

Vendler versus Dove

Helen Vendler's recent evisceration of Rita Dove's editorial work on *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* in the November 24, 2011 issue of *The New York Review of Books* and Dove's rejoinder in the December 22, 2011 issue do not constitute blood sport but are reasonably close. On one hand, there is the high aesthetic viewpoint—"More Wallace Stevens, please." On the other hand, there is the identity/political awareness/diversity viewpoint—"More Others, please." The details are interesting in their way—*The Waste Land* is in the anthology but without the end notes? Melvin Tolson gets how many pages? James Merrill is represented by one poem?—but not the main event. Anthologies never make anyone happy. Drive-by discernment is inherently unrewarding. Poetry is a culture not a medal pinned on a posthumous breast, not a wink standing in for the lifework of a nod. The main event is the two different viewpoints.

What the dust-up reveals, to my mind, is how inevitably at sea poetry is going to be in a mass democracy. The stuff gets written, lots of it in fact, but what it means is anyone's guess. It has an academic aspect because it is part of literature and literature is taught in schools but lots of things are taught in schools. No one is arguing about geometry or French verbs. Where the authority comes from for poetry is a very vexed issue. An aesthete will tell you it has to do with the quality of the language, as if that somehow can be distilled and bottled and put on display. Perhaps in the work of someone like Ashbery it has been put on display. A more political person will tell you it has to do with authenticity of experience and particularly experiences that haven't seen much literary light in the past. Someone sitting in a cafe writing a poem to his or her love interest, someone who doesn't give a shit about any anthology, will tell you that the authority is in his or her heart and that is plenty. Authority isn't given; it's taken.

On one hand, poetry is an impossible art and no one succeeds very much at it because it is so damnably hard. Trying to make rhythm, sound, some degree of form, and connotation and denotation of words all come together and still have something to say that is worth attending to that hasn't been said a few thousand times before, that amounts to something more than a small

mound of pathos—that's tough. So in the long view, which is Vendler's, not many poets stand up to the test, no matter how many books they do and prizes they win. That's all passing praise, fluff from the era. The notion that an anthology would include way over one hundred poets from one century is preposterous. Go scratching around in the nineteenth century and see if you come up with way over one hundred worthy American poets. Yet the long view has nothing to do with the emotional immediacy that fuels poetry in the first place. Poetry exists because people have intense feelings about intense matters (like love and death) and want to declare those feelings in concise and metaphorical language. People want to thrust pieces of paper into one another's hands or post poems on websites that say, in essence, "Look how I feel!" I exaggerate but only slightly. Poets who have been at it for a while are more sophisticated but the emotional impulse is what the whole endeavor rests on. If that impulse isn't recognized then the whole enterprise has no more inherent value than raking leaves. If the leaves are used to mulch the garden, it has less.

On the other hand, poetry has standards. No one wants trite or clichéd or sing-song or dull or prolix. That's fair enough and keeps the amateur cattle out of the higher corral. Yet in a modern society the standards are always being overturned. Originality is an attitude not a standard and originality is prized because it shows that the artist hasn't been smothered by some variety of complacent right-thinking—bourgeois, communist, precious aesthetic, whatever. As soon as someone proposes some modest standard someone else will show it is false. That's understandable: poetry exists in time. The notion of what it properly (or improperly) constitutes changes. I doubt, to step outside the Anglo world, that Ronsard would have appreciated Rimbaud. This is further muddied by the notion of genius, a notion that goes back a very long ways to the uncanny aspect of inspiration. Rimbaud was a genius, we say. That ends the discussion. He did something new and brilliant, whatever those words may mean. Certainly *Le bateau ivre* doesn't look like Ronsard. And certainly it rocked the boat (pun intended). Boat rocking, even by people who claim they aren't boat rockers such as Eliot, has come to be considered good in and of its self. Nowadays there is so much boat rocking, no one knows what

the calm sea ever looked like. Transgression, to use a favored word of the day, is the norm. And if that is the norm then might it no longer be transgression? Banish the thought.

Let's say that poetry in a mass democracy (or mass not-so-covert oligarchy) revolves around the dialogue between the self and the soul. The self is the life in time; the soul is the life outside of time. Poetry is the place where they meet. Sparks occur. Those are poems. How do we judge the sparks? We can say we are moved. We can say we appreciate the language. We can say something is being shown to us that we hadn't realized previously. And we can say that we care about the poems more than we care about the poets, which is as it should be. We still don't know much about Shakespeare but we keep reading the sonnets. If poetry is spirit lore, then it's the lore that matters.

The difficulty in modern times is that the poet has to make up lore. The amazing thing is that some poets—Whitman and Dickinson, for instance, in the United States—have done it. They knew something other people didn't know but that they needed to know. That's rare. And said it in ways that other people hadn't said it. That's rare too. On the other hand, the originality aspect, the rareness, only goes so far. Ballads are quite satisfying and the form has been around for many hundreds of years. If we don't see many these days, that's because we've lost the knack and the interest. If images interest us more than drama, that's our failing. The form will survive us.

I suspect when another century (an optimistic notion indeed) looks at Dove's anthology (and Dove's assertion that she tried her best—who would think otherwise?), they will wonder at what many poets, particularly in late twentieth-century America, were thinking. Why did they write about themselves so much? Didn't they see that what was called for from poetry was passionate anonymity not willful identity? Didn't they see that their differences were irrelevant, that hymns of praise and grief were what poetry could offer to the human race as it slid over the environmental waterfall? Didn't they see how endangered simple inwardness was?

The putative failings that Vendler fingers represent the outlook of one anthologist but the issues surrounding poetry are much larger. Some reflection would reveal that the real issues are not whether this poet is “better” than that poet (apples and oranges) but that the state of poetry instruction in the society is scandalous. The society neither believes nor trusts in poetry (Wasn’t this Whitman a homosexual who couldn’t hold a job? Didn’t this Dickinson stay in her room all the time?) and offers precious little meaningful instruction to its young about it. Go find a school principal who has walked up to an English teacher and said, “You know, I wish you were doing more poetry.” It ain’t happening, particularly in an educational climate obsessed with objective testing, technology, and so-called accountability. Poetry is subjective and proud of it, hence Vendler and Dove not seeing eye to eye. No reason they should. We don’t have any definitive lore. We apparently don’t need any. The freelance spirit poetry offers is a luxury to the society-at-large more intent on salvation and money, both of which offer comforts far beyond that of a meager poem. That’s understandable. When the dust settles, a few souls (not an academic word but a poetry word) will gravitate toward this or that poem. Dove’s anthology will have done its task. Is there any harm in that? Not really—poetry when it works is something magical and strange. Anthologies make us feel the whole endeavor is more coherent than it is. That’s the illusion. Taking dictation from the ether remains a very curious enterprise. If poets and anthologists and professors don’t believe in that ether, more’s the pity.