whose prose style I admired, and (knowing myself incapable of Douglas Bush's wit) turned to Frye as a model. Because I admired clarity, and Frye was always clear, I studied his sentences and his paragraphs, and learned from his example how to write a chapter. (I learned, later, much more about writing a book from my brilliant editor at the Harvard University

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Press, Margaretta Fulton.)

Though the profession as a whole was not friendly to women, stubborn persistence, at least in some cases, could carry the day. My first job was at Cornell, and when at midyear I had a baby, the chairman deprived me of teaching, declaring that those who had had babies knew that people with babies couldn't teach. At last, through the kind intervention of my colleague Stephen Parrish, the chairman relented and gave me a single spring-term 8 A.M. section of Freshman English. (Nobody but graduate students taught at 8 A.M.; I got up at six o'clock, readied myself and the baby, drove the baby three houses down the street to the babysitter, drove around the lake to class from eight to nine o'clock, drove back and picked up the baby at nine thirty, and felt I didn't have a job at all except when I was grading papers at night.) The following year the chairman gave me my job back full time and, deciding I was serious, began to ask me to substitute in courses above the freshman level as colleagues went on leave; in my third year he asked me to give a course of my own. A striking advance in my literary learning came at Cornell when I audited Paul de Man's course in Valéry, Rilke, and Stevens; I encountered deconstruction (in which I had already been implicitly tutored by Stevens's poetry) and found it useful in its salutary countering of unity, coherence, and emphasis with dispersal, contradiction, and disjunction.

The profession, when I entered it, was not unfriendly to literary criticism, though many colleagues considered criticism lightweight by comparison to "real" scholarship. What the field *was* unfriendly to was reviewing, which was referred to as "mere journalism." I, on the other hand, took reviewing as the occasion for serious thought, and didn't see why it should be looked down on. Because of my slender means, I took every reviewing job I could get; reviewing was an agreeable and intellectual way to earn money, and it became for me a self-seminar in the new. To be asked to write on a new book by John Berryman or James Merrill or Elizabeth Bishop was already a joy; and reviewing to a word limit for the general public taught me to aim in my prose for concision and a personal voice. After I had been writing for some years for the *New York Times Book Review* and the *New York Review of Books*, I had a call from William Shawn of the *New Yorker*, asking me to be their poetry critic. To me as to everyone writing for him, Mr. Shawn gave free rein, unlimited space, and genial encouragement.

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I should tell the tale of my very first *New Yorker* review, because it sheds light on Mr. Shawn's character. I was asked to review the collected poems of an author who had recently died. I wrote truthfully on the scope and limits of the author's work, and sent off the review. Then came a phone call from Mr. Shawn: "Mrs. Vendler, I very much liked your review; it was interesting and well done. But I wanted to explain that I don't feel I can print it." (My heart sank.) "You see, there are things in it that I believe might hurt the feelings of the poet's widow, and I wouldn't want to be responsible for that." (I hadn't reckoned on live people being connected with a dead poet.) But Mr. Shawn kindly went on to add, "I'm sure there will be something else very soon that we'll want you to do for us"—and he kept his word. I wrote for the magazine for many years, until a new editor changed its character. Luckily, other editors continued to give me space, especially Robert Silvers of the *New York Review of Books,* and some new editors took me on (among them Leon Wieseltier of the *New Republic* and Mary-Kay Wilmers of the *London Review of Books*).

Along with reviewing, I continued to write books on individual poets. To me the most extraordinary drama in literature—and the best context in which to investigate stylistics—is the development of a poet from callow imitation into full lyric mastery. I was helped in thinking about that process of development by two resources. In reflecting on its emotional and intellectual factors, I was influenced by Freud, as was natural to a member of my generation, and especially to one reading poets who had undergone psychotherapy: Lowell, Bishop, Berryman, Plath, Sexton. The husband of my close friend Marguerite Stewart owned the complete Freud, and I often browsed in those volumes when I was in their house. I learned from Freud's seductive expository style as well as his provocative content. The second resource that influenced me in studying the poets' development and the consequent changes in their style was the discipline of linguistics. My then husband, Zeno Vendler, was a linguist as well as a philosopher, and his library of books on linguistics gave me, when we were first married, a new way into the minutiae of style. Stylistics is a relatively undefined field, sometimes practiced by linguists, sometimes by critics; it has had a more continuous tradition in European than in Anglo-American criticism. However, linguists and stylisticians too often separate the elements of style from the total imaginative practice of a poet and from the

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psychological and intellectual motivations of verse. In writing on poets, I have wanted to connect inseparably—as they are connected in the fluent progress of a poem—imagination, feeling, and stylistic originality. Each poet presents a new stylistic field; and one must perceive, in each case, a map by which one can draw a path from stylistic result back to imaginative and emotional cause. My life as a critic has really been a life of coming to understand the expressive powers of the English language over several centuries as they are idiosyncratically invented and modulated by lyric poets.

Each of my books on a single author has had a polemical purpose as well as a descriptive one. These were, in sequence: to interpret Yeats's *Vision* as less a book of occult doctrine than as a thesis on poetics; to rehabilitate Stevens's longer poems in objecting to the view (most vividly expressed by Randall Jarrell) that they were elephantine and ponderous; to show (*contra* Coleridge and others) that an atheist's reading of Herbert could reveal the power and fineness of his poetry to those who didn't share his religious beliefs; to argue that Keats's odes exist not only as detached poems but also as a purposive sequence working out reflections on poetics that rebut associationist and sensationalist theories of the arts; to insist, in my second book on Stevens, that he was far from being the cold and solely intellectual writer represented by his conventional reputation; to consider Shakespeare's sonnets as individual experiments in lyric language and structure rather than as narrative sites of thematic expression; and to represent Seamus Heaney, whose poetry had so often been treated exclusively within political or national frameworks, as a writer who made original interventions in almost all the lyric genres. In commenting on Dickinson, I wanted to show her blasphemous and harsher moments as much as her well-known charm and despair.

I've sometimes been characterized as a "formalist" critic: indeed, Frank Lentricchia (before his apostasy from his earlier positions) once called me the "Queen of Formalism"—two neo-Marxist denunciations in one. The label "formalist," it should be recalled, was in the earlier part of this century a term of abuse bestowed on their enemies by Marxist theorists of literature. To call someone a formalist is to accuse that person of being an elitist concerned with the technical carapace of art to the exclusion of its intellectual, human, and material significance. "Formalist" is always, even now, a term used pejoratively. I prefer, for

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what I do, the classical label of "commentary" or Pater's label, "aesthetic criticism." The presumption of commentary, from the first classical commentaries down to our own day, is that literary works are complex enough in thought and style to solicit detailed intellectual and critical reflection; the presumption of aesthetic criticism is that artworks have not been seen accurately until the intrinsic relations governing the structural and formal shapes they assume are perceived and accounted for. An aesthetic critic is naturally concerned with the generic and formal aspects of an artwork, its implicit poetics, its internal structures of relation, its intellectual argument, and its expressive means, but such a critic wants also to deduce and describe the internal factors motivating the invention of such idiosyncratic forms. Form is content as deployed. Content is form as imagined.

