

writing of Hiawatha which Denham has quoted to good effect in *Northrop Frye: Religious Visionary and Architect of the Spiritual World* (24).

Frye remarked that Butler's notebooks had "a lot of tripe in them" (337). He would have said the same of these notebooks, and, indeed, he wrote a few remarks to that effect (Denham, *Northrop Frye* 19). However, he had enough respect for literary scholarship that he could not subscribe to Butler's dream "Society for the Suppression of Erudite Research and the Decent Burial of the Past" (Butler 180). He did not want his remains destroyed, but could hardly have imagined the extent to which they would soon be made available. Some fellow critics like Harold Bloom and Terry Eagleton have already responded to less-than-tactful remarks. Others may wish the materials were arranged differently or tied more directly to the yet unedited volumes of Frye's previously published works. However, one can only be grateful for the confirmation, positive or negative, that the notebooks provide. There is positive confirmation, for example, that Frye never ceased to admire the criticism of his teacher Pelham Edgar, whose books included both Shelley and James. There is negative confirmation that he paid little attention to Canadian writers like Sarah Duncan as he planned his study of romance. With Dolzani's introduction and notes, these unexpurgated remarks will be interesting to anyone who wants to know what one of Canada's leading thinkers was *really* thinking.

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Works Cited

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Helen Vendler. *Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickenson, Yeats*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2006.
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What is thinking? To make the question thus explicit is to be at once beguiled by the charms and beset by the longeurs of Western European

epistemology. Is all thinking rational? Is all rationality, as its etymology suggests, a kind of calculation? Does thinking exclude emotion? Is remembering a kind of thinking? Is perception? Neither the dictionaries nor the latest issues of *New Scientist* are much help, for to answer any one of these questions decisively is not so much to uncover the fact of the matter as to take a stand in the charged debate about what it means to be human. And to evade answering decisively is not so much to acknowledge ignorance as to acquiesce in the (often unvoiced) intellectual politics that happen to be in vogue at the moment of one's evasion.

To illustrate, the following are all, to a greater or lesser degree, current:

Thinking is the contemplation of existence (one reading of Parmenides).

Thinking is world-making (another reading of Parmenides, and a popular reading of Hegel and Heidegger).

Thinking is the verbal dialogue of the soul with itself (Plato).

Thinking, correctly pursued, is that which leads to knowledge via machine-like steps (Jerry Fodor) *having first exiled emotion and imagination* (Bacon).

Thinking is doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, willing, refusing, and also imagining and sensing (Descartes).

Thinking is logical or conceptual analysis (Russell; Descartes in a rigorous mood).

Thinking is the art of correct judgement (Arnauld).

*Thinking is the exercise of the mind, especially the understanding, in **any** active way; the formation of connected ideas of **any** kind* (OED, emphasis added).

Thinking is engaging in rational thought; reasoning (Funk and Wagnalls).

*Thinking is having **or** making a train of ideas pass through the mind; meditating; cogitating* (OED, emphasis added).

Thinking excludes the passive reception of ideas (OED).

Thinking consists in perceiving structural features of a situation and grouping these to achieve a satisfactory gestalt, "looking

for structural rather than piecemeal truth" (Herakleitos; Max Wertheimer).

"Can we deny the name of 'thinking' to the satiric discursive miniatures of Pope, the empathetic reprises of Whitman, the multiple reconceivings of seriality by Dickinson, or the complex architectonic assembling of images by Yeats?" Helen Vendler asks rhetorically in the final paragraph of *Poets Thinking* (118). "Yes, indeed," comes the unwelcome, wholly unrheterical reply, "we can, and we do."

Vendler is not unaware that a case has to be made for calling the mental activity of poets "thinking." She opens *Poets Thinking* with the observation that thinking "has usually been defined as a chain of argument, explanation, logical induction, or deduction" (1). Lyric poetry, by contrast, "has often been considered an irrational genre, more expressive than logical, more given to meditation than to coherent or defensible argument" (1). What she does not say is by whom thinking and poetry have been so construed, nor what ends those construals serve. She has adopted, without comment, a view of thinking characteristic of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment (whose most energetic contemporary defenders may be found in significant concentrations in English-speaking analytic philosophy departments), and she is resisting, without contextualization, a view of lyric poetry that first gained ascendancy during the Romantic reaction. I do not wish to deny the currency of either view in contemporary English-speaking (especially English-speaking academic) circles, and I share Vendler's sense that both are pernicious. My concern is that in the absence of the requisite contextualization, she misses the fact that there exist many definitions of thinking from which it follows, quite obviously, that lyric poets think and hence that their exclusion from the privileged company of thinkers has, in most cases, a fundamentally *political* dimension. In the absence of an address to this dimension, those who need most to be convinced will turn away from the book snug in their original prejudice, and what promised to be a radical defence of a radical thesis will end up as a sermon to the converted. This is, I believe, the fate of the book's main argument.

But it will not be, I hope, the fate of the book, which, as a series of readings of individual poems chosen to illustrate fundamental aspects of various oeuvres, is always interesting and frequently enlightening. The chapters of the book—one each on Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, and Yeats—are the text of Vendler's Clark Lectures, given in Cambridge in 2001. Her choices were governed, she tells us, by several factors: the intention to illustrate a variety of ways in which lyric poets think; a desire to include

poets of diverse (English-speaking) nationalities and diverse eras; and a wish to avoid overtly so-called philosophical poets (such as Donne, Eliot, and Stevens), whose presence would have skewed the central question away from “Do poets think?” toward “How does their thinking differ from thinking expressed in prose?” (8). The need for distinct case studies, rather than a generalized treatment of poetic thinking, was occasioned by Vendler’s conviction that the “unmistakable, idiosyncratic, and formally coherent personal style” that is the hallmark of a good poet, *just is* the expression of a poet’s distinctive patterns of thought (6–7). As there is no single thing which all lyric styles have in common, she would maintain, so there can be no common or fundamental characteristic of lyric thinking.

While I agree that any given style is *sui generis*, I do not agree that it follows from this that there are no generic characteristics in virtue of which we call something “lyric.” But let me, again, set philosophy aside in order to spend a little time with Vendler’s actual readings.

The motivation for the essay on Pope (and, one suspects, perhaps the entire project) came from a conference Vendler attended at Harvard in 1983. Three scholars from disciplines other than literature—a philosopher, a political scientist, and an anthropologist—were invited to discuss Pope’s *An Essay on Man*; each, in turn, consigned the poem to a dusty shelf in the history of ideas, whence it was to remain as an artifact of no contemporary relevance. Vendler “felt pained on Pope’s behalf” (12), surmising that the commentators had spent more time with Pope’s prose summaries than with the poem itself. The *poem* reveals that Pope’s aim in the *Essay* was not the exposition of received ideas but, rather, the satirizing of such ideas, in particular, the satirizing of the tedious prose in which they were routinely embalmed. However, through the work’s epigrammatic snap, its baroque detailing, and the “fiendish compression” of its syntax, Pope aimed also to enact “a cinematic flow of *living* thought,” thought that leaps and bucks, denying easy comprehension, demanding that the reader “hang on for the ride, bouncing to the next hurdle hardly having recovered his seat from the last” (24, 27). In a brilliant reading of the famous opening lines of Epistle II (“Know then thyself . . .”), Vendler demonstrates that the *non-satiric* content of the *Essay* says what the bunched, restless syntax of Pope’s line elsewhere shows: that no *system* of thought can adequately capture the glory, jest, and riddle that human life actually is. Only something as “ceaselessly energetic and subversive” as Pope’s poetic thinking is adequate to the task (36).

Vendler's reading of Whitman is arguably the most arresting, as well as the most heterodox, of the book. The bulk of her discussion is focused on two little-studied poems, "Sparkles from the Wheel" and "Come Up from the Fields Father," rounded out by a reading of "A Noiseless Patient Spider." Vendler notes that all have a "reprise" structure—an initial presentation followed by a re-presentation of the same material in an altered or expanded format. (She claims that she is here using "reprise" as it is used in music [37], but her sense of it as something whose "very core is self-revision" [38] would seem to be literary rather than musical. In music, the term most frequently denotes simple repetition.) Her argument that such poems reveal Whitman thinking rests on her view that the "reprise" is the thought-inflected *version* (the "interpretation," the "re-focussing") of an original "retinally innocent" set of perceptions (38).

But is there such a thing as "retinally innocent" perception? Bertrand Russell notoriously argued for its existence under the name "sense data" in the early years of the twentieth century, but decades of industrious philosophical trench work failed to make the notion coherent and it has fallen into disfavour among philosophers and psychologists. Regardless of one's view on this question, however, it is difficult to regard the opening stanzas of either of the first two poems Vendler examines as "retinally innocent." Those of "Sparkles from the Wheel" are, as Vendler herself notes, couched in the voice of a noticeably withdrawn spectator (40), and those of "Come Up from the Fields Father" convey a lushly sensual appreciation of the Ohio countryside. What Vendler gets exactly right, though, is that the re-presentation of the scene in both cases involves a dramatic shift in focus; in particular, it involves the cultivation of what Whitman called "effusing" (and what Keats more famously called "negative capability"): the self, the ego, is let go as the poem attends empathetically from *inside* the life of various things or persons. Most significantly, this empathetic, egoless attention becomes poetic *thinking* (I would venture "lyric thinking") when it "compress[es] a multifaceted scene, distributed over sequential time, into a single momentary *gestalt*" (47), when it produces "the correct multiphasic rendition of the *single* aura of the moment" (47). Yes! Precisely! (Can one deny the name "thought" to the formation of such an "aesthetic and linguistic *gestalt*"? *Pace* Vendler (48), of course one can. As an advocate for Wertheimer against Bacon, et al., I have no wish to do so, but it is naive to imagine that simply saying, "See? How marvellous!" is going to leave the opposition smacking its collective forehead, exclaiming, "Ach! How could we have missed it?") Vendler's briefer argument that "A Noiseless Patient Spider" uses reprise to effect "imaginative reconception"

(56), a shift from description to allegory (55), is relatively unproblematic. In all three poems, she concludes, Whitman “visibly resists the temptations of insufficiently examined response” (60). This, too, I think is correct and calls our attention to a moral dimension of Whitman’s art that is not often noticed. Despite my concerns about the philosophical grounding of her argument, Vendler’s reading in this chapter is consistently of a very high order: alert to nuance, structurally sound, compassionate, and insightful. And in her observation that Whitman’s lyric-poetic thinking attempts to comprehend the whole in a single gesture she has, I believe, touched on the very heart of the matter.

Dickinson, in contrast to Whitman, would seem to be one of those overtly “philosophical” poets that Vendler wishes to avoid. However, her discussion does not focus on the “metaphysical” content of Dickinson’s poems. Instead, her argument that the poems show Dickinson thinking is based on an analysis of changes in the way Dickinson presents “plot” over the course of her oeuvre. In the early poems, Vendler argues, Dickinson aims at an exhaustive description of experience via a “seriality without gaps” (70)—*and then ... and then ... and then ...*, catching the atoms as they fall. (Vendler’s examples include “I’ll tell you how the Sun rose” (1861), “I like to see it lap the Miles—” [1862], “Bound—a trouble” [1861], and “The Heart asks Pleasure—first—” [1863].) However, “[a]s the years go on, ... Dickinson changes her thinking on the adequate temporal shape by which to mirror life,” says Vendler (86). She abandons a “chromatic slot-filled structuring” and represents experience, especially painful experience, in a variety of other ways. The discussion surveys several of these alternate “shapes” into which Dickinson presses experience, ranging from a simple binary sorting of events into “Before” and “After” (“Before I got my eye put out—” [1863]) to a complex structure in which events are arranged in an emotional or metaphysical hierarchy (“There’s a certain Slant of light” [1862]; “I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—” [1863]). Following a summary list of ten “modified” structures for representing events, Vendler concludes: “By thinking through such models of temporality, by constructing so many versions, evasions, and revisions of the seriality that was her original defense against anxiety, Dickinson makes us conscious of the extent to which examining a poet’s intellectual models of experience is indispensable to the understanding of art.” (91) I am not persuaded.

The examples Vendler cites do not convince me that “as the years go on” Dickinson “thinks through” “models of temporality” in order to represent experience more accurately. In the first instance, many of the examples Vendler cites are drawn from roughly the same period in

Dickinson's life as the "gaplessly serial" poems. Nor is there evidence that intellectual "models" of temporality have been investigated and digested in some thorough-going way, and some of Vendler's structures (a "giggling' hysteria without terminus" (91); "a present-tense dead indifference, governed by repetitive apathetic *or's*" (86)) seem not to be *structures* at all, while others ("a seriality of uninterrupted catastrophe" [91]) seem to have exactly the structure she is saying Dickinson abandons. Most importantly, Dickinson's strategy for conveying experience seems heavily dependent on the *content* of that experience: a happy and simple seriality is adequate to cheerful descriptions of the dawn or the progress of a train, but acute pain requires a more edged, more broken, more numbed or anguished treatment if form is to follow sense. It is this—form following sense—that I believe we see in Dickinson's poems of crisis and catastrophe, just as we see it in her confident descriptive pastoral verse. An argument made that in order to make form follow sense the poet must exercise gestalt capacities would be welcome, intriguing, and apt, but Vendler's argument that in Dickinson we see thinking in the form of the development of successive models of temporality both distorts the nature of Dickinson's project and distracts us from the genuine epistemological issues.

With Yeats, Vendler's readings are once again nuanced, and the thesis she hopes to illustrate—that in "Among School Children" and "The Circus Animals' Desertion" we can see Yeats thinking about his own image-based mode of thought—is compelling. There are points in her readings of both poems that I find questionable, but I'd like to set these aside in order to concentrate on the lucidity and penetration of her overall approach.

We begin with the premise that Yeats structures his work through the opposition of (archetypal) images. Whether or not we wish to call this ground "thinking in antinomial images" or merely "writing that uses antinomial images" is of no significance: Vendler is concerned with if Yeats's poems *about* his imagistic *modus operandi* constitute "thinking." Her argument that "Among School Children" "is Yeats's most harrowing investigation ... of the worth of his antinomies as a mental principle of order" (93) hinges on construing the "bitter diptychs" (101) of the first seven-and-a-half stanzas as the framing of a question which the final couplet of the eighth stanza "solves" (104). The question is: Is there nothing more to the self than the pattern of "self-deception followed by heartbreak" (103)? And Yeats's answer, "daringly postponed" (100) until the last two lines of the poem, is: There is! The dancer is indistinguishable from the dance, selfhood can be understood as "the arc we trace moment by moment in our inventive responses to the unchosen events of our

fate" (106). That Yeats is *thinking* about the issue, posing and resolving the question, is made clear, Vendler argues, by two formal features of the poem. The first is its "serial modulations of genre" (98): it begins as a narrative, progresses to meditation, and ends as an ode. The "odal turn" signifies Yeats's intention to reach beyond the heartbreak of his personal life to articulate a universal truth (98). The second crucial formal feature to which Vendler points is the poem's use of *ottava rima*—the first seven stanzas, which pile up the antinomic images of the "bitter diptychs," are all in some way "imperfect," the sestet and final couplet to a greater or lesser degree enjambed. Only the eighth of the *ottava rimas* is a perfect exemplar of the form. By means of this structural control, the final image is enabled to enact Yeats's "solution": "life is imperfect as it unfolds and yet perfect as it rounds to completion" (100).

While the "thinking form" of "Among Schoolchildren" is packed out with antinomial images, in "The Circus Animals' Desertion," Vendler notes, Yeats depends heavily on "bald assertions and bald questions" (111). This is only fitting, she argues, for a poem concerned with the waning of poetic powers, conceived as the ability to summon and manipulate images. However, what the three central stanzas of the poem tell us is that the images summoned by the young poet were all deployed in the service of Romantic dreams: "Players and painted stage took all my love, / And not those things that they were emblems of." It is the recognition that to serve *truth* he must make his bed in the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart that produces the "torrent of new images" that dominate the final stanza (117). In a related way, then, Vendler argues, "The Circus Animals' Desertion" enacts thinking: Yeats's critique of his youthful deployment of images is made visible through the poem's rhetorical structure—discursive statement set against the dense series of images released when the project of Romantic idolizing is given up.

In her introduction to *Poets Thinking*, Vendler offers a disarmingly personal sketch of the nature and origin of her own critical orientation:

When, as a young student, I read literary critics, I longed for them to dwell on, and above all to explain, the aesthetic intent governing the unfolding of an individual poem, and wanted as well to see them track the aesthetic determinants of an entire oeuvre. What I did not find, I have tried to create—a criticism guided by the poem as an exemplification of its own inner momentum rather than as an illustration of a social, philosophical, psychological, rhetorical, or theoretical thesis. Criticism, I believe, while being alert to the smallest nuances of

language-use, ought to infer from the text the emotional motivation that not only compelled a poet from silence into speech but also produced the originally unforeseeable contours of the evolving inner form of the work of art. (4–5)

It is her diligent adherence to these ideals, their intellectual generosity and the special capacity for readerly “effusing” on which they depend, that are the great strengths of these essays, as they are of Vendler’s work as a whole. As a philosopher, I can muster disappointment that the book’s thesis is not argued with greater rigour and sophistication. But as a poet and reader, I can only commend the example Vendler sets of close but passionate attending in the service of the text.

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Morag Shiach. *Modernism, Labour and Selfhood in British Literature and Culture, 1890–1930*.
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Morag Shiach undertakes to “discuss a wide range of writers [...] and consider a great variety of texts, including philosophical writings, novels, poetry, journalism, political theory and visual arts” (14). The wide range signifies an ambitious approach to the question of labour and Modernism, although it also makes it difficult to discern either temporal or thematic coherence in this study. Shiach begins with a long march through three centuries of thinking about labour. Locke argues that labour legitimizes individual claims to property; Marx, that labour is the sole source of value; Ruskin, that “life without industry is guilt” (42). So far, we can see a consensus that labour is not the curse of Adam but a founding virtue of any productive society. But by the end of the nineteenth century a labour-centric view of human existence is under attack from Modernism, and from other quarters as well.

Shiach’s challenge is to chart the emergence around 1900 of cross-currents which render problematic the status of “labour” as a stable, unitary concept. Modernism, in its masculinist aspect at least, tends to see mass production as a threat to heroic manhood. What is taken from us by the machine needs to be restored through sexual, ritual, or primitivist self-assertion. Woman suffers too, like Eliot’s typist who loses her femininity as she “lays out food in tins.” Nor is mechanical sex any cure for the ills of mechanical labour. Yet, a generation earlier, novelists like Gissing or