The Music of What Happens

Poems, Poets, Critics

HELEN VENDLER

Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England 1988

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper, and its binding materials have been chosen for strength and durability.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Vendler, Helen Hennessy.
The music of what happens.

Includes index.
1. American poetry — 20th century — History and criticism. 2. English poetry — 20th century — History and criticism. 3. Poetry. I. Title.
PS325.V46 1988 811'.5'09 87-21240
ISBN 0-674-59152-6 (alk. paper)

The Music of What Happens

There are the mud-flowers of dialect
And the immortelles of perfect pitch
And that moment when the bird sings very close
To the music of what happens.

Seamus Heaney, "Song"

For Marian Connor

. . . I wondered how it could utter joyous leaves standing
there alone without its friend near, for I know
I could not.

Walt Whitman

Acknowledgments

In collecting these essays, I felt again the generosity of all those who, one way or another, sponsored them and saw them into print. I am especially grateful to William Shawn, until recently the editor of the *New Yorker*; to Robert Silvers, editor of the *New York Review of Books*; and to Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of the *New Republic*. I thank them for their hospitality, courtesy, and editing intelligence. I regret deeply that Howard Moss, who first welcomed me to the *New Yorker*, should not have lived to receive my thanks for his encouragement and friendship.

During the time some of these pieces were written, I enjoyed a sabbatical leave from Harvard, a Harvard research subsidy, an NEH Senior Fellowship, an ACLS travel grant, and a Rockefeller Foundation residency at Bellagio. These grants were not awarded for the work collected here, but this work benefited from the support and leisure they provided. I thank my referees, who enabled me to have such grants.

My colleagues at Boston University and at Harvard have offered me that conversation and friendship without which no writing can be carried on.

This volume is dedicated to a lifelong friend as inadequate homage to her quick mind, her gift for laughter, and her tender heart.

The Music of What Happens

Contents

IV Recent Writing

Introduction

Most of these essays on critics and poets were written in the last ten years, while criticism was struggling through one of its periodic generational changes. In a 1986 essay in *Raritan*, W. J. T. Mitchell, who edits *Critical Inquiry*, called the present tendency in criticism "a shift in emphasis from *meaning* to *value*," explaining meaning-centered criticisms as those interested in "interpretations," and value-centered criticisms as those "focussing on the problems of belief, interest, power, and ideology." As master-terms of criticism, *meaning* and *value* (in Mitchell's sense) may seem important to others: to me they seem marginal. The criticism of art should not be chiefly a matter either of interpretation(s) or of discussion of ideology. Of course, criticism may, along the way, make an interpretation or unveil or counter an ideology; but these activities (of paraphrase and polemic) are not criticism of the art work as art work, but as statement. "Art works," said Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory*, "say something that differs in kind from what words say" (1970; English version, 1984, 263).

Paraphrase, interpretation (in the usual sense), and ideological polemic are legitimate preliminary activities putting the art work back into the general stream of statements uttered by a culture. All of these statements (from advertising to sermons) can be examined for their rhetorics of persuasion and their ideological self-contradiction or coherence, but such examinations bracket the question of aesthetic success. It is impossible, of course, to name a single set of defining characteristics that will discriminate an aesthetic object from one that does not exert aesthetic power, but that is no reason to deny the existence of aesthetic power and aesthetic response. Though aesthetic response is culturally conditioned, and tastes differ even among those within a single culture, nevertheless the phenomenon of aes-

thetic response always remains selective. Nobody finds everything beautiful. And no other category ("the rhetorically complex," "the philosophically interesting," "the overdetermined," "the well structured" and so on) can be usefully substituted for the category "the aesthetic."