During my years of teaching, some members of the profession became unfriendly to aesthetic criticism, finding it either "naive" or "essentialist." They also became unfriendly to lyric poetry itself: lyrics were too short to be good texts for deconstructive purposes, and novels and plays appeared to be more suitable sites for the information retrieval about social conditions on which a politicized criticism depends. An agonized article in *PMLA* asked why the study of poetry had gone under. But in spite of such transient professional attitudes, the appetite of the young for the study of poetry hasn't abated. When scholars in English departments haven't provided it, the young have infiltrated programs in creative writing or in foreign languages to find it. The young respond to poetry for the same reason I did at their age: poems, as histories of human consciousness, describe complex truths of human response, and they structure words with particular force, wit, charm, intellectual responsibility, and plangency. In fact, when a life experience arrives that is as yet unrepresented in lyrics, the young person accustomed to being accompanied in life by poems feels desperately at a loss, as I did when I encountered the absence of significant poems on that mysterious emotional upheaval known as motherhood. We still lack a great poet writing great poems on that subject, although Sylvia Plath made a beginning.

The larger problem for critics, professionally speaking, is that American culture is as yet too young to prize poetry—or, for that matter, any complex form of intellectuality except perhaps science (because science "works," and our New World history has made us

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pragmatists). America, having sloughed off Europe, is still too raw and ignorant to be proud of its own native achievements in art and poetry and music. A student can graduate from high school in the United States without knowing that there ever was an American architect or composer or painter or sculptor or philosopher, and without reading any of the more complex poems written by our American authors. That, I think, will change as we eventually become proud of the significant artworks composed on our own soil, and incorporate them, as part of the patrimony of our patriotism, into the general education of the young. Meanwhile, those of us living within what Stevens called “the radiant and productive atmosphere” of poetry transmit as far as we can, in books and in the classroom, the beautiful, subversive, sustaining, bracing, and demanding legacy of the poets. The pieces of writing in this collection were written in the belief that poetry belongs to all, but that its audience often needs—as I do still—paths into its inexhaustible precincts.

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# 1

# The Ocean, the Bird, and the Scholar

## *How the Arts Help Us to Live*

When it became useful in educational circles in the United States to group various university disciplines under the name "The Humanities," it seems to have been tacitly decided that philosophy and history would be cast as the core of this grouping, and that other forms of learning—the study of languages, literatures, religion, and the arts—would be relegated to subordinate positions. Philosophy, conceived of as embodying truth, and history, conceived of as a factual record of the past, were proposed as the principal embodiments of Western culture, and given pride of place in general education programs.

But this confidence in a reliable factual record, not to speak of faith in a reliable philosophical synthesis, has undergone considerable erosion. Historical and philosophical assertions issue, it seems, from particular vantage points, and are no less contestable than the assertions of other disciplines. The day of limiting cultural education to Western culture alone is over. There are losses here, of course—losses in depth of learning, losses in coherence—but these very changes have thrown open the question of how the humanities should now be conceived, and how the study of the humanities should, in this moment, be encouraged.

I want to propose that the humanities should take, as their central objects of study, not the texts of historians or philosophers, but the products of aesthetic endeavor: art, dance, music, literature, theater, architecture, and so on. After all, it is by their arts that cultures are principally remembered. For every person who has read a Platonic dialogue, there are probably ten who have seen a Greek marble in a

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museum; or if not a Greek marble, at least a Roman copy; or if not a Roman copy, at least a photograph. Around the arts there exist, in orbit, the commentaries on art produced by scholars: musicology and music criticism, art history and art criticism, literary and linguistic studies. At the periphery we might set the other humanistic disciplines—philosophy, history, the study of religion. The arts would justify a broad philosophical interest in ontology, phenomenology, and ethics; they would bring in their train a richer history than one which, in its treatment of mass phenomena, can lose sight of individual human uniqueness—the quality most prized in artists, and most salient, and most valued, in the arts.

What would be the advantage of centering humanistic study on the arts? The arts present the whole uncensored human person—in emotional, physical, and intellectual being, and in single and collective form—as no other branch of human accomplishment does. In the arts we see both the nature of human predicaments—in Job, in Lear, in Isabel Archer—and the evolution of representation over long spans of time (as the taste for the Gothic replaces the taste for the Romanesque, as the composition of opera replaces the composition of plain-chant). The arts bring into play historical and philosophical questions without implying the prevalence of a single system or of universal solutions. Artworks embody the individuality that fades into insignificance in the massive canvas of history and is suppressed in philosophy by the desire for impersonal assertion. The arts are true to the way we are and were, to the way we actually live and have lived—as singular persons swept by drives and affections, not as collective entities or sociological paradigms. The case histories developed within the arts are in part idiosyncratic, but in part they are applicable by analogy to a class larger than the individual entities they depict. Hamlet is a very specific figure—a Danish prince who has been to school in Germany—but when Prufrock says, “I am not Prince Hamlet,” he is in a way testifying to the fact that Hamlet means something to everyone who knows about the play.

If the arts are so satisfactory an embodiment of human experience, why do we need studies commenting on them? Why not merely take our young people to museums, to concerts, to libraries? There is certainly no substitute for hearing Mozart, reading Dickinson, or looking at the

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boxes of Joseph Cornell. Why should we support a brokering of the arts? Why not rely on their direct impact? The simplest answer is that reminders of art's presence are constantly necessary. As art goes in and out of fashion, some scholar is always necessarily reviving Melville, or editing Monteverdi, or recommending Jane Austen. Critics and scholars are evangelists, plucking the public by the sleeve, saying, "Look at this," or "Listen to this," or "See how this works." It may seem hard to believe, but there was a time when almost no one valued Gothic art or, to come closer to our own time, *Moby-Dick* and *Billy Budd.*

A second reason to encourage scholarly studies of the arts is that such studies establish in human beings a sense of cultural patrimony. We in the United States are the heirs of several cultural patrimonies: a world patrimony (of which we are becoming increasingly conscious); a Western patrimony (from which we derive our institutions, civic and aesthetic); and a specifically American patrimony (which, though great and influential, has, bafflingly, yet to be established securely in our schools). In Europe, although the specifically national patrimony was likely to be urged as preeminent—Italian pupils studied Dante, French pupils studied Racine—most nations felt obliged to give their students an idea of the Western inheritance extending beyond native production. As time passed, colonized nations, although instructed in the culture of the colonizer, found great energy in creating a national literature and culture of their own with and against the colonial model. (We can see this, for instance, in the example of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland.) For a long time, American schooling paid homage, culturally speaking, to Europe and to England; but increasingly we began to cast off European and English influence in arts and letters without, unfortunately, filling the consequent cultural gap in the schools with our own worthy creations in art and literature. Our students leave high school knowing almost nothing about American art, music, architecture, and sculpture, and having only a superficial acquaintance with a few American writers.

We will ultimately want to teach, with justifiable pride, our national patrimony in arts and letters—by which, if by anything, we will be remembered—and we hope, of course, to foster young readers and writers, artists and museumgoers, composers and music enthusiasts. But these patriotic and cultural aims alone are not enough to justify putting

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the arts and the studies of the arts at the center of our humanistic and educational enterprise. What, then, might lead us to recommend the arts and their commentaries as the center of the humanities? Art, said Wallace Stevens, helps us to live our lives. I'm not sure we are greatly helped to live our lives by history (since, whether or not we remember it, we seem doomed to repeat it) or by philosophy (the consolations of philosophy have never been very widely received). Stevens's assertion is a large one, and we have a right to ask how he would defend it. How do the arts, and the scholarly studies attendant on them, help us to live our lives?

