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Tone and Emotion in Helen Vendler's Dickinson and Stevens

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Wallace Stevens Journal

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 38, Number 2, Fall 2014

pp. 172-176

10.1353/wsj.2014.0046

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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HELEN VENDLER IS A CRITIC AND TEACHER of many gifts. Noting if not personal in her judgments of value, she has reassessed the canon of poetry in English and contributed substantially to our present reading of major figures. One opens her many volumes with the certainty that one will find a forceful argument about Dickinson, Heaney, Yeats, Stevens, even Ashbery—who leaves so little space for forceful arguments since everything in him is so slippery. To have put such very different voices together in a single canon and argument is no small feat, which Vendler has performed effortlessly. She provides us with an example of good and trenchant writing, something not so often found, after all, in criticism. I remember someone saying that the great critic is even rarer than the great poet. Helen would be the first to demur at being called a great critic, but doubtlessly she has performed an essential function over the decades, tirelessly and persuasively.

Yeats was already much studied when she published her first book on *A Vision* and the later poems, innovative though that was, but *On Extended Wings*, her first book on Stevens, certainly opened up new territory in 1969, and has remained fresh ever since. She wrote of Stevens' notoriously obscure longer works as if they needed no excuse, as if they were thoroughly available. She left all the chat about Stevens the insurance man and the objections of reviewers behind, assuming a reader that would follow her without hesitation on her arduous way. Her method—the same she uses for every poet—was to explain Stevens through Stevens, peppering her confident sentences with words and phrases that came from the work itself, somewhat self-referentially. This approach took for granted that her reader shared her knowledge and above all her love of these words and sentences. This could hardly be expected to be the case, since we are all beginners and remain so to some extent. But it is an object lesson. After all, criticism and teaching are not so much, or not only, about providing hard information, but about presenting or suggesting an attitude—in the case of Vendler, what it means over the last few decades to read poetry. How does one proceed, with respect and open-mindedness? **[End Page 172]**

Vendler is far from adulatory or awed in the face of her great figures. She doesn't spare the arch Stevens the unlikely accusation of sentimentality, or at least she tells us that in the close of "Credences of Summer" he "risks sentimentality" (*Extended Wings* 244). Of the moving passage "One day enriches a year" (*CPP* 324), she writes that

The final resolution . . . is an ingenious but frigid appropriation from logical abstraction. Its weakness is betrayed as Stevens has to buttress it by his gaudy language, always produced in moments of strain: the soldier who bristles and looms comes in phrases not flesh but fustian.

(*Extended Wings* 238)

The phrasing is itself typical and admirable in its movement and finality. Vendler quarrels with her poets. Remembering Yeats's famous dictum, we might wonder if she also quarrels with herself. But then she would be a poet. However this may be, criticism should be competent and well written, this side of self-indulgence. This is Vendler's lesson. She has never taken to fashionable jargons, and this will make her books and pronouncements permanently valuable. We can disagree—do, in fact, disagree many times. But at least we have a common ground of debate. No criticism, obviously, is final. At best, it is a step in a constant process of reassessment. This is also the case with Vendler's outstanding contribution.

It is necessary to know how and why a poet wrote, and how he or she was and should be read. The question of tone is one of the central aspects of a poetic text, and one that is occasionally difficult to deduce from the text itself. Was Shakespeare joking when he told his fair youth that he would live forever "in the mouths of men"—was he being just a little tongue in cheek...

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