

to arrange his musical source material in neat hierarchies. Instead, he treated all music that expressed genuine human emotions as equal, applying the principles of Progressive-era democracy to sound in a way that harks back to Louis Moreau Gottschalk and looks forward to Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, and Gunther Schuller.

Like the American horizon, Ives's oeuvre remains open, unfinished, though not unexplored. Thanks to Swafford's skillful retelling, we can better understand why Ives's music remains so fresh. Its jagged juxtapositions, shifting moods, and eclectic references may have baffled Ives's contemporaries. But they speak to an adventurous, inclusive conception of art that is widely felt, and much disputed, a century after his greatest works were composed.

—S. Frederick Starr

#### **SOUL SAYS:**

##### *On Recent Poetry.*

By Helen Vendler. Harvard Univ. Press.  
256 pp. \$24.95

#### **THE GIVEN AND THE MADE:**

##### *Strategies of Poetic Redefinition.*

By Helen Vendler. Harvard Univ. Press.  
160 pp. \$29.95 cloth; \$14 paper

#### **THE BREAKING OF STYLE:**

##### *Hopkins, Heaney, Graham.*

By Helen Vendler. Harvard Univ. Press.  
160 pp. \$29.95 cloth, \$14 paper

When Helen Vendler describes the act of reading poetry, she makes it seem as straightforward as understanding the newspaper or humming a favorite tune: "The senses and the imagination together furnish rhymes for the poet. The rhythms of the poet translate themselves back, in the mind of the reader, into the senses and the imagination."

But nowadays the space between poet and reader is often too clouded for such clear passage. The contemporary reader at ease with Whitman but at sea with his successors may, in distress, look to the contemporary critic for a compass. Alas, most criticism written today in the academy, by critics whose proprietary interest in literature has yielded to a proprietary interest in self, will cause readers to jump ship and take their chances with the sharks.

Vendler's criticism is a saving exception. A university professor at Harvard, she responds generously to the workings of the poetic imag-

ination, in our time and across centuries: "The purpose of lyric, as a genre, is to represent an inner life in such a manner that it is assumable by others." Her singular talent as a reader is to assume the inner life of poet after poet, and to write precisely and eloquently about this merger of sensibilities.

When Vendler was 17, lyric poetry seemed to her "the voice of the soul itself." It still does, by the evidence of her three latest books: a volume of review essays and two volumes of thematic lectures. The essays on 20 contemporary poets in *Soul Says* date from the late 1980s and early 1990s, and generally mark the appearances of each author's newest work. But time and again, a brief topical essay is a map to the larger world of the poet's achievement.

*The Given and the Made* (the 1993 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures at the University of Kent) considers how "an unasked-for *donnée*" shaped the work of four poets. Robert Lowell's *donnée*, given by his famous family, was history. John Berryman's, given by his alcoholic manic-depression, was the Freudian concept of the id. Rita Dove's, given by birth, is her identity as a black American woman. Jorie Graham's, given by her trilingual upbringing, is the arbitrary attachment of word to thing, and the corresponding relation of an invisible to a material world.

*The Breaking of Style* (the 1994 Richard Ellman Lectures in Modern Literature at Emory University) traces the process by which three poets—Gerard Manley Hopkins, Seamus Heaney, and (again) Jorie Graham—shed an old style for a new: the equivalent, for Vendler, of casting off a material body. These transformations permit Vendler to explore the essential connection between style and substance in poetry, and to argue (against interpretive fashion) for "the human perceptual, aesthetic, and moral signals conveyed . . . by such elements as prosody, grammar, and lineation." Hers is a method of steady engagement with the poetry—with line length, with images, with odd detail, and overarching argument. There is a soul in the body of a poet's successful disposition of words.

Not every page of these books is equally persuasive, and there is some repetition among the volumes—especially when the same poets, and poems, are discussed. The books are best read not straight through but with time out to sample the poetry. Of living

poets, Vendler's favorites seem to be Heaney and Graham; you will no sooner finish her essays about them than make your way to a bookstore.

And that may be the great achievement of all Vendler's criticism: its ease, assurance, and clarity, set in a bedrock of careful scholarship, persuade diffident readers to tease out the soul's sense beneath a poem's surface puzzle.

—James Morris

### EMERSON AMONG THE ECCENTRICS:

#### *A Group Portrait.*

By Carlos Baker. Introduction and epilogue by James R. Mellow. Viking. 672 pp. \$34.95

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a stern critic of preachers. After hearing Barzillai Frost, the junior associate of Ezra Ripley at the First Church at Concord, preach an interminable, abstract sermon during a snowstorm in March 1838, Emerson wrote in his journal: "He had no one word intimating that ever he had laughed or wept, was married or enamoured, had been cheated, or voted for, or chagrined. If he had ever lived or acted we were none the wiser for it." It was in response to the aptly named Reverend Frost that Emerson declared that "the true preacher deals out to the people his life,—life passed through the fire of thought." This was also Emerson's standard for the writer, the teacher, the scholar, and the politician. He expected the same immediacy and vividness from his intercourse with friends—even when it took the inspiring form of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "hospitable silence."

In this posthumous biography, the late Carlos Baker, professor of English at Princeton University, brings the "fire of thought" to life through Emerson's pursuit of friendship. Despite an occasional cranky misanthropy and a persistent resistance to intimacy, Emerson over and over embraced friendship's risk and vulnerability as the necessary companion to solitude.

*Emerson Among the Eccentrics* (an unfortunate title that condescends to its subject) puts Emerson at the center of the lives of the

prominent men and women of letters and ideas of the period 1830–80. Baker's potentially dreary decade-by-decade organization is relieved, at times brilliantly, by bringing Emerson's friends to the forefront. This is a biography of intertwined lives: Emerson and Margaret Fuller Ossoli, Bronson Alcott, Nathaniel and Sophie Hawthorne, Jones Very, Henry David Thoreau, Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, and, in the farther reaches of the circle, Walt Whitman, John Brown, and even Abraham Lincoln. These and other figures in the 19th-century pantheon maintain vital connections, if not always friendship, through thick and thin, agreement and disagreement, proximity and distance, joy and sorrow.

Baker's narrative shows how Emerson's presence and correspondence, those twin complements to his lectures and essays, held this informal congregation together. Reviewing Emerson's second book of essays for Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, Margaret Fuller wrote: "History will inscribe his name as a father of his country, for he is one who pleads her cause against herself." As this tribute suggests, Emerson sought to discern the singular

American nature of his fellow citizens' shared language and technology (the railroad is a theme running through this biography), as well as their ideals and compromises—whether personal, aesthetic, political, or moral. Emerson admired Lincoln as an apotheosis of the vernacular American, a man who "grew according to the need." Like Lincoln's, Emerson's struggle for union and unity was both

private and public: toward the end of his life, when mind and memory were failing, the lecture platform was as much home to him as his study.

Carlos Baker died in 1987, before he could write an introduction pondering "Emerson's philosophy of friendship." According to James R. Mellow, a biographer in his own right and the author of the book's introduction and epilogue, death also prevented Baker from writing " 'Exuent Omnes,' presumably a summary closure to the lives of the remaining cast of characters." Notwithstanding Baker's origi-