Stevens was a democratic author, and he expected his experience, and his reflections on it, to apply widely. For him, as for any other artist, "to live our lives" means to live in the body as well as in the mind, on the sensual Earth as well as in the celestial clouds. The arts exist to relocate us in the body by means of the work of the mind in aesthetic creation; they situate us on the Earth, paradoxically, by means of a mental paradigm of experience embodied, with symbolic concision, in a physical medium. It distressed Stevens that most of the human beings he saw walked about blankly, scarcely seeing the Earth on which they lived, filtering it out from their pragmatic urban consciousness. Even when he was only in his twenties, Stevens was perplexed by the narrowness of the way in which people inhabit the Earth:

> I thought, on the train, how utterly we have forsaken the Earth, in the sense of excluding it from our thoughts. There are but few who consider its physical hugeness, its rough enormity. It is still a disparate monstrosity, full of solitudes & barrens & wilds. It still dwarfs & terrifies & crushes. The rivers still roar, the mountains still crash, the winds still shatter. Man is an affair of cities. His gardens & orchards & fields are mere scrapings. Somehow, however, he has managed to shut out the face of the giant from his windows. But the giant is there, nevertheless.[1]

The arts and their attendant disciplines restore human awareness by releasing it into the ambience of the felt world, giving a habitation to the tongue in newly coined language, to the eyes and ears in remarkable re-creations of the physical world, to the animal body in the kinesthetic flex and resistance of the artistic medium. Without an alert sense of such

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things, one is only half alive. Stevens reflected on this function of the arts—and on the results of its absence—in three poems that I will take up as proof-texts for what follows. Although Stevens speaks in particular about poetry, he extends the concept to *poesis*—the Greek term for making, widely applicable to all creative effort.

Like geography and history, the arts confer a patina on the natural world. A vacant stretch of grass becomes humanly important when one reads the sign "Gettysburg." Over the grass hangs an extended canopy of meaning—struggle, corpses, tears, glory—shadowed by a canopy of American words and works, from the Gettysburg Address to the Shaw Memorial. The vacant plain of the sea becomes human when it is populated by the ghosts of Ahab and Moby-Dick. An unremarkable town becomes "Winesburg, Ohio"; a rustic bridge becomes "the rude bridge that arched the flood," where Minutemen fired "the shot heard round the world." One after the other, cultural images suspend themselves, invisibly, in the American air, as—when we extend our glance—the Elgin marbles, wherever they may be housed, hover over the Parthenon, once their home; as Michelangelo's Adam has become, to the Western eye, the Adam of Genesis. The patina of culture has been laid down over centuries, so that in an English field one can find a Roman coin, in an Asian excavation an emperor's stone army, in our Western desert the signs of the mound builders. Over Stevens's giant earth, with its tumultuous motions, there floats every myth, every text, every picture, every system, that creators—artistic, religious, philosophical—have conferred upon it. The Delphic oracle hovers there next to Sappho, Luther's theses hang next to the Grünewald altar, China's Cold Mountain neighbors Sinai, Bach's Mass in B Minor shares space with Rabelais.

If there did not exist, floating over us, all the symbolic representations that art and music, religion, philosophy, and history, have invented, and all the interpretations and explanations of them that scholarly effort has produced, what sort of people would we be? We would, says Stevens, be sleepwalkers, going about like automata, unconscious of the very life we were living: this is the import of Stevens's 1943 poem "Somnambulisma." The poem rests on three images, of which the first is the incessantly variable sea, the vulgar reservoir from which the vulgate—the common discourse of language

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and art alike—is drawn. The second image is that of a mortal bird, whose motions resemble those of the water but who is ultimately washed away by the ocean. The subsequent generations of the bird, too, are always washed away. The third image is that of a scholar, without whom ocean and bird alike would be incomplete.

> On an old shore, the vulgar ocean rolls
> Noiselessly, noiselessly, resembling a thin bird,
> That thinks of settling, yet never settles, on a nest.
>
> The wings keep spreading and yet are never wings.
> The claws keep scratching on the shale, the shallow shale,
> The sounding shallow, until by water washed away.
>
> The generations of the bird are all
> By water washed away. They follow after.
> They follow, follow, follow, in water washed away.
>
> Without this bird that never settles, without
> Its generations that follow in their universe,
> The ocean, falling and falling on the hollow shore,
>
> Would be a geography of the dead: not of that land
> To which they may have gone, but of the place in which
> They lived, in which they lacked a pervasive being,
>
> In which no scholar, separately dwelling,
> Poured forth the fine fins, the gawky beaks, the personalia,
> Which, as a man feeling everything, were his.[2]

Without the bird and its generations, the ocean, says the poet, would be "a geography of the dead"—not in the sense of the dead having gone to some other world, but in the sense of their being persons who were emotionally and intellectually sleepwalking, dead while alive, who lacked "a pervasive being." To lack a pervasive being is to fail to live fully. A pervasive being is one that extends through the brain, the body, the senses, and the will, a being that spreads to every moment, so that one not only feels what Keats called "the poetry of earth" but responds to it with creative motions of one's own.

Unlike Keats's nightingale, Stevens's bird does not sing; its chief

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functions are to generate generations of birds, to attempt to sprout wings, and to try to leave behind some painstakingly scratched record of its presence. The water restlessly moves, sometimes noiselessly, sometimes in "sounding shallow[s]"; the bird "never settles." The bird tries to generate wings, but never quite succeeds; it tries to inscribe itself on the shale, but its scratchings are washed away. The ocean is "falling and falling"; the mortal generations are following and following. Time obliterates birds and inscriptions alike.

Imagine being psychically dead during the very life you have lived. That, says Stevens, would be the fate of the generations were it not for the scholar. Stevens does not locate his scholar in the ocean or on the shale, the haunts of the bird; the scholar, says the poet, dwells separately. But he dwells in immense fertility: things pour forth from him. He makes up for the wings that are never wings, for the impotent claws; he generates "fine fins," the essence of the ocean's fish; he creates "gawky beaks," opening in fledglings waiting to be fed so that they may rise into their element, the air; and he reproduces new garments for the Earth, called not regalia (suitable for a monarchy) but "personalia," suitable for the members of a democracy. How is the scholar capable of such profusion? He is fertile both because he is a man who "feel[s] everything," and because every thing that he feels reifies itself in a creation. He gives form and definition both to the physical world (as its scientific observer) and to the inchoate aesthetic world (as the quickened responder to the bird's incomplete natural song). He is analogous to the God of Genesis; as he observes and feels finniness, he says, "Let there be fine fins," and fine fins appear.

Why does Stevens name this indispensable figure a "scholar"? (Elsewhere he calls him a "rabbi"—each is a word connoting learning.) What does learning have to do with creation? Why are study and learning indispensable in reifying and systematizing the world of phenomena and their aesthetic representations? Just as the soldier is poor without the poet's lines (as Stevens says elsewhere), so the poet is poor without the scholar's cultural memory, his taxonomies and his histories. Our systems of thought—legal, philosophical, scientific, religious—have all been devised by "scholars" without whose aid widespread complex thinking could not take place and be debated, intricate texts and scores could not be accurately established and interpreted. The restless emotions of aesthetic desire, the wing-wish and

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inscription-yearning of the bird, perish without the arranging and creative powers of intellectual endeavor. The arts and the studies of the arts are for Stevens a symbiotic pair, each dependent on the other. Nobody is born understanding string quartets or reading Latin or creating poems; without the scholar and his libraries, there would be no perpetuation and transmission of culture. The mutual support of art and learning, the mutual delight each ideally takes in each, can be taken as a paradigm of how the humanities might be integrally conceived and educationally conveyed as inextricably linked to the arts.