It is natural that people under new cultural imperatives should be impelled to fasten new interpretations (from the reasonable to the fantastic) onto aesthetic objects from the past. But criticism cannot stop there. The critic may well begin, "Look at it this way for a change," but the sentence must continue, "and now don't you see it as more intelligibly beautiful and moving?" That is, if the interpretation does not reveal some hitherto occluded aspect of the aesthetic power of the art work, it is useless as art criticism (though it may be useful as cultural history or sociology or psychology or religion). There is a parallel with musical performance: all sorts of "interpretations" of a sonata are possible, and their number is theoretically infinite; but unless the interpretation accurately reveals a newly perceived coherence of structure, or a newly exposed line of development, or new harmonic interest, it can make no cognitive or emotional claim to replace an older interpretation; and the musical listener, having heard something merely eccentric or ingenious, will depart dissatisfied.

The aim of a properly aesthetic criticism, then, is not primarily to reveal the *meaning* of an art work or disclose (or argue for or against) the ideological *values* of an art work. The aim of an aesthetic criticism is to *describe* the art work in such a way that it cannot be confused with any other art work (not an easy task), and to *infer* from its elements the aesthetic that might generate this unique configuration. (Ideological criticism is not interested in the uniqueness of the work of art, wishing always to conflate it with other works sharing its values.) Aesthetic criticism begins with the effort to understand the individual work (aided by whatever historical, philosophical, or psychological competence is necessary for that understanding); it is deeply inductive, and goes from the single work to the decade of work, from the decade of work to the lifetime of work, from the lifetime of work to the interrelation with the work of other artists.

What does it mean to describe an art work so that another viewer, reader, or listener will recognize this as a just aesthetic description? It will not do to name each note in a piece of music in sequence, or make an inventory of all the objects pictured and the colors used in

a painting, or describe the topic and meter of a poem. Aesthetic description aims at something finer and more analytic than any of these grosser methods. The first rule of thumb is that no significant component can be left out of consideration. A critic must notice not only (to use Seamus Heaney's words from which I take my title) "what happens," but also "the music of what happens," and must perceive the pertinence of both "the mud-flowers of dialect / And the immortelles of perfect pitch." And the second rule of thumb is that the significant components are known as such by interacting with each other in a way that seems coherent, not haphazard.

Critics with an interpretative or ideological *a priori* (by contrast to critics with an aesthetic *a priori*) seem, to someone who knows a poem well, bent on leaving out whatever in a poem is not to their purposes, or on distorting, in the service of argument, what they do find to describe. I have argued in one of these essays against such a reading (a Freudian one by Lionel Trilling) of Wordsworth's Immortality Ode. Both ideological and hermeneutic (or interpretation-centered) critics want to place the literary art work principally within the sphere of history and philosophy, while an aesthetic critic would rather place it in the mimetic, expressive, and constructivist sphere of the fine arts — theater, painting, music, sculpture, dance — where it may more properly belong (as I have argued here in an essay on Geoffrey Hartman).

Critics who see interpretation as their *raison d'être* fundamentally regard the art work as an allegory: somewhere under the surface (as in a biblical parable) there lies a hidden meaning which it is the critic's responsibility (as it was the exegete's duty) to reveal. Such an ultimate disregard for "surface" in favor of a presumed "depth" goes absurdly counter to the primary sensuous claim of every work of art, the claim made precisely by its "surface" (these words, these notes, and no others). An interpretation of meaning or a disclosure of value should be not an endpoint but a means of returning to the mingled freedom and necessity of the words-as-arranged-on-the-page. Form, after all, is nothing but content-as-arranged. Content disarranged (as in paraphrase) leaves form behind, usually unnoticed. And a scrutiny that notices chiefly rhetorical figures and their predictable self-undoing leaves out the larger conduct of the art work — its play with genre, intertextuality, etymology, tonality, levels of aesthetic function.

