

Anna T. Szabó

The Architecture of Poetry

Helen Vendler: *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Harvard University Press, 1997.

“Our talking about poetry is a part of, an extension of, our experience of it, and as a good deal of thinking has gone to the making of poetry, so a good deal may well go to the study of it.” These lines by T. S. Eliot are one of the quotations Helen Vendler starts her book with; it is telling that the other five are also by poets. Vendler comes to the Sonnets as a critic of lyric poetry, but at one point she has to admit that she aimed to position herself into “the vantage point of the poet who wrote them, asking the questions that a poet would ask about any poem.” She believes that the Sonnets are calling for us to enter the lyric script because they “are preeminently utterances for us to

utter as ours.”

Although many modern critics are interested in the Sonnets, few of them pay enough attention to them as poems, Vendler says. The predominantly social and psychological approaches tend to forget the fact that a lyric poem or even a whole sequence of sonnets is primarily a form of dramatic solitary speech and not a social or historical narrative. One should still read it as a work of art: the structure of the text itself is as much or even more interesting than the social structure it is part of. Helen Vendler, therefore, makes no attempt to link any of the poems to the social, political or personal references of the age or of the author; she is very careful not to mention any of the names or events that were common starting points for former commentators. It may be regretted that together with the social aspect an interesting historical point is left unmentioned in most of the analyses - that is, how do the Sonnets relate with the works of other major Renaissance poets, and to what extent are they innovative compared to other sonnet sequences; but perhaps this contrastive analysis would require a radically different viewpoint.

Vendler's wish is to defend the sonnets she admires from being treated as relics of the past, even though this kind of ornamented finery is very far from modern aesthetics and poetics - as can be demonstrated by the English poet

Basil Bunting's 'purified' (or rather: drastically maimed) version of Shakespeare's Sonnets. (Bunting, on Ezra Pound's advice, cut out from the sonnets everything he thought superfluous, and in this way he arrived at a more modern but much less satisfying poem.) Shakespeare's text is so dense and complex, Vendler states, that nothing can be altered or taken from its structure. She demonstrates the futility of this attempt by quoting and writing several prose versions, collages, pastiches and even modern "translations" of the Sonnets, showing that Shakespeare is Shakespeare not in spite of, but because of the "old finery" he deliberately employs.

Her love of the Sonnets leads Helen Vendler to try to find not only the aesthetic strategies at work, but also some possible compositional motivations – at this point she admittedly follows Auden, whose two basic questions when reading a poem were: "How does it work?" and "What kind of a guy inhabits this poem?" For Vendler, mind and heart are equally important in the composition of a good poem ("The poet's duty is to create aesthetically convincing representations of feelings felt and thoughts thought"); she says that all significant features in a Shakespearean sonnet serve "a psychologically mimetic end": the dynamics of the poems reflects the changes of mind of their "speaker."

(Vendler makes it clear that the fictive "speaker" of the Sonnets, although a poet himself, is not the same with the author proper, Shakespeare, the ultimate aesthetic organiser of the text). This complex inner motion creates a credible speaker and a voice which even the modern reader finds "real."

Lyric poetry is "interior meditative drama": it stages conflicting words instead of actual persons. This is a play of words; inner emotional dynamics are created by the verbal and rhetorical structure of the poem. Structure itself is motion, and the aim of the critic must be to find the very points in the poem where any significant change in the linguistic pattern can be witnessed, because these can be treated as basic evidence useful for any further interpretation ("This Commentary consists primarily of what might be called 'evidential' criticism: that is, I wanted to write down remarks for which I attempt to supply instant and sufficient linguistic evidence"). Helen Vendler argues strongly for the necessity of helping the reader by laying out firm foundations on which the reader's own interpretation can be built; her main problem with Stephen Booth's 1977 edition of the Sonnets (to which she frequently refers) is that Booth offers no "evidence" but only possible readings (as Booth puts it: "The notes in this edition are designed to admit that everything in a sonnet is there"); she disagrees with the

relativism of this approach that leaves it up to the reader to construct the poem - she considers this too ready a surrender to hermeneutic suspicion. Not that she would stress the importance of "meaning" and meaning alone - as she points out in the Introduction, theological hermeneutics that seeks the one and only Meaning can hardly be applied to lyric poetry.

However, she must be convinced that there *is* a meaning in the poem, because she fears the overflowing abundance of ambiguities which - since William Empson's first analyses of the Sonnets - are a must for critics to point out. Later in the book (while analysing sonnet 107) Vendler says that some interpretations generate ambiguities instead of solving an interpretational problem; she is convinced that "Shakespeare's meaning need not be tortured to make a poem interesting." It may be considered symbolic that this statement is a part of an argument on line 7 sonnet 107: "Incertainties now crown themselves assured." The line, without its context, is fully ambiguous. Vendler's careful analysis of the context presents strong evidence that one meaning is much more plausible than the other - however, to overstress authorial/authoritative meaning ("firm authorial instruction") would certainly lead to intentional fallacy.