"Somnambulisma" is the illustration of Stevens's adage "Poetry is the scholar's art." What is necessary, asks "Somnambulisma," for creative effort? Emotion, desire, generative energy, and learned invention—these, replies the poem, are indispensable in the artist. But there is another way of thinking about art, focusing less on the creator of art than on those of us who make up art's audience. What do we gain in being the audience for the arts and their attendant disciplines? Let us, says Stevens, imagine ourselves deprived of all the products of aesthetic and humanistic effort, living in a world with no music, no art, no architecture, no books, no films, no choreography, no theater, no histories, no songs, no prayers, no images floating above the Earth to keep it from being a geography of the dead. Stevens creates the desolation of that deprivation in a poem—the second of my three texts—called "Large Red Man Reading." The poem is like a painting by Matisse, showing us an earthly giant the color of the sun, reading aloud from great sky-sized tabulae which, as the day declines, darken from blue to purple. The poem also summons up the people of the giant's audience: they are ghosts, no longer alive, who now inhabit unhappily (having expected more from the afterlife) the remote "wilderness of stars." What does the giant describe to the ghosts as he reads from his blue tabulae? Nothing extraordinary—merely the normal furniture of life, the common and the beautiful, the banal, the ugly, and even the painful. But to the ghosts these are things achingly familiar from life and yet disregarded during it. Now they are achingly lost, things that they never sufficiently prized when alive, but that they miss devastatingly in the vacancy of space among the foreign stars.

There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear his phrases,

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As he sat there reading, aloud, the great blue tabulae.
They were those from the wilderness of stars that had expected more.

There were those that returned to hear him read from the poem of life,
Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them.
They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality,

They would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the frost
And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over leaves
And against the most coiled thorn, have seized on what was ugly

And laughed, as he sat there reading, from out of the purple tabulae,
The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law:
*Poesis, poesis,* the literal characters, the vatic lines,

Which in those ears and in those thin, those spended hearts,
Took on color, took on shape and the size of things as they are
And spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had lacked.
(365)

The ghosts, while they were alive, had lacked feeling, because they had not registered in their memory "the outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law." It is a triple assertion that Stevens makes here: that being possesses not only outlines (as all bodies do) and expressings (in all languages) but also a law, which is stricter than mere "expressings." Expressings by themselves cannot exemplify the law of being: only *poesis*—the creator's act of replicating in symbolic form the structures of life—pervades being sufficiently to intuit and to embody its law. *Poesis* not only reproduces the content of life (its daily phenomena) but finds a manner (inspired, "vatic") for that content, and in the means of its medium—here, the literal characters of its language—embodies the structural laws that shape being to our understanding.

Stevens's anecdote-of-audience in "Large Red Man Reading" suggests how ardently we would want to come back, as ghosts, in order to recognize and relish the parts of life we had insufficiently noticed and

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hardly valued when alive. But we cannot—according to the poem—accomplish this by ourselves: it is only when the earthly giant of vital being begins to read, using poetic and prophetic syllables to express the reality, and the law, of being, that the experiences of life can be reconstituted and made available as beauty and solace, to help us live our lives.

How could our lives be different if we reconstituted the humanities around the arts and the studies of the arts? Past civilizations are recalled in part, of course, for their philosophy and their history, but for most of us it is the arts of the past that preserve Egypt and Greece and Rome, India and Africa and Japan. The names of the artists may be lost, the arts themselves in fragments, the scrolls incomplete, the manuscripts partial—but Anubis and the Buddha and *The Canterbury Tales* still populate our imaginative world. They come trailing their interpretations, which follow them and are like water washed away. Scholarly and critical interpretations may not outlast the generation to which they are relevant; as intellectual concepts flourish and wither, so interpretations are proposed and discarded. But we would not achieve our own grasp on Vermeer or Horace, generation after generation, without the scholars' outpourings.

If we are prepared to recognize the centrality of artists and their interpreters to every past culture, we might begin to reflect on what our own American culture has produced that will be held dear centuries from now. Which are the paintings, the buildings, the novels, the musical compositions, the poems, through which we will be remembered? What set of representations of life will float above the American soil, rendering each part of it as memorable as Marin's Maine or Langston Hughes's Harlem, as Cather's Nebraska or Lincoln's Gettysburg? How will the outlines and the expressings and the syllables of American being glow above our vast geography? How will our citizens be made aware of their cultural inheritance, and become proud of their patrimony? How will they pass it on to their children as their own generation is by water washed away? How will their children become capable of "feeling everything," of gaining "a pervasive being," capable of helping the bird to spread its wings and the fish to grow their "fine fins" and the scholar to pour forth his "personalia"?

To link, by language, feeling to phenomena has always been the

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poet's aim. "Poetry," said Wordsworth in his 1798 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, "is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science." Our culture cannot afford to neglect the thirst of human beings for the representations of life offered by the arts, the hunger of human beings for commentary on those arts as they appear on the cultural stage. The training in subtlety of response (which used to be accomplished in large part by religion and the arts) cannot be responsibly left to commercial movies and television. Within education, scientific training, which necessarily brackets emotion, needs to be complemented by the direct mediation—through the arts and their interpretations—of feeling, vicarious experience, and interpersonal imagination. Art can often be trusted—once it is unobtrusively but ubiquitously present—to make its own impact felt. A set of Rembrandt self-portraits in a shopping mall, a group of still lifes in a subway, sonatas played in the lunchroom, spirituals sung chorally from kindergarten on—all such things, appearing entirely without commentary, can be offered in the community and the schools as a natural part of living. Students can be gently led, by teachers and books, from passive reception to active reflection. The arts are too profound and far-reaching to be left out of our children's patrimony: the arts have a right, within our schools, to be as serious an object of study as molecular biology or mathematics. Like other complex products of the mind, they ask for reiterated exposure, sympathetic exposition, and sustained attention.

The arts have the advantage, once presented, of making people curious not only about aesthetic matters, but also about history, philosophy, and other cultures. How is it that pre-Columbian statues look so different from Roman ones? Why do some painters concentrate on portraits and others on landscapes? Why did great ages of drama arise in England and Spain and then collapse? Who first found a place for jazz in classical music, and why? Why do some writers become national heroes, and others do not? Who evaluates art, and how? Are we to believe what a piece of art says? Why does Picasso represent a full face and a profile at the same time? How small can art be and still be art? Why have we needed to invent so many subsets within each art—within literature the epic, drama, lyric, novel, dialogue, essay; within music everything from the solo partita to the chorales of Bach? Why do cultures use different musical instruments and scales? Who has the right

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# 2

# Fin-de-Siècle Lyric

## *W. B. Yeats and Jorie Graham*

The recent past always presents itself as if destroyed by catastrophe.
—Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia,* "Dwarf Fruit"

Except for us,
The total past felt nothing when destroyed.
—Wallace Stevens, *Esthétique du Mal*

Egypt and Greece, good-bye, and good-bye Rome!
—W. B. Yeats, "Meru"

She's deep into the lateness now.
—Jorie Graham, "History"

Fin-de-siècle writing suggests seriousness and flamboyance, hyperbole and arbitrariness. The notion of fin de siècle presents itself to reflection as unsuitable for lyric, since it derives from the time span of epic narration, and lyric generically prefers the brief moment to the narrative span. The primary formal problem for the writer of lyric who wishes to invoke the notion of history is how to tuck such a panoramic concept into a short-breathed poem. The fin-de-siècle poem is a subgenre within a lyric genre we could call the history poem, and in this chapter I have a few words to say about the way Yeats and Graham work toward solutions of the formal problem of reconciling the epic subject of history with the lyric moment.