It goes without saying that there are discursive elements (topics, plot) and ideological elements (belief, interest, position-taking) in

every work of art. Art must say something and must care about what it says; and every artist uses "ideas" (as well as images, phonemes, echoes, textural contrast, feelings, myths, and so on) as part of the raw material of composition. The artist uses ideas, that is, as functional parts (rather than as ideological determinants) of the work. "A poem," says Khlebnikov, "is related to flight, in the shortest time possible its language must cover the greatest distance in images and thoughts." ("On Poetry," c. 1920, from *The King of Time,* 1985, 153). In the long run, topicality of statement and situational *engagement* are the first things in an art work to fall to the ravages of time. Every artist feels this with a pang. As the culture ideologically supporting a work decays, the work becomes "merely" (merely!) beautiful. "The Museum Shop Catalogue" by John N. Morris shows the process in action:

> The past is perfectly darling —
> These pretty things that come along with us!
> Mary and Siva house without oppugnancy . . .
>
> Everything here has been imported
> Over some frontier. At last
> It is all a kind of art entirely.
>
> And really they *are* just lovely,
> Perfectly lovely, these things.
> In vain do I deplore . . .
>
> Mary and Siva
> Accompany our lives.
> Although a loneliness persists.
> They are only beautiful now.
>
> (*Poetry* 144, August 1984, 262–263)

That the work of art had something to say and *that* there was an urgency in saying it, remain evident both in its propositions and in its rhetoric; but who except believing Christians could now read George Herbert with delight if truth of doctrine and ideological relevance were the chief basis of aesthetic response?

"With delight" is a necessary phrase for an aesthetic criticism. One can presumably discuss both the *meaning* and the *value* (in Mitchell's sense) of a work in which one has taken no delight whatever (and

the signs of aesthetic interest are notably absent from criticism centered on either *meaning* or *value*). But one cannot write properly, or even meaningfully, on an art work to which one has not responded aesthetically. The art work "falls into shape" only when it is perceived as an art work (not when it is read as a rearrangeable set of propositions, tropes, attitudes, or beliefs).

These remarks will seem truisms to those who are naturalized within aesthetic response, a response different, both in its cognitive and in its "delighted" aspects, from the response we give to material that is primarily expository or hortatory. The twentieth-century critic most faithful to art's two sides — its originating propositions and beliefs and its necessary subordination of these to intrinsic efforts of form — is Theodor Adorno, whose own aesthetic base in music made him see the folly of a criticism confining itself simply to *meaning* or *value*, alone or together. In his tireless reiteration of the truth that art, unlike other mimetic or expressive or discursive activities, obeys a law of form, which it is the critic's duty to infer and articulate from its embodiment, he struggled to enunciate a theory of social value for art, a theory which does not rest on the ideological content of the art work. (In this, he partly followed Benjamin, who saw advances in technique as the intrinsic social value of art.) "The more aware technical and aesthetic analyses become of the importance of *tour de force* in art," says Adorno, "the more fertile will they be" (*Aesthetic Theory*, 265).

Because the first thing that is usually remarked when a new work appears is its propositional meaning and its ideological values, it is all the more necessary that an aesthetic criticism should give it its due as *tour de force*. An aesthetic criticism will investigate *how* and *why* the art work is as it is, using its propositions and values as a bridge to its individual manner, its texture, its temperament, the experience and knowledge it makes possible, and its relation to other art works. Each new cultural idea of the beautiful has to be critically defined — whether it be a new musical chromaticism, or analytic cubism, or a new populism in language, or a new indeterminacy of closure.

The critic of new objects works in the dark. In Stanley Cavell's words,

> [The critic] is part detective, part lawyer, part judge, in a country in which crimes and deeds of glory look alike, and in which the

> public not only, therefore, confuses one with the other, but does not know that one or the other has been committed: not because the news has not got out, but because what counts as one or the other cannot be defined until it happens; and when it has happened there is no sure way he can get the news out; and no way at all without risking something like a crime or glory of his own. (*Must We Mean What We Say?*, 1976, 191)

Samuel Johnson, in his "Prologue" for David Garrick, said it earlier:

> Hard is his lot, that here by fortune plac'd
> Must watch the wild vicissitudes of taste;
> With ev'ry meteor of caprice must play,
> And chase the new-blown bubbles of the day.

Chasing our new-blown poetic and critical bubbles — some of them very beautiful — is of necessity the work of many diverse voices. I offer these essays in aesthetic criticism as the reports of one voice — confident in its attachment to poetry, but conscious that the art of poetry is far larger than any single description of its powers.

I

On Criticism