5

The Poet's Choices

HELEN VENDLER ON JOHN KEATS

Jeff Dolven and Joshua Kotin

The headline for a New York Times *profile of Helen Vendler (1933–2024) dubbed her "The Closest Reader."*[1] *A student of the original "practical critic," I. A. Richards, Vendler has carried his prescriptions for students—tight focus on the words on the page, in dialogue with other works of literature, bracketing history and theory—into the twenty-first century. She is a consummate noticer, which she achieves through a practice Dolven and Kotin call* empathetic reading. *Vendler identifies with the writer and considers why they chose each word, word by word. Dolven and Kotin present, here, a starter kit to begin to notice like Vendler: read aloud, read to a friend, write the work out longhand. Imagine a counterfactual text. Close reading becomes an act of attention tantamount to authorship.—DS + JW*

IN THE essay "How Should One Read a Book?" (1926), Virginia Woolf answers her own question in this way:

> To read a book well, one should read it as if one were writing it. Begin not by sitting on the bench among the judges but by standing in the dock with the criminal. Be his fellow worker, become his accomplice. Even, if you wish merely to read books, begin by writing them.[2]

1. Rachel Donadio, "The Closest Reader," *New York Times*, December 10, 2006.

2. Virginia Woolf, "How Should One Read a Book?" *The Yale Review* 16, no. 1 (Autumn 1926), https://yalereview.org/article/virginia-woolf-essay-how-should-read-book.

There is no literary critic more committed to this practice than Helen Vendler. In *The Odes of John Keats* (1983), she takes Woolf's recommendation to what must be its limit: "The poet is so unconscious of his reader that we have only the choice of becoming him [. . .] and losing our own identity."[3]

In this chapter, we attempt to describe what it means for Vendler to become Keats: how she does it and what it can do for readers to, as it were, identify with her as she identifies with the poet. We recognize that reading in this way may not be obvious or easy, and may even seem nonsensical. You're signing your name to the paper you're writing—why attempt to lose yourself? What can you see as Vendler or Keats that you can't see as you? Vendler's book—as well as all her writing about individual poets from George Herbert to Emily Dickinson to Wallace Stevens—makes a case for bringing a writerly attention, a sense of agency, responsibility, and choice, to the interpretation of someone else's words. The practice is worthy of study for the light it brings to specific poems, and for its general lessons about the techniques and value of reading closely.

One of the first things that Vendler does in *The Odes of John Keats* is set the boundaries of her enterprise. "I propose," she writes, "the conceptual frame of authorial choice and the contextual frame of the Keats canon (supplemented by some of Keats's sources)" (5). We'll return to the idea of "authorial choice" in our next paragraph. By the "Keats canon" and "Keats's sources," Vendler means that her interpretation of each of the six odes will draw on the others, on Keats's poetry at large, and on the work of the writers Keats most often invoked: Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton. Notice that poetry itself is her world of reference. This is the data she uses to get to know Keats, to get inside his head. Another term for this "frame"—the one proposed by the book you're reading—is scene setting: orienting your reader both to the poem at hand and to the resources you will bring to it. Vendler's scene is Keats's writing and Keats's reading.

When you write about a poem, your contextual frame will likely be narrower than Vendler's. It will possibly include other poems you have been assigned or a critic or historian you have read, or both. It might only include the particular poem you are interpreting. Let us work with Vendler's boundaries. What questions does she ask within them, and what questions can we ask? The main guidance she offers is that phrase, "the conceptual frame of authorial choice." (You didn't have to wait long for that phrase to reappear.) Just as her

3. Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983), 246. All subsequent citations given in text.

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contextual frame excludes many texts, so this emphasis on choice excludes many questions. She is not concerned with the influence of larger social and political discourses (as a historicist would be). She is not inclined to view language as at play free of its speakers (as a deconstructionist would). She does grant special authority to Keats's unconscious drives and impulses (like a psychoanalytic critic). It is a lot to set aside, but within its boundaries is a world of intentional language. "[A]n artist's choices are never haphazard," she writes (5).

You can enter this world by small acts of noticing: noticing something surprising, something strange, something you didn't expect. This advice will be familiar to any close reader: mind the details, pay attention to your own surprise and confusion. To wake ourselves up to these possibilities, we rely on a few strategies. For example, reading the poem with a friend and talking about it. (Hence our collaboration on this chapter.) Even reading the poem aloud to yourself is useful: you will likely notice many choices when you hear how the poem sounds and how it departs from everyday speech. Vendler likes to write the poem out by hand—to pretend that she is inventing it as she goes. Slowing things down, tuning your senses, reading in company, you will notice whether anything in the poem seems off, or wrong, or goes against common sense, or if the poet seems uncertain about anything. Does a line contain an extra beat? An archaic word or an anachronism? Any small, telling swerve from the familiar, the expected?

The value of Vendler's practice depends on what you do when you've noticed that surprising detail. It is her reflex to ask not just what that detail means, but why did Keats choose to include it instead of something else? Why put those words in that order and not another? Why choose that image or that rhyme or that punctuation mark among all those available—available, for example, elsewhere in his poems, or sources, or everyday language? All these questions invite us to imagine a different poem, a counterfactual poem. By comparing the poem we have to the poem that could have been, we learn to see through the poet's eyes, because it was exactly that contingency that Keats faced when he was writing and revising. (Although it should be said, Keats was not much of a reviser!) For Vendler, every choice a poet makes is important and, in Keats's case, correct. Our job is to find out why he did just what he did.

Reading Keats's final ode, "To Autumn," Vendler notices many surprising features of the poem and its connection to the other odes. We will focus on one: a simple problem with profound consequences. The activities of the harvest as represented in the poem—reaping (cutting and gathering the wheat), gleaning (collecting what is left in the field), and threshing (separating the grain from the straw)—happen out of order. In the poem, the threshing

happens first, then the reaping and gleaning. The reordering is subtle and easy to miss. Keats uses a series of keywords to mark the actions: "winnowing" (a near-synonym for threshing), "hook" (an instrument for reaping) and "half-reap'd," and "gleaner" (a person who gleans). The reordering is also easy to miss because all three actions take place in an environment of inactivity—of sleep and drowsiness, of carelessness. Indeed, the actions, as we will see, might not even be actions at all.

The relevant stanza of "To Autumn" is the second. (The poem has three.) Keats is addressing a personified autumn:

> Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
> Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
> Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
> Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
> Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
> Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
> Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers:
> And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
> Steady thy laden head across a brook;
> Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
> Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.[4]

The stanza imagines Autumn "sitting careless on a granary floor." The wind does the winnowing—or threshing—and its object is not the wheat, but Autumn's "hair." Continuing this portrait of active inactivity, Keats describes how Autumn's "hook/Spares the next swatch and all its twined flowers." The word "spares" allows Keats to imply reaping even as Autumn abstains. Finally, Keats compares her to a gleaner alternately dozing by a brook and watching the "last oozings" of a cider press. (Like almost all critics of the poem, we use she/her pronouns for Autumn.) The harvest is at once out of order and also not quite happening.

Vendler develops her account in one long paragraph. We track her close reading over four stages or movements. First, she notices the inactivity:

> We see in this poem a thresher who does not thresh, a reaper who does not reap, a gleaner who does not glean, a cider-maker who does not turn her press. (251)

4. John Keats, *Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982), 360.

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Already an act of noticing sets the stage for a claim—an act of local claiming, to adopt the terminology of this book. "Autumn," Vendler writes, "acquiesces in but does not enact her own dissolution. Her tresses are the winnowed grain, her life-blood the last oozings" (251). In other words, Autumn passively accepts the transitions that make autumn autumn. What is autumn if it doesn't lead to winter?

So far we only have an account of the harvest being stayed, paused. These acts of noticing and local claiming lead to bigger questions. In the second stage of her close reading, Vendler notices something else: "Keats's rearrangement of the normal order of the grain harvest":

> Where we would expect (in this minutely conscious poem) first reaping, then gleaning, then threshing, we find instead first threshing, then reaping, then gleaning, a sequence invented, I believe, to show the difficulties of presenting an inactive harvest, one imbued with pathos. (251)

Again, an act of noticing leads to a claim. Provoked by an unexpected fact, Vendler attempts to explain why Keats would have chosen to write the poem in this way. Her claim: he meant to imbue the "inactive harvest" with "pathos," a quality, the dictionary tells us, "that evokes pity or sadness."

The third stage of her close reading begins to explain the significance of this claim. She describes an association that was almost certainly in Keats's mind between threshing and the apocalypse, the end of time in Christian history and the day of final judgment, when the saved are winnowed from the damned. For Keats, the apocalypse—its violence and terror—interferes with the production of a more temperate, melancholy, even sustainable pathos:

> Though the archetypal image of harvest is that of reaping, the most energetic single harvest image is that of threshing: when "the stars shall be threshed, and the souls threshed from their husks," then, as Yeats and Blake knew, would come the trampling out of the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. Keats wishes to avoid any appearance of apocalypse, and so the season, far from herself wielding the flail, becomes in the threshing scene entirely passive, and is herself, in her metamorphosis into grain, "winnowed" by the soft wind (251).

Vendler talks through how a harvest works—how it culminates, in energy and productivity, with the violent act of threshing. She mentions two poets, W. B. Yeats and William Blake, to show how Keats inhabits a particular tradition.

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(Keats didn't read Yeats or Blake—indeed, Yeats was born forty-four years after Keats died.) Keats, she argues, wants to evade this tradition to "avoid any appearance of apocalypse."

In the fourth stage of her close reading, she completes her act of theorizing, which now becomes regional and global. To do so, she adds a final turn that tempers her account of pathos, capturing Keats's unique and precise vision:

> Gleaning must occur last in the series of scenes from the grain-harvest because it is by definition the most pathetic of harvest-phases, associated as it is in Keats's mind with the image of Ruth, in tears amid the alien corn. And yet, refusing to succumb to the pathos inherent in the image of gleaning [. . .] Keats permits himself to show the gleaner only as a careful tributary presence on her way to the granary, a presence steady and skillful, not homesick and estranged. In the arrested motion of the stanza, the thresher sits, the reaper drowses, the gleaner balances her laden head, and the cider-maker watches in vigil. (251–52)

In this passage, another biblical association comes to Vendler's aid: the Book of Ruth, to which Keats alludes in his "Ode to a Nightingale." (Vendler is making characteristic use of the contextual framework of Keats's writing and reading.) The story once again offers a contrast that clarifies the poet's choices. The biblical Ruth is in exile after a famine in Judah, and is now gleaning in an alien field, "homesick and estranged." Keats's gleaner, by contrast, is a figure of poise and balance, carrying a basket of grain safely across a brook. This stanza is no apocalypse; the poet has not followed his precedents, either about the order of the harvest or its meaning. The stanza sustains instead a kind of mellow sadness, time passing but somehow not running out, the harvest's events loosened from the order that would drive the season to a final winter. You might have something like this feeling when you first read the poem without being able to say exactly what it is or why you feel it. Or perhaps it might grow on you as you reread, as details that at first are just puzzling start to make sense. It can work both ways: but that's one of the things that close reading is, a way of figuring out how to talk about how a poem makes you feel.

Vendler's close reading of the out-of-order harvest reflects a life of studying poetry. She was fifty when *The Odes of John Keats* was published. She had been reading Keats for most of her life, and teaching him, too. It can seem like she knows more than you will ever know. (It still seems that way to us.) But she is

committed to a basic set of questions that we can all ask and all begin to answer. In the case of "To Autumn": Why this word, John Keats, rather than another? Why that word after this one? What were you thinking when you made that choice? To close read in this way is to become like Keats, and to make Keats a little more like you. He is not a man struck by lightning: he is a writer making choices, solving problems, just as you are in writing an essay about him.

There are many critics who want to understand the poets they read and write about better than the poets understood themselves—critics who aspire to say something that the poet could not have known about the motives and even the structures of their art. Not Vendler. In an interview for *The Paris Review* in 1996, she told the poet Henri Cole:

> What I would hope would be that if Keats read what I had written about the ode "To Autumn," he would say, Yes, that is the way I wanted it to be thought of. And, Yes, you have unfolded what I had implied, or something like that. It would not strike the poet, I hope, that there was a discrepancy between my description of the work and the poet's own conception of the work. I wouldn't be very happy if a poet read what I had written and said, What a peculiar thing to say about this work of mine.[5]

Vendler is not a suspicious reader, reading for what is hidden behind the poet's words; she is also not a surface reader, merely describing those words. She aspires to give an account of a poem as an instance of how the poet has figured out how to think and live and feel. In the process, she can try out those ways of being for herself. "I feel close to Keats [. . .] by temperament," she explains in the same interview. Vendler might be best described as an empathetic reader.

Empathetic reading is often a way to care for one's subject. (For a very different—but equally thrilling and attentive—example of empathetic reading, read Hugh Kenner's book about Ezra Pound, *The Pound Era* [1971].) When Keats wrote "To Autumn" in September 1819, his brother Tom had died of tuberculosis the year before, and he himself would die, at the age of twenty-five, seventeen months later. He already suspected he might not live long. To articulate the pathos of rich suspension that Keats achieves, by pausing or holding back the momentum of autumn, is a gift to the poet—a recognition

5. Helen Vendler, "The Art of Criticism No. 3," interview by Henri Cole, *The Paris Review* 141 (1996): 170.

that, in the poem at least, he has solved the problem of death itself, turning it from a grim appointment to an enduring feeling. Vendler gives Keats's short life its completion and its eternity at once. To write such an essay (Vendler herself observes that she gives more than a page to each of the poem's thirty-three lines) you have to care so much about the poet. That may be daunting, for a critic starting out. But reading is one way to learn that care. Reading as a writer, Vendler shows us how poetry can pass from a bewilderment to a passion.