But first I want to mention the literary-historical problem of the fin de siècle as a descriptive phrase. The phrase *fin de siècle,* as we have inherited it today, carries a nineteenth-century tonality, embracing a group of etiolated or exaggerated images and an associated aura of exhausted male sexuality, a sexuality dominated by the aggression of

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femmes fatales and a congeries of "perversions"—sadomasochism, suicide, homosexuality, incest, and so on. It would be a mistake, surely, to transfer this literary description, deriving from the nineteenth century, to the twentieth-century fin de siècle, which has acquired a different, if equally disturbing, sense of itself while not distancing itself altogether from the melodrama of the nineteenth-century phase.

Even in a turn-of-the-century predecessor, the nineteenth-century sense of the fin de siècle can suffer revision, and I therefore begin with Yeats, who produced classic fin-de-siècle poems in the nineties and then rewrote them vigorously in works composed later, during the interwar period, when he saw approaching what he regarded as the end of the European cultural synthesis.

Yeats thought about the fin de siècle in four ways, derived from various theories of history—classical, Christian, Celtic, and Nietzschean—available to him. Between 1889 and 1899, he saw the end of the century principally, as I've mentioned, in terms we are accustomed to think characteristic of the nineteenth-century fin de siècle—weariness, exhaustion, enervation. These are qualities a young man delights to express as, for the first time, he represents experience to himself as repetitive, too thoroughly known, too exhaustively foreseeable. In *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889), Yeats's account of the kidnapping of the passive hero by a fairy femme fatale, the decadent tones that we associate with the French and British fin de siècle are thoroughly explored, and the subsequent volume *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899), with its poems of hopeless yearning, expressed in the dying fall of uncertain and quavering rhythms, is the fin-de-siècle book par excellence. It is in *The Wind among the Reeds* that we can begin to chart Yeats's conceptual models of the fin de siècle.

The Christian apocalyptic tradition is visible in the 1899 poem "The Secret Rose":

> When shall the stars be blown about the sky
> Like the sparks blown out of a smithy, and die?
> Surely thine hour has come, thy great wind blows,
> Far-off, most secret, and inviolate Rose?[1]

Considered formally, "The Secret Rose" acts to compress epic time into lyric time by allusion to events assumed to be well known; these take us

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from the archaic period through to the present. But Yeats is already drawn to another model of the end, a more political one, as he writes a poem about the Celtic Armageddon, the battle in the Valley of the Black Pig, on which his note reads: "All over Ireland there are prophecies of the coming rout of the enemies of Ireland, in a certain Valley of the Black Pig, and these prophecies are, no doubt, now, as they were in the Fenian days, a political force" (449). The entropic model of weariness unto death, the Blake-derived model of the Christian Apocalypse, and the political model of the great battle all present themselves to Yeats as plausible imaginative schemes for lyric at the turn of the century. But at this time, his tone does not change perceptibly from one model to the other. His tone does finally change in the twenties once he has encountered the ideas of Nietzsche and Spengler; he now begins to rewrite his earlier poems, as he takes on his favorite model by far of the fin de siècle, that of the repetitive but innovative spiral or gyre or vortex.

As "gyres run on" (343), subjective and objective eras succeed each other; Yeats's model for these is the classical era succeeded by the Christian era. At the end of the Christian era, expected in the year A.D. 2000, a new subjective era will, he announces, arrive; it will have as its dominating symbol not Helen of Troy, the child who inaugurated the two-thousand-year classical era before Christ, but the Rough Beast, who now replaces Jesus in the manger:

> Now I know
> That twenty centuries of stony sleep
> Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
> And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
> Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?
> (185)

Though "The Second Coming" was not written at a calendric fin de siècle, it was written at the end of an era, when the First World War had destroyed Europe's peace and the Easter Rising, followed by the Troubles and a civil war, had changed the governance of Ireland. Yeats certainly believed that he was witnessing the breakup of the Christian historical era, as he says in *A Vision* (his conspectus of "history"); and in such poems as "The Second Coming" and "Leda and the Swan" he

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was in fact rewriting his early 1899 fin-de-siècle poems in a new imaginative form, as anticipatory fin-de-siècle poems characterizing the year 1999.

Yeats had also come to realize the inutility of statement in verse without a corresponding authenticating form, and both "The Second Coming" and "Leda and the Swan" find new formal models for the fin de siècle. "The Second Coming"—to resume it briefly in formal terms—is written in two unrhymed parts. The first contains eight lines and is written in an impersonal mode—"Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold"; the second contains fourteen lines and is written in the first person—"The darkness drops again, but now *I know*." We may interpret this doubled form as an attempt, in the first eight lines, to write an octave of impersonal "public" political discourse which has aspirations—visible in its eight-line exposition of a "problem"—toward the sonnet form. But the generalizing octave fails and cannot find its sestet. The writer then decides to rewrite his public and impersonal octave in a personal and lyric voice and is rewarded for his turn to lyric authenticity by a "vision out of Spiritus Mundi" in which he sees the awakening of the Rough Beast. His second attempt at a sonnet succeeds in providing both a consolidating image (in its Rough Beast "octave," which actually spills over, in a Miltonic *volta*, into the ninth line) and an intellectual conclusion: "Now I know." However, this successful "sonnet" still retains the blank-verse form as a signal of its wish to speak in the unrhymed lines of the initial failed octave. Blank verse is the lyric convention for speech or public oratory, whereas rhymed lines are the lyric convention for song. The originary failed speech of the first octave—which yet has aspirations toward lyric vision—is "replaced" by a personal sonnet, which yet, by keeping its oratorical aim (as shown by its unrhymed lines), deflects sonnet writing away from private song.

Similarly, in "Leda and the Swan," the formal model for "the cycle of the solid having turned"—Wallace Stevens's phrase—is the gradual metamorphosis of Zeus from pure bird (wings, bill, dark webs) to God (a glory and a rush) to human lover (a breast, a beating heart) to a synthesis of all three ("the brute [bird] blood [lover] of the air [sky-god]") before he returns to being pure bird (an "indifferent beak," 212). In these two poems, "The Second Coming" and "Leda and the Swan," Yeats folds epic into lyric by forcing the fin-de-siècle double moment—which combines cultural catastrophe with inception—to stand, by

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synecdoche, for the whole epic and dramatic narration it engenders:

> A shudder in the loins engenders there
> The burning wall, the broken roof and tower
> And Agamemnon dead.
> (212)

However, Yeats was too shrewd a poet not to suspect that beyond those models of time which he used to posit a sharp breaking point—the Apocalypse, the battle in the Valley of the Black Pig, the impregnation of Leda by Zeus—there might be another model of history, a model of "plus ça change," or (as Shakespeare said in sonnet 59) "whether revolution be the same." What if one stood outside the turns of history and merely watched, instead of being a participant? In certain poems written just before the outbreak of World War II, such as "Meru" and "Lapis Lazuli," Yeats imagines detached spectators (they are always Asian—Himalayan monks in "Meru," "three Chinamen" in "Lapis Lazuli") who can watch the decay of the West without chagrin.