There is a term Helen Vendler uses which at certain points seems to

reconcile her approach with that of Booth's. If she senses a strong subversive ambiguity in a sonnet, she constructs parallel readings, one rewriting and negating the other, and terms the second reading as a "ghost poem" or "shadow poem" (see for example her discussion of sonnet 61). This "implicit undersong" is indecorous or accusatory - and it can always be construed from the poem itself. This approach, on the rhetorical level, is parallel with what Booth does on the verbal level - demonstrating that everything can be distorted or reversed (re-versed), *uncertainties are assured*. Vendler, however, permits only one "ghost poem," and she seems not to be troubled by the elemental hermeneutical uncertainty that is triggered by this double vision.

The other duality she employs is a duality of character. She treats most of the sonnets as replies to some anterior utterance (usually the words of the Fair Youth), and analyses them as speech acts employed by the speaker of the poem in order to achieve a certain goal. It sometimes seems disturbing (and also superfluous) to read her long 'reconstructions' of antecedent scenarios, of the words possibly uttered by the object of the speaker's affections (the Youth or the Dark Lady). This approach is intended to emphasise the dramatic quality of the sonnets and is successful in doing so, but it also seems to

overemphasise the thematic and situational element of the sonnets. Helen Vendler at first appears to employ this method of 'quoting' the words of the beloved with full self-confidence, but later on (in the essay on sonnet 92) she suggests that maybe many of the sonnets that have apparently direct address are in fact internal meditations directed toward the image of the young man.

The only danger of any emotionally motivated approach to the Sonnets is that at some points it can verge on being too psychological. Vendler's emotional aestheticism – which otherwise makes the book not only absorbing but also beautiful – sometimes leads her to try to prove things that, being a question of individual taste and interpretation, cannot be proven by intellectual means (for example that sonnet 114 is "anguished and self-lacerating" instead of coldly intellectual as Booth says; or the claim that the technical aim of sonnet 151 "is to enact appetite and orgasm"). Vendler appears to agree with John Berryman whom she quotes saying "When Shakespeare wrote 'Two loves I have,' reader, he was *not kidding*." She uses the word "heartbreaking" more than once in her essays: the poems, in her view, are "true," at least psychologically and dramatically. One needs only to read the poems without intellectual detachment to agree. Yet, even Vendler herself admits that there is a great deal of authorial irony involved in

many of the sonnets.

As she considers Shakespeare a hyperconscious writer, Vendler doubts that anything in the Sonnets could have been unintended (Keats, on the other hand, as quoted by Vendler, thought that the Sonnets are "full of fine things said unintentionally"). Therefore, in her analytic essays on each sonnet, she aims to discover the "architecture" of the poems in order to "advance our understanding of Shakespeare's procedures as a working poet - that is, a master of aesthetic strategy." This is the most interesting, most revealing feature of the book - to proceed with keen and careful analysis from the very graphemes upwards to the grammatical and rhetorical structures in order to find and enlist every element that makes the poem work the way it does. She intends to present the reader with a structural analysis instead of a thematic one; from this aspect every sonnet is equally interesting. Critics focusing on topical questions are usually less interested in the sonnets that are thematically weaker, but Vendler wonderfully proves that in terms of linguistic strategy the first subsequence is as fully dramatic as the second.

Helen Vendler has a unique talent of describing the (possible) workings of a poet's mind. She (together with such contemporary editors as Katherine Duncan-Jones) suggests that the Quarto of the Sonnets could have been based on

an authorised manuscript, she ventures on guessing the order of composition of some of the sonnets (she is convinced, for instance, that the philosophical sonnets of the first sub-sequence are of later composition than the complimentary ones; she also tries to solve the problems of the weaker sonnets - like sonnets 145, 153 and 154 - by saying that they were early work inserted as a closure to the whole sequence). She offers many thought-provoking insights concerning word choice and word origin - she contrasts Shakespeare's use of disturbingly elaborate Latinate words with the simplicity and frankness of his Anglo-Saxon vocabulary (sonnet 125), or she points out that Shakespeare was consciously applying Latin words with implied reference to their etymology (sonnet 96); in her commentary on sonnet 7 she suggests that Shakespeare puns on the French word 'or' while describing the route of the golden sun: 'orient,' 'adore,' 'mortal;' she also makes a witty remark about how "Time always brings out the Latin side of Shakespeare" (sonnet 123). She attempts to explain (sometimes verging on apologetic criticism) Shakespeare's frequent use of proverbs in the Sonnets: in the first sub-sequence these appeals to the *consensus gentium* serve the goal of revealing the young man's real character - he is shown as someone who can only be convinced by such commonplaces. Proverbs, on the

other hand, express the speaker's despair at solving the problem exposed by the sonnet - and when the problem itself is insoluble, the common wisdom can rarely offer any real consolation.

