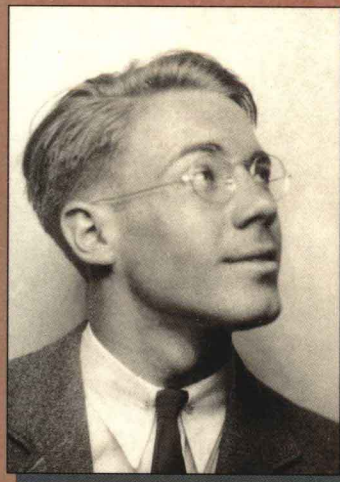
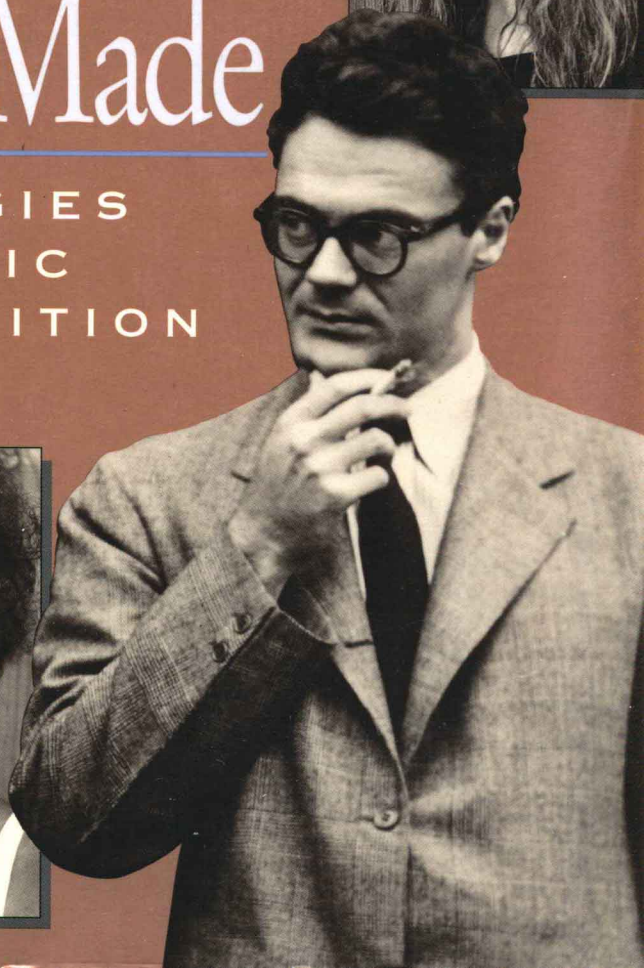


HELEN VENDLER



# The Given and the Made

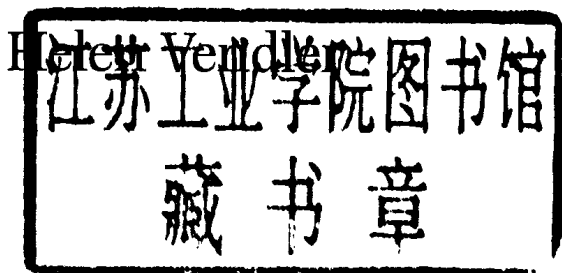
STRATEGIES  
OF POETIC  
REDEFINITION



# The Given and the Made

*Strategies of Poetic Redefinition*

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HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, Massachusetts

1995

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Printed in the United States of America

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

**Vendler, Helen Hennessy.**

The given and the made : strategies of poetic redefinition / Helen Vendler.  
p. cm.

Originally presented as the author's T. S. Eliot memorial lectures  
(Canterbury, University of Kent).

ISBN 0-674-35431-1 (cloth)

ISBN 0-674-35432-X (pbk.)

1. American poetry—20th century—History and criticism—Theory, etc.
2. Berryman, John, 1914–1972—Criticism and interpretation.
3. Lowell, Robert, 1917–1977—Criticism and interpretation.
4. Graham, Jorie—Criticism and interpretation.
5. Dove, Rita—Criticism and interpretation.
6. Self in literature. I. Title.