These Asian contemplatives have now succeeded their "Christian" predecessors the Magi, who, in Yeats's World War I poem called "The Magi," have watched without contentment or satisfaction the historical panorama of Christ's life. Unsatisfied by the ignominy and mystery of Bethlehem, the Magi remain to watch for the outcome they expect, the triumphant coming of the Messiah; instead they find the greater fin-de-siècle confusion of Calvary. The Magi remain, therefore, in Yeats's imagination, figures for those who know that every worked-up emotion welcoming a fin de siècle is a fraud, that repetitiveness is the only truth:

> Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye,
> In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones
> Appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky
> With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,
> And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,
> And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,
> Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,
> The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.
> (124)

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and “The Phase after History.” Graham’s foreword to *Region of Unlikeness* quotes Augustine in the *Confessions,* as he broods on language as successivity and the human wish to spatialize that successivity: “You hear what we speak … and you do not want the syllables to stand where they are; rather you want them to fly away so that others may come and you may hear a whole sentence. So it is with all things that make up a whole by the succession of parts; such a whole would please us much more if all the parts could be perceived at once rather than in succession” (xi). In the poem called “Act II, Sc. 2,” Graham spatializes her own life into textual form, significantly not choosing, as Yeats would have done, the moment of inception or conclusion but rather borrowing from Stevens an intermediate moment in the epic drama. (The poem of Stevens from which she borrows is one called “Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion,” in which Stevens first names the moment in personal time, “Chaos in Motion,” and then in textual space, “and not in Motion.” In it, he announces that at this late moment “Scene 10 becomes 11, / In Series X, Act IV, et cetera.”)[3] Graham’s theme in “Act II, Sc. 2” is the problem of representing accurately one’s position in participatory terms once one has begun, in middle life, to be a watcher of one’s own history even as one enacts it:

> Look she said this is not the distance
> we wanted to stay at—We wanted to get
> close, very close. But what
> is the way in again? And is it
> too late? She could hear the actions
> rushing past—but they are on
> another track.
> (66)

Many of Graham’s poems enact a rapid zooming, in alternate short and long lines, between getting close and gaining distance; this poses at all times a problem of historical representation. But a preoccupation with the degree to which the events of history are mentally and textually constructed into acts and scenes rather than “objectively” recorded is the stance that differentiates contemporary historiographers and poets of the fin de siècle from those who, like Spengler and Yeats, tended to accept constructions already invented, even if such schemes—linear, circular,

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spiral-shaped—were inconsistent with one another. As Stevens said of the mind in “Of Modern Poetry”:

> It has not always had
> To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
> Was in the script. Then the theatre was changed
> To something else. Its past was a souvenir.[4]

In Graham’s poetry, time itself and the recorder of time are intimately linked, cannot be conceptually separated, in that it is only the recorder who demarcates time, points out moments worth remembrance. All the other moments in the continuum will sink unnoticed. How do we explain what gets recorded? Perhaps attention is random: people might record what they happened to witness or happened to come across. But Graham will not entertain that possibility: it is, for her, the sacred obligation of the recorder to pay attention at the precisely fated moment:

> the only
> right time, the intended time,
> punctual,
> the millisecond I was bred to look up into, click, no
> half-tone, no orchard of
> possibilities,
>
> up into the eyes of my own
> fate not the world’s.
> (93)

Graham’s formulation here reflects the biblical idea of *kairos*, the time intended by God—usually a brief time—for some aspect of his will to become fulfilled (see, e.g., Romans 13:11, “Knowing the time … now it is high time to awake out of sleep”; or I Corinthians 4:5, “Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts”).

As she says in this passage, Graham also believes, in opposition to many historical poets, that it is only by chronicling accurately and punctually one’s individual fate that one can, in lyric, “do” history.

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Against Yeats's prophetic wish to describe the world's fate as well as his own, Graham records the world's fate through her own. She can write about the epic of the Holocaust only by filtering it through the memory of a childhood visit to her Jewish grandmother confined to a nursing home. In this way, Graham sets herself against the purely spectatorial perspective of Yeats's Chinamen or Himalayan hermits and against the conventionally generalized prophetic position of poets such as Adrienne Rich, who have written about broad social conditions without explicit autobiographical reference to their own motivation within, or limits with respect to, the social problem at hand.

Attention, says Graham in the second poem she entitles "History," is always processing time; but Attention, gnawing the minutes like Ovid's *tempus edax* (Shakespeare's "Devouring Time"), is not, she argues, as we might think, free ranging, but chained. Historical attention, which Graham in the following passage calls "x," is always chained, at least for the poet, by private vocation:

> Listen:
> the x gnaws, making stories like small smacking
>
> sounds,
> whole long stories which are its gentle gnawing.
> . . . . .
> If the x is on a chain, licking its bone,
>
> making the sounds now of monks
> copying the texts out,
> muttering to themselves,
> if it is on a chain
> . . . . .
> that hisses as it moves with the moving x,
> link by link with the turning x
> (the gnawing now Europe burning)
> (the delicate chewing where the atom splits),
> if it is on a chain—
> even this beast—even this the favorite beast—
> then this is the chain, the gleaming
>
> chain: that what I wanted was to have looked up at the right
> time,

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to see what I was meant to see,
to be pried up out of my immortal soul,
up, into the sizzling quick—

That what I wanted was to have looked up at the only
right time, the intended time,
punctual,
the millisecond I was bred to look up into.
(92–93)

Reflection on history is peculiarly intensified by the arrival of the fin de siècle—"she's deep into the lateness now" (35), says Graham's first "History"—because of the arbitrary nature of temporal demarcation by century. One wants to characterize the departing century and to anticipate the new one, while conscious of the fictional and ultimately textual nature of such characterizations. The worst—or best—fin-de-siècle speculation is the apocalyptic one: that this is the absolute end of time, that there will be no more history. If the Christian Apocalypse, where all shall be revealed and justice shall be made manifest, is the sublimely comic version of the end of history, for Graham, Shakespearean tragedy, with its final obliteration of the central dramatis personae, is the atheist and materialist version of the end of history. In her extraordinary poem "The Phase after History," Graham brings together, in her characteristic way of coping with simultaneity, three narratives—linked as natural event, autobiographical experience, and literary archetype. The first narrative, of natural event, is that of an incident in which a bird has become lost in Graham's house and is about to batter itself to death against a windowpane unless she can find it and release it. The second narrative, that of autobiographical experience, retells the attempted suicide (followed by a successful suicide) of one of Graham's young students, who attempted with a knife to carve his face away from his body. The third narrative, representing the archetype behind both anterior narratives, is drawn from *Macbeth,* in which an old order, represented by Duncan, is brought to an end by Lady Macbeth in order to begin, as she hopes, a new phase of history, the dynastic reign of the Macbeths over Scotland. In the person of Lady Macbeth, Graham represents the fin de siècle as an active moment of assassination, in which the poet must kill the old century and the future it envisioned—Duncan and Duncan's sons—in order to begin a new era. The guilt and

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self-murder entailed are fully acted out in Graham's horrifying "phase after history."

For Graham, the human face symbolizes the forward-pointing, future-envisioning part of the self. One's normal tenderness toward one's own envisaged future is sharply checked by a self-hatred that causes either suicide or self-revision. One is convinced that for oneself there must come a moment of decisive change, a fin de siècle, that whatever follows must be different. An attempt to hear in one's inner being the rustle of a hitherto unenvisaged future—the bird's attempt to find a way out of the house—produces whatever meaning can be extracted from the fin de siècle:

> Which America is it in?
> Which America are we in here?
> Is there an America comprised wholly
> of its waiting and my waiting and all forms of the thing
> . . . . .
> a place of *attention?*
> (114)

Most of the notions of the future which first occur to the mind are false, trivial, wrong, incomplete, exhausted, inadequate. The Muse, rejecting these, tells the poet to wait until the right sentence of art, Keats's unheard melody, Graham's "inaudible … utterance," formulates itself:

> The voice says wait. Taking a lot of words.
> The voice always says wait.
> The sentence like a tongue
> in a higher mouth
>
> to make the other utterance, the inaudible one,
> possible,
> the sentence in its hole, its cavity
> of listening,
> flapping, half dead on the wing, through the
> hollow indoors,
> the house like a head
> with nothing inside

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these, and especially her concern with middleness rather than with inception, conclusion, or repetition, suggest that the fin de siècle, as we now imagine it, is something we actively will—as Graham's student willed his suicide—in an attempt to shake off an irredeemable past; or that it is something we hesitate over—like Lady Macbeth in her dream-reprise of the murder—as we seek to find something to justify our murder of the past, as we try to coordinate our executive hand and our intentional gaze; or that it is something that we head blindly into—like the bird crashing into the invisible windowpane. The indeterminacy of these possibilities, and the poet's incapacity to decide among them, leave Graham as watcher but also, in the end (in the person of Lady Macbeth), as participant in a history she does not understand.

Another poem from *Region of Unlikeness*, one explicitly about the construction of historical event, is called "Who Watches from the Dark Porch." The watcher hears a nearby ambiguous child-cry—is it laughter? is it pain?—and must try to interpret it as a signal of the nature of being. Is Nature—or, as Graham calls it in this poem, "Matter"—inherently comic or tragic? Interpretation, appearing here allegorically personified as the consort of Matter, is necessarily tragic because it is mortal. Here is the beginning of "Who Watches," asking why we feel sure that our previous attempts to codify our history were lies:

> Is it because of history or is it because of matter,
> mother Matter—the opposite of In-
> terpretation: his consort: (his purple body lies
> shattered against terrible
> reefs)—matter, (in it
> a shriek or is it
> laughter)
> (a mist or is it an angel they strangle)—
> that we feel so sure we lied?
> (97)

The "instant replay" of interpretation arouses a nostalgia for presence:

> Said Moses show me Your face.
> Not the voice-over, not
> the sound track (thou shalt not thou

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shalt not), not the interpretation—buzz—
the face.
But what can we do?
(106)

Graham ends this typical flurry of injunctions, questions, and parenthetical interjections—so different from Yeats's agitated but dominating declarativeness—with the injunction to sit still, a command borrowed from Eliot's "Ash Wednesday" but lacking Eliot's Christian implication. Both the writer's desire for revelation (which can lead to a false willed meaning) and the nostalgia for presence (which can lead to religious sentimentality) threaten the artist of the fin de siècle. Yielding to the first will create another abstract Utopia of the sort we have already seen too many of; yielding to the second will offer a premature ontology and a premature sentimental ethics.

… sit still sit still the lively understandable
spirit said,
still, still,
so that it can be completely the

now.
(108)

If this sitting—"don't wait, just sit, sit" (108)—reveals only that one is at *"the scene of the accident"* (107) facing the "pileup of erasures—play, reverse play" (107) in the scene of writing, then this will have to be the poetics exacted by Graham's disbelief in predetermined schemes of history, those schemes that have given us, in fact, the very model of the fin de siècle that Graham refuses. The Yeatsian curtain is not lifted, but then the Yeatsian darkness does not drop, either. Play, reverse play, instant replay, erase, play again—this Beckettian model makes every moment both a beginning and an end. The tape runs both ways and is always provisional, always expressed, formally speaking, in the cresting and troughing irregularities of Graham's prosody. Or, in another of Graham's metaphors (from Yeats, from Mallarmé), the dice are "being incessantly retossed" (107).

Where, then, does the poet obtain confidence in representation? Her confidence, expressed in the poem "Soul Says," lies finally in the idiom

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of presentness itself, in the simplicity with which we say, without thinking, "The river *glints,*" or "The mother *opens the tablecloth up into the wind.*" These sentences make a text, or fabric, which descends over the earth for a moment in an "alphabet of ripenesses, / what is, what could have been." Graham concludes, as Wordsworth concluded long ago, that the verbal object, insofar as it persists, becomes a natural part of the material world: "(This is a form of matter of matter she sang)" (125). As history becomes text, it is spatialized into fabric, a tarpaulin (as Ashbery called it in the poem of that name) spread to cover the perceptual field. This is, in the end, a comic resolution, by which the temporal wave of presentness causes the hilarity of articulated expression in song. The last words in *Region of Unlikeness,* closing "Soul Says," are to be thought of, we are told, as words spoken by Prospero as he lays down his art:

> Now then, I said, I go to meet that which I liken to
> (even though the wave break and drown me in laughter)
> the wave breaking, the wave drowning me in laughter—
> (125)

Questions of such gravity as how to demarcate time are not solved, of course, in lyric; they are merely reimagined. Graham's drowning wave (tragedy) cannot be demarcated, as in Yeats, into epical inception, event, conclusion, or even into repetition; it can only be redescribed as comedy—generating an annihilating cosmic laughter. *The Tempest,* the single Shakespearean play that observes the unities of time, space, and action, chooses to describe the coextension of space, time, and human will as, finally, a comic form. Each ends only when all are ended, and the end of textuality and the end of history become, in *The Tempest* and "Soul Says," the comic ending of the dramatized world. While present event and textuality—the forms of lyric—persist, there can be, Graham's work suggests, no conclusive fin de siècle; but the intellectual strain of remaining in the now of the song cannot be entirely obliterated. The song is the place, Graham writes in "Soul Says," "(Where the hurry [of time] is stopped) (and held) (but not extinguished) (no)" (125). Each of these parentheses inserted in the soul's claim is a small fin de siècle in itself.

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# 3

# The Unweary Blues

## The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes

The available poetry of Langston Hughes (1902–1967) used to be the *Selected Poems*, a collection that Hughes himself made for Knopf in 1959, reissued in 1990 as a Vintage Classic. It contained, naturally, no poems from Hughes's last two volumes of verse, *Ask Your Mama* (1961) and *The Panther and the Lash* (1967), nor from the earlier *The Dream Keeper* (1932). Hughes had censored out his most controversial poems, omitting, for instance, his allegorical comment on the Scottsboro case, "Christ in Alabama," which begins by addressing the oppressed blacks of the Southern states, modulates into a prayer to God (the "White Master above"), and ends with a description of Christ crucified by a racist South:

> Christ is a nigger,
> Beaten and black:
> Oh, bare your back!
>
> Mary is His mother:
> Mammy of the South,
> Silence your mouth.
>
> God is His father:
> White Master above
> Grant Him your love.
>
> Most holy bastard

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Of the bleeding mouth,
Nigger Christ
On the cross
Of the South.[1]

When you consider the genial, resolutely optimistic and humorously ironic character of Hughes's temperament, it is a mark of how desperate he felt that he should write such a poem. Yes, the magazine *Contempo* had solicited from him a comment on the Scottsboro boys (whom Hughes had visited in prison in 1931). Still, nothing but his own judgment made him throw back in the face of the South its own ostentatious "Christianity," a form of that religion which had not heard that God is love. In 1959, without any pressure from Knopf, he soft-pedaled, in his *Selected Poems*, the wild Hughes, the angry Hughes, the convert to Communist beliefs who wrote "Good Morning Revolution" and "Goodbye Christ":

Goodbye,
Christ Jesus Lord God Jehova,
Beat it on away from here now.
Make way for a new guy with no religion at all—
A real guy named
Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME—
(166)

Maybe Hughes no longer believed in these suppressed poems; they are certainly not representative of his best work. Still, it is hard to describe his best work without these poems as foil. In *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, it is possible to see, without laborious work in a major library, just what the career of Langston Hughes, poet, produced.

The *Poems* completes Rampersad's long service to Hughes's memory. Rampersad's earlier splendid two-volume biography, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, virtually necessitated a coherent collection of the poetry. What is missing in the chronologically arranged *Poems*, however, is a listing of the table of contents of each of the separate volumes of Hughes's poetry. Since books such as *The Weary Blues* or *Fine Clothes to the Jew* represent historically important moments in

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the hateful father, the incompetent mother, the patronizing white "Godmother," the abortive schooling at Columbia, the seafaring years, the graduation from Lincoln University, the conversion to Communism, the travels in the Soviet Union and China and Civil War Spain, the scriptwriting in Hollywood, the FBI attacks, the Harlem years, the McCarthy subpoena, the work in journalism, opera, and theater, the eventual heap of honors, the death from prostate cancer—we are entitled to ask what sort of poetry Hughes gave us and what lyric became, in his hands, that it was not before.

It is easy to name the literary and musical traditions inspiring Hughes's work. They include Whitman's democratic free verse, the dialect poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Sandburg's updating of Whitman, Amy Lowell's imagism, Negro spirituals, the blues, and jazz. Rampersad's biography not only traces most of these but also weighs their importance. There is less room in the biography for consideration of individual poems, or even for an account of Hughes's poetics. What sort of poetics, for instance, generates a poem such as "Personal"? It is a poetics of announced reciprocity. It always takes two to make a Hughes poem (in this case, God and the poet). But it is a cryptic reciprocity, exchanged in private messages within envelopes marked "Personal." That label means "not to be read by anyone else." The message that God sends Hughes may not be the same message he sends to another American, or another black, or another poet, or another person; and the message Hughes sends back to God may not be the same message he would send to his mother, or to Senator McCarthy, or to the NAACP. Lyric, in this construction, is the message you send to God; and it is your answer to God's message to you—the idiosyncratic fate God has dealt you. If Dickinson said of her poetry, "This is my letter to the world / That never wrote to me," Hughes says, "This is my answer to the God / Who once addressed a destiny to me."

The first reciprocity, then, is the one between personal fate and the personal lyrics responding to that fate. Even the loneliest moment of all in Hughes, the moment of suicide, is represented as a moment of reciprocity:

### Suicide's Note

The calm,
Cool face of the river

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Asked me for a kiss.
(55)

The second characteristic of Hughes's verse is the idiosyncrasy of personal identity. The letter from God gave a personal fate, the fate of a single soul; and the fate is the fate of birth, not of current events. To be born a black American male in Kansas is not the same—as Hughes increasingly realized—as to be born a black American female in Harlem, or a black African in Nigeria. Hughes's letter from God was personal to him; and his watchful curiosity about the nature of other, equally personal, fates informs all his best writing. A black writer with a less fluid and multiple conception of identity would not have been able to do such lively social portraiture, would not have been so interested in the Harlem street scene. Someone with a more stereotypical sense of himself as black would not have gotten along so well, or experienced such genuine fellow feeling, as Hughes did in the multiracial cabins of the trading ships he worked on.

Reciprocity and idiosyncrasy could exist in a poetry of only two persons, as they do in the lyrics of George Herbert. But Hughes's poetry —to name a third characteristic of his writing—is inveterately social. There is always an explicit or implicit social (more often than erotic) other. It may be a landlord, or a set of fellow workers, or the nameless "they" of a racist society, or merely an old mule. But the lyric speaker, because he is so conscious of his own separate and idiosyncratic identity, is always aware of the bonds of social relation, happy or unhappy.

The fourth characteristic of the Hughes poem (at its normative best) is irony. Though irony is always, for the best of reasons, frequent in colloquial talk among the oppressed, it is oddly infrequent in the "high" literature of oppression, which tends toward the melodramatic and the tragic (Stowe, Zola, Hood). Du Bois's famous "double consciousness" of the "souls of black folk" does not necessarily produce irony, though it may produce the doubleness—watching oneself as if one were another —that can become a root of writerly irony. But the sort of humorous irony found everywhere in Hughes depends on the conscious diminution of self, which is precisely the sort of diminution that the role of tragic victim cannot tolerate. When someone else is diminishing you, it is hard to diminish yourself at the same time. Yet true moral defiance lies in

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refusing the very role of victim, which is always a role conferred by others rather than one self-invented. The invention of a new role, appropriate to one's lowly place in (actual) society but one not determined by society, is an act that Hughes is particularly good at:

> Me and the Mule
>
> My old mule,
> He's got a grin on his face.
> He's been a mule so long
> He's forgot about his race.
>
> I'm like that old mule—
> Black—and don't give a damn!
> You got to take me
> Like I am.
> (239)

The wry humor of this makes one forget, for a beat, the oddity of the mule's having a "race" at all. On reflection, we see that the mule is a product of miscegenation between horse and donkey, yet by now he has become just who he is. His black master does not think himself better than the mule, and he isn't, socially speaking. But neither of them is going to disappear, and sooner or later the world will get used to them. The truth of a humiliated position is not denied. On the contrary, the shot of energy that comes from truth-telling gives the poem its kick.

When Hughes is at his best, irony pokes in to rebuke even denunciation. In his "Memo to Non-White Peoples," he begins in what one might call the paranoid position:

> They will let you have dope
> Because they are quite willing
> To drug you or kill you.…
>
> They will let you have alcohol
> To make you sodden and drunk
> And foolish.
> (456)

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But the truth is that dope and alcohol need some cooperation, and the poem veers from accusation of whites to accusation of blacks:

> They will gleefully let you
> Kill your damn self any way you choose
> With liquor, drugs, or whatever.
> (456)

Hughes's second thoughts of this sort transform many poems that would otherwise be predictable into wayward human documents. Irony is anathema, of course, to all the true believers Hughes encountered—whether in the KKK, the NAACP, the USSR, the FBI, or the police—and Hughes gently distanced himself, in the long run, from all comprehensive belief systems, though he was, by nature, a believer. Even when he is writing about being (in his imagination) captured by the Klan, in a poem called "Ku Klux," he shows himself answering questions ironically:

> They took me out
> To some lonesome place.
> They said, "Do you believe
> In the great white race?"
>
> I said, "Mister,
> To tell you the truth,
> I'd believe in anything
> If you'd just turn me loose."
>
> The white man said, "Boy,
> Can it be
> You're a-standin' there
> A-sassin' me?"
> (252)

Sooner or later, Hughes got around to "a-sassin' " every solemnity, especially the solemnity of coerced "belief" common to all religious and political organizations:

> They hit me in the head

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