Helen Vendler is especially interested in the phonetic and graphic overlaps that occur between many words in the Sonnets. As the Renaissance poets had an unusually "intensive ear-training," Vendler systematically uncovers the possibilities of resonance between the words of a given sonnet (see for example the commentary on sonnet 81, where she talks about the play with the antithetic meaning of 'death' and 'breath,' or on sonnet 87, where Shakespeare's puns on the word 'king': ten rhyme words end in -ing). Graphic overlaps are also abundant - Shakespeare, according to Vendler, played self-testing games with anagrammatic words (with 'hews,' 'hues' and 'use' in sonnet 20, with 'store' and 'rose' in sonnet 67, or with 'abuse,' 'sue' and 'usurer' in sonnet 134, and so on). In her analysis of sonnet 126 (which is not a regular sonnet but a six-couplet poem) Vendler offers a table presenting all the phonetic interrelations in the poem, because she finds it extraordinarily rich in alliteration and assonance.

There are such tables and diagrams in almost every commentary (they show phonetic, syntactic, relational or conceptual patterns); many of them are interesting (especially the ones dealing with the organising grammatical figures,

for example tense-relations - see the commentary on sonnet 146), but some of them seem only to enlist the linguistic features of a poem or show the rhetorical structure that is fairly evident in the sonnet itself. However, as Helen Vendler points out that Shakespeare's favourite figure and organising principle is antithesis, a clear division of contrasting elements is a sure proof of this structural and thematic feature. She is also interested in the rhythmical patterns of the Sonnets, especially when the changes in prosody reflect on thematic variation (e.g. the "wintry" rhythmic irregularities in sonnet 5, or the easy conversational intonation suggested by the amphibrachs in sonnet 126).

The sonnet as a form comes to focus in many of the commentaries. Because it has four parts, the Shakespearean sonnet is far more flexible than the two-part Italian sonnet; the sequence is dominated by patterns of 4-4-4-2 and 8-4-2, but some of them exhibit a well-defined octave. In her commentaries, Vendler surveys the logical relations that structure the sonnets, and comes to the conclusion (in the commentary on sonnet 75) that "almost every conceivable restructuring possible within fourteen lines is invented by Shakespeare in the course of the sequence."

Yet the most inventive part of the sonnets is the couplet, the reflective-analytic ending of each poem. In

Vendler's opinion the couplet is the point where the view of the speaker and the view of the author almost converge: the pathetic-emotional speaker in the course of the poem is analysing his own position until he reaches the couplet and expresses a self-ironising turn - this "intrapsychic" irony is in fact authorial irony (this is the tonal difference Jan Kott sensed when he termed the couplet as "an actor's line").

In order to defend Shakespeare from the charge of idle superfluity Vendler systematically proves that there are words that link the quatrains to the couplet, and these take on different emotional import in the course of the poem. She terms the aggregate of these words (and their variants) the Couplet Tie, and enlists them at the end of each commentary, after having reflected on their importance. "Shakespeare expended real effort in creating verbal connections between the body of a sonnet and its couplet, and the words he chose to reiterate in this way are almost always thematically highly significant ones." In some sonnets where repetition is so frequent that the same word is

repeated five or more times, Helen Vendler lists the root words that appear in each quatrain (and the couplet), and she terms them Key Words. She also takes notice of the Defective Key Words, and tries to explain their presence - or absence - in the poem. These lists of emphatic words may be of

special importance not only to the commentators but to the translators of the Sonnets, because they point out those words which keep the poems together both structurally and psychologically.

The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets is a book of almost 700 pages; one cannot say that it makes an easy reading. It is worth reading throughout, but it will surely be helpful for those who only wish to read one or two commentaries. The Quarto facsimiles of the Sonnets are intended to satisfy not only the philologist but also the devotee of beautiful books. There is an extra supplement to the book, a CD with Helen Vendler reading sixty-six of Shakespeare's Sonnets.

Katalin Pálincás

The Roundness of a New Keats Biography

Andrew Motion: *Keats*, London: Faber and Faber, 1997

After Walter Jackson Bate's (1963), Aileen Ward's (1963), and Robert Gittings's (1968) excellent biographies of Keats, which already made extensive use of Hyder E. Rollins's annotated edition

of the *Letters* (1958), there can hardly be any justification for a new *Life* – unless, of course, some new documents have been unearthed – but the excavation of new significances by applying a radically new approach to the already established data.¹ That is exactly what is claimed by Andrew Motion in the *Introduction* to his 636-page *Keats*: as part of the new historicist reassessment of the Romantic Movement (Marilyn Butler, Jerome J. McGann, John Barnard), his ambition is to recreate Keats “in a way which is more rounded than his readers are used to seeing.(...) My intention is not to transform Keats into a narrowly political poet. It is to show that his efforts to crystallise moments of ‘Truth’ combine a political purpose with a poetic ambition, a social search with an aesthetic ideal” (xxv). He promises to give substantial interpretations of the “forms and idioms” (xxiii) of the works in this “rounded” way, thus the reader expects some exciting interplay of “resonance and centrality” (Stephen Greenblatt): the autonomy of the self-centred vision and the cultural complexity of the age “resonating” in the integrity of the work.

As Motion remarks, there is no need to prove the radical liberalism of Keats. The traditional view of him as

¹ Stephen Coote's *John Keats: A Life* in 1995 went practically unnoticed by academia as it made no claim for new insights.