

**Helen Vendler 2003: *Coming of Age as a Poet*. Cambridge, Massachusetts:
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Bill Phillips
Universitat de Barcelona
billphillips@ub.edu

Following the death of Auberon Waugh, founder and editor of *Literary Review*, Geoffrey Wheatcroft wrote, to the outrage of Waugh's many supporters, that the magazine "was not so much bad as pointless" (*Guardian* 2001). The same could also be said of Helen Vendler's *Coming of Age as a Poet*. It is not exactly bad, merely forty years out of date, and it is hard to know why, or for whom, it was written. It is clearly neither intended for academics nor for anyone involved in postgraduate studies or research, nor is it likely to appear on undergraduate reading lists other than those of Harold Bloom and the author herself. Towards the end of the "Introduction" we are told that "In rehearsing, for the new reader, familiar facts and opinions about these well-known poems, I have needed to present information already well known to scholars" (8) so presumably the book is for those readers who know nothing of poetry at all. Non-academic poetry-lovers might be interested, but both her written style and the rather redundant arguments presented in the book may prove a stumbling block to those anxious to learn more about the lives and works of Milton, Keats, Eliot and Plath.

As a vigorous opponent of contemporary critical theory Helen Vendler inevitably eschews the arcane jargon which so bedevils many a work of criticism, and which offends the non-academic reader so particularly. Nevertheless, she is not the model of clarity that one might expect her to be: a consequence, perhaps, of an unhealthy devotion to the works of F.R. Leavis on whose turgid syntax and idiosyncratic vocabulary Helen Vendler appears to have modelled her own. She tends to use long, over-elaborate sentences, full of parentheses and lists apparently designed to tax both the reader's patience and concentration. A good example is provided by the book's conclusion which consists of a single page, of which the first sentence is 23 lines long and which I shall not quote here. She also has an addiction to brackets:

The young poet advances on many fronts at once (often shakily), learning how to manage sound (the sounds of syllables, words, phrases, and lines); rhythm (iambes and trochees, tetrameters and pentameters, caesuras and line-breaks, intonation and phrasing); syntax (including individually distinctive sentence-forms); and larger formal units such as stanzas and sonnets. (5)

This is extremely irritating because the brackets, which could be replaced with parenthetical commas, visually disrupt an already unnecessarily overloaded sentence. Reading it is hard work. She also uses, at times, rather obscure vocabulary. This is made worse by the fact that she occasionally uses it incorrectly. Of Milton's "L'Allegro" she argues that its protagonists' "lives are arranged chiasmically: we see the educated protagonist's day; then the rustics' day and night; then the educated protagonist's night" (17). Now as I understand it, chiasmatic is the adjective of chiasmus, which the ever-reliable H.W. Fowler defines as "when the terms in the second of two parallel phrases reverse the order of those in the first to which they correspond" (1965, 86). John F. Kennedy was famous for his use of chiasmus: "ask not", he exhorted, "what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country" (*Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* 1987, 295). Kennedy's chiasmus, which Fowler explains has its

origin in the Greek letter chi, or X, is in the words “country”, “you”, “you”, and “country”. I fail to see, therefore, how a poem arranged around “the educated protagonist’s day; then the rustics’ day and night; then the educated protagonist’s night” can be described as chiasmic. Well actually I can, vaguely, since the arrangement is “educated protagonist”, “rustic”, “rustic”, “educated protagonist”, but the use of the term seems to me to be utterly pointless and confusing in this context. I have laboured on at some length about the way *Coming of Age as a Poet* is written because one might reasonably expect that an academic of Helen Vendler’s reputation would at least write well. Aesthetic judgement and analysis of how poems are written is supposed to be her speciality; surely something might have got rubbed off somewhere.

We do not, however, expect to be impressed by her ideas, and in this we are not disappointed. The purpose of the book is to “consider the work a young poet has to have done before writing his or her first “perfect” poem—the poem which first wholly succeeds in embodying a coherent personal style” (1). The word “perfect” retains its inverted commas for most of the book, for which we should be grateful. We should also be grateful that we are told the purpose of the book in the first sentence of the “Introduction”, so that we know we need not continue reading. To do her credit, though, Helen Vendler does attempt to explain the requirements for writing a “perfect” poem:

A governing stylistic decorum needs to be acquired (down to the smallest details of technique); this consciousness of the lyric medium is accompanied psychologically by a growing awareness of the problems attending accurate expression of inner moods and attitudes. The poet needs also to identify the salient elements of the outer sense-world that speaks to his idiosyncratic imagination; to devise his own particular axes of time and space; to decide on the living and non-living beings who will populate his work; and finally to find a convincing cosmological or metaphysical frame of being within which the activity of the poem can occur. (4-5)

So now we know. And she goes on to show us, throughout the book, how Milton’s “L’Allegro”, Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”, Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and Plath’s “The Colossus” fulfil these requirements. Meanwhile, let’s try and apply the same criteria to other famous poems. Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 18”, for example. Yes, it seems to apply perfectly: there is undoubtedly a governing stylistic decorum there—it is by Shakespeare, after all. It is pretty good, too, on giving expression to inner moods and attitudes, and the sonnets are notorious for identifying the salient elements of the outer sense-world that speaks to the poet’s “idiosyncratic imagination”. “When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st” reveals axes of time and space as well as identifying a living being in the work (*was* it the Earl of Southampton?) and the final lines “So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,/So long lives this, and this gives life to thee” (Shakespeare 1964, 58) provide a terribly convincing metaphysical framework. A similar analysis of “Lay, Lady, Lay” by Bob Dylan reveals that it, too, must be a “perfect” poem. I have a suspicion that the lyrics of Eminem, too, might be crowbarred into conformity if required. Which of his works is his *first* “perfect” poem though? I doubt that Helen Vendler will tell us since she confines herself to those poets already consecrated by the canon. And a pretty conservative canon at that. In fact, it would have been interesting to see an unknown or forgotten poet revealed as the author of “perfect” poems but one always suspects that critics like Helen Vendler are reluctant to stray far from works hallowed by time and universal acclaim in case no-one else agrees with them, not even Harold Bloom. Indeed, her inclusion of Sylvia Plath is to be considered quite daring.

Harold Bloom is undoubtedly a strong influence on Helen Vendler's ideas. Like him she is a Romantic. Having quoted *The Prelude* she says:

Wordsworth has recounted in this passage the normal course of individual human formation. But for a young writer, the stakes are doubled. The youthful writer cannot pursue an evolution to adulthood independent of an ongoing evolution of style. To find a personal style *is*, for a writer, to become adult. (2)

“[F]or a young writer the stakes are doubled”? Boy soldiers, child prostitutes, coal miners, construction workers, teachers, well, just about everyone else, really; we have it easy, do we, compared to those struggling poets? No doubt Helen Vendler would also agree with Wordsworth that the poet is a man “endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind” (Wordsworth 1996, 255). She combines the Wordsworthian assertion that the poet is someone special with Harold Bloom's pseudo-Freudian theory of the ‘Anxiety of Influence’ according to which, to quote Terry Eagleton, “all authors were locked in Oedipal combat with some mighty predecessor” (*Observer* 2000). Thus, much of the poet's “coming of age”, argues Helen Vendler, depends on his response to earlier poets: “the ultimate style of a poet is partly chosen (often in rebellion against available discourses)” (2). This rebellion is necessary if “adulthood” is to be achieved, for it is only then that the poet's work manifests “a coherent and well-managed idiosyncratic style voiced in memorable lines” (2)—in other words, the “perfect” poem!

I suggested earlier that *Coming of Age as a Poet* is forty years out of date. Works of criticism, like the texts they presume to elucidate, are often really a kind of debate or discussion. A conversation, perhaps, with contemporaries, with whom one wishes to share points of view, or to disagree violently. It is significant, then, that the first fellow critic mentioned by Helen Vendler is Cleanth Brooks, and the opinion with which she chooses to disagree was published in 1947. Other critics referred to are G. Wilson Knight, William Empson and Rosamund Tuve. Now, while I do not expect a detailed New Historicist analysis of Keats, or even a feminist appreciation of Plath, surely Frank Kermode could have been called upon to say something about Milton. Has Helen Vendler read nothing in the way of criticism since 1963? Is it possible to be a Professor at Harvard University and remain so ignorant of *everything* that has happened within one's chosen discipline for the last forty years.

So why did she write the book? “In part”, apparently,

because it's popularly believed that anything written in unjustified lines is reasonably called a poem. In the broadest sense—that which distinguishes verse from prose—it is. But to earn the label ‘poem’ in its fullest sense, the piece of verse must be almost superhumanly accomplished. (3)

In other words, the barbarians must be kept at bay. And if you do not know who the barbarians are, Helen Vendler will let you know, because, I am afraid, there is no way that her instructions on what makes a great poet will help you to work it out for yourself.

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