PS323.5.V39 1995

810.9'005—dc20

95-6765  
CIP

## The Given and the Made

# Acknowledgements

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The T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures (1993) at the University of Kent were the occasion for my writing this book. I am very grateful to Mr Christopher Cherry, Master of Eliot College, for his kind hospitality during my stay. Thanks are also due to Faber and Faber.

Those named below have graciously given me permission to reprint as follows: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux for the poetry of John Berryman and Robert Lowell; The Ecco Press for the poetry of Jorie Graham; Rita Dove for her poetry; The University Library of the University of Minnesota and Mrs John Berryman (Kate Donahue) for unpublished writings of John Berryman. I am indebted to Susan Welby for help in manuscript preparation.

# Introduction

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This book began as the T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures delivered at the University of Kent at Canterbury. No twentieth-century poet more deserves commemoration than Eliot, a poet who gave us a new, painful, and haunting music, setting poetry on altogether unforeseen paths. I saw T. S. Eliot only once, in 1950, when I heard him deliver a memorial lecture at Harvard in honor of Theodore Spencer, repeating, though in prose, the elegiac gesture of poets:

So may some gentle Muse  
With lucky words favour my destined urn,  
And as he passes turn,  
And bid fair peace to my sable shroud.

The chain of public literary commemoration is forged of the golden links of elegy and the silver links of memorial lectures. But the most moving commemorations are perhaps the private ones of friendship: Robert Lowell, when Eliot died, acknowledged his own debt to the poet in a letter to Valerie Eliot:

There was no one else who could both write and tell us how to write. . . . There was no doubt of the greatness. . . . No older man so touched something personal in my depths.<sup>1</sup>

And in due course Eliot became one of Lowell's snapshots in

## INTRODUCTION

the volume *History*: 'Ah Tom, one muse, one music' wrote Lowell as his words of fair peace.<sup>2</sup>

Eliot requires no commemoration to ensure his literary immortality; his poems alone give him that. But, as Shakespeare in Sonnet 101 says to his reluctant Muse, who protests that the visible worth of the young man makes commendation redundant,

Because he needs no praise, wilt thou be dumb?  
Excuse not silence so . . .

I hope here to commemorate Eliot, who needs no praise, by looking at the achievement of some of his heirs, for all of whom he made 'American poet' a title of pride.

Before coming to my special topic – what a poet makes of an unasked-for *donnée* – let me say a word about the genre I am treating. I will be considering, through four examples, some possibilities for lyric in America after the second World War; that is, how the inner life of that time – our time – can be accurately and compellingly represented in brief verbal patterns. Lyric is still pre-eminently the non-social genre: though normative narrative and normative drama require at least two characters and are therefore ineluctably social, normative lyric requires not a character but a voice, one engaged in solitary meditation. Meditation may of course include direct address, so much so that some theorists have called apostrophe the defining trope of lyric; but the person addressed is, in the normative lyric, always silent and almost always absent. Only one consciousness, and that an abstract one, is present in the normative lyric.

The relation of the reader to the speaker of the normative lyric is one that has been variously described. Both John Stuart Mill and T. S. Eliot, for instance, thought that the reader 'overhears' the speaker of the lyric, as the audience overhears

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the soliloquies of Hamlet. Others, like Jon Stallworthy, have preferred, as I do myself, to see the reader as the true speaker of the lyric. In this view, the lyric is a script written for performance by the reader – who, as soon as he enters the lyric, is no longer a reader but rather an utterer, saying the words of the poem *in propria persona*, internally and with proprietary feeling. For poems that are overheard, I prefer to keep the name ‘dramatic monologue’: in such a poem the reader is genuinely placed in the position of overhearing someone else, clearly not himself, speak aloud to yet another person. I reserve the name ‘lyric’ for poems that make their reader their solitary speaker.

No single description fits all lyrics, but I will proceed on the assumption that the purpose of lyric, as a genre, is to represent an inner life in such a manner that it is assumable by others. The inner life of anyone may of course have many aims and thoughts directed to social purposes; but the inner life is by definition one not engaged directly in social life. Rather, it is engaged in a reflective look at its own processes of thought and feeling. Of course it may, in that moment, urge social action on itself. But social transactions as such cannot take place in lyric as they do in narrative or drama.

Because the inner life is partly constructