

## ***Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats***

**Reviewed by Jonathan Kugler**

*Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats*

By Helen Vendler

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**H**elen Vendler, current A. Kingsley Porter University Professor at Harvard University, has become an increasingly important critic of poetry. Her new book, *Poets Thinking*, evidences her success. Created from a series of talks given at Cambridge University, the book seeks to reveal the intellectual process that poets use during the creation of their poems. In her introduction, Vendler describes this goal: “I want to illuminate, if possible, the way thinking goes on in the poet’s mind during the process of creation, and how the evolution of that thinking can be deduced from the surface of the poem” (6). To study the “surface of a poem,” she includes interpretations of Alexander Pope, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and William Butler Yeats. Through these interpretations, she attempts to show the intrinsic tendency toward logic in poetry.

Through this goal, Vendler is trying to create what she did not find in previous criticism: an interpretation that is “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” (4). Refreshingly, Vendler would rather value the specific study of poems as an attempt to understand the poet’s inner thought process, rather than apply a preformed theory. She feels as though poets themselves recommend this interpretation of poetry, citing the fact that poets leave intellectual and emotional clues (what she describes as “implicit instructions concerning how [poems] should be read”) that “ought to be introduced as evidence for any offered interpretation” (5). Here, it is clear that Vendler desires all interpretations of poetry to be based on the word choice, diction, and the thought process behind a specific poem, not on surrounding contexts or theories. Therefore, she believes a critic’s interpretation “cannot be generalized, but must be approached poet by poet” (7). This sparks Vendler’s examination of Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, and Yeats individually.

It is clear through Vendler’s statements that she does not want to create a new theory of interpretation to be applied during the analysis of poetry. Rather, she wishes to remind the critic of the importance of the textual clues a poet leaves to his or her reader. These clues,

Vendler holds, are not merely emotional tones, but are intellectual indications of interpretation.

Vendler's interpretive reminder allows poetry to be understood as Emerson's "metre-making argument." Her criticism is a revitalizing return to the undeniable connection between the aesthetical appeal and intellectual intent of poetry. As a reader, I welcome her request to remove the tendency to see poems as "static entities," and agree with her recommendation to view poets as active and inventive (4). By focusing on the intellectual interpretation of poetry, Vendler has successfully kept poetry in the realm of social or political commentary; however, her coupling of poetry's intellectual influence with a textual analysis of tone and "reading clues" has challenged critics from other disciplines to admire poetry for a new reason: its ability to be both aesthetically appealing and contemporarily interpretable.

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