

Socialism might not mean utopia, but it could mean a better tomorrow, and Howe did as much as any American of his generation to identify the political legacy of socialism with democracy, civil liberties, human decency, and intellectual integrity. Yet if he was a “hero of sorts,” as Sorin concludes, his was the heroism of the believer, not of the actor. For all his knowledge of international radical politics, Howe sent barely a ripple through the realm of political action. He opposed World War II as a clash between imperialists, then recovered so much faith in American policy that he failed to see the illiberal character of the Vietnam War until 1968. By that time, the antiwar movement had grown up in spite of him, followed by the counterculture and second-wave feminism. Howe treated these with the same withering condescension he had once dispensed to enemies at City College. The “ethic of solidarity” always looks better in theory than in practice.

If Howe’s temperamental excesses weakened his political leadership, they also reflected his honest attempt to confront the dilemmas of 20th-century radicalism. He was too smart to retreat into dogmatism, too faithful to betray his beliefs. At his best, he lived by social hope. This might not have amounted to heroism. But it was no mean achievement in troubled times.

—JOHN H. SUMMERS

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**COMING OF AGE AS A POET:  
*Milton, Keats, Eliot, Plath.***

By Helen Vendler. Harvard Univ. Press.  
174 pp. \$22.95

Literary critics don’t come much more eminent and established than Helen Vendler. A beloved teacher of poetry and a principal architect of the reputations of countless contemporary poets, notably 1995 Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney, she holds not only a select University Professorship at Harvard but a poetry reviewing slot at *The New Yorker*. From these twin platforms Vendler disseminates a fairly traditional vision of poetry, one that stresses the poet’s private aesthetics and the quest for a personal language to reflect inner experience. Those who complain that postmodern and “political” approaches have taken over the study of literature would be hard pressed to

name any postmodernist whose cultural authority rivals Vendler’s.

This latest book returns to familiar territory. Of the four poets it treats—John Milton, John Keats, T. S. Eliot, and Sylvia Plath—Vendler already has written copiously about Plath and Eliot and has published a book-length study of Keats’s odes. Her concern in these essays, originally delivered as lectures at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, is to pinpoint what the four poets had to accomplish at the outset, the problems of form and diction each had to solve before writing that initial “perfect” poem, the first one to last down the years and embody the poet’s mature style. If we can understand this, she writes, “then we can begin to appreciate all that any young poet has to master in order to write a poem that will endure.”

Though this sounds like a tight focus, in practice Vendler treats her topic loosely. The poems she picks as “perfect” are, not surprisingly, very well known—Milton’s “L’Allegro” (1631), Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” (1816), Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1911), and Plath’s “The Colossus” (1959). She uses them to discuss such disparate matters as Milton’s capacity for extending a poem in space and time, Keats’s many variations on the sonnet form over the course of his career, Eliot’s repressed upbringing, and the unfairness of criticism that questions Plath’s status as a major poet. Throughout, Vendler tracks her poets’ struggles toward adulthood, because, “for a writer, achieving emotional maturity is inseparable from achieving linguistic maturity.”

The result is a collection of pleasing if not especially striking insights into canonical poems and poets. Vendler is particularly good on how her favorite poets play with structure and how they wrestle with a poetic form—the Petrarchan sonnet, say—until it becomes theirs. Some of the close readings scintillate more than others; a few of the analyses (notably of “Chapman’s Homer”) feel a trifle shopworn, as if they have been used for years as classroom examples.

Indeed, the volume’s only real weakness is a certain wobble in its sense of the intended audience. Parts read like an introduction, for a nonreader of poetry, to some of the underlying

mechanisms that make the form tick, while others, particularly portions of the Milton essay, seem to assume an audience well versed in scholars' disputes. Since the introductory

tone predominates, this little volume is best taken as an invitation to the unversed reader to follow Vendler into wider fields.

—AMY E. SCHWARTZ

## SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

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### *DREAMING:*

#### *An Introduction to the Science of Sleep.*

By J. Allan Hobson. Oxford Univ. Press. 170 pp. \$22

In June, sleep specialists from around the world will gather in Chicago to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the discovery of rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, the state in which our most vivid dreams occur. At the University of Chicago in 1953, graduate student Eugene Aserinsky and physiologist Nathaniel Kleitman found that sleepers' eyes dart beneath closed lids roughly every 90 minutes. These episodes last only a few minutes early in sleep but close to an hour later on. People awakened during REM sleep usually report dreams with visual images and storylike narratives. Those awakened while their eyes are at rest seldom do, though they sometimes recall prosaic thoughts.

With the discovery of REM, Aserinsky and Kleitman revolutionized the scientific study of sleep. They showed that sleep is not, as previously thought, a uniform and passive state. The brain proves as active in REM sleep as in waking, sometimes more so.

Changes in the level of brain activation shape the content of our dreams, J. Allan Hobson contends in this book. A psychiatrist who directs the neurophysiology and sleep laboratory at Harvard Medical School, Hobson threw the sleep and psychoanalytic communities into a tizzy in 1977 when he and his colleague Robert McCarley proposed that dreams reflect the waking brain's efforts to make sense of randomly generated signals. This theory challenged the Freudian notion that dreams originate in disguised wishes. Hobson and McCarley were castigated for claiming that dreams lack meaning.

Not so, Hobson takes pains to emphasize here. Indeed, he maintains that dreams offer insight into our waking lives. He includes

selections from some of the more than 300 of his own dreams he has recorded in the past 25 years, and discusses the events and feelings they depict. Understanding how we create dream stories, he writes, helps illuminate the nature of consciousness, "our most interesting human attribute."

In REM sleep, brain areas that control vision and emotions turn on. Positron emission tomography (PET) scans reveal increased activity in regions that generate hallucinations. At the same time, noradrenaline and serotonin—two chemicals critical to logical thinking, focusing, and memory—turn off. Their absence renders dream stories strange, implausible, and hard to remember (most of us recall dreams infrequently, and when we do, we may retain only one or two of the four or five dreams of a typical night). In REM sleep, the brain generates motor signals but squelches our ability to act on them. We may perceive that we fight



*The Dream* (1932), by Pablo Picasso