

The Ocean, the Bird, and the Scholar


By Helen Vendler


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One of our foremost commentators examines the work of a broad range of English, Irish, and American poets. Helen Vendler's essays, book reviews, and occasional prose from the past two decades, taken together, are an eloquent plea for the centrality—in humanistic study and modern culture—of poetry's subversive, sustaining, and demanding legacy.

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Editorial Review

Review

It's one of [Vendler's] finest books, an impressive summation of a long, distinguished career in which she revisits many of the poets she has venerated over a lifetime and written about previously. Reading it, one can feel her happiness in doing what she loves best. There is scarcely a page in the book where there isn't a fresh insight about a poet or poetry. (Charles Simic *New York Review of Books* 2015-08-13)

Vendler has done perhaps more than any other living critic to shape our understanding of poetry in English... Vendler brings fresh insights on Whitman, Yeats, Eliot, Bishop, Ammons, Ashbery and others, but the most crucial piece is the title essay, an argument to place the arts at the center of our educational system rather than its periphery: 'After all, it is by their arts that cultures are principally remembered.' And it's through the work of exceptional critics like Vendler that those arts are made negotiable to the cultures that produced them. (Joel Brouwer *New York Times Book Review* 2015-09-04)

The formidable poetry critic **Helen Vendler** gathers together over two decades of essays, book reviews, and prose examining a broad range of nineteenth- and twentieth-century English, Irish, and American poets. Taken together, her writings serve as an eloquent argument for the necessity of poetry both in humanistic study and in modern life. (Christine Emba *New Criterion* 2015-05-12)

A generous collection of essays spanning 35 years..., by one of our best critics, is an event worth celebrating... **Vendler** claims, modestly, that readers including herself will always need a path into some poems and poets, and suggests that the function of criticism is to provide such a path. She does this splendidly, and creating such paths for contemporary poets who have not yet accumulated a body of interpretation for their work is a very special gift... These essays will be a pleasure for readers of poetry and a service to the poets Vendler chooses for her close readings. (Elizabeth Greene *Times Higher Education* 2015-06-18)

A new book by **Helen Vendler** is always occasion for gratitude, since for more than 50 years she has provided us with the most exacting writing about poetry of any American critic... She is at her best in commentaries on Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, James Merrill, and John Berryman... Vendler argues for the centrality of the arts in a humanities curriculum, since their demand for 'subtlety of response' can't be duplicated. Her own essays are a vivid proof of what such response can look like. (William H. Pritchard *Boston Globe* 2015-06-06)

In this triumphant collection, **Vendler** reminds us why she is one of the most important living scholars of poetry... This book, with its oceans of depth, reminds us why we need poetry--as well as teachers like Vendler to bring it to transformative life. (*Publishers Weekly (starred review)* 2015-03-23)

Poems are artifacts and [Vendler] shows us, often thrillingly, how those poems she considers the best specimens are made... A reader feels that she has thoroughly absorbed her subjects and conveys her understanding with candor, clarity, wit. (John Greening *Times Literary Supplement* 2016-03-25)

About the Author

Helen Vendler is A. Kingsley Porter University Professor at Harvard University.

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Helen Richards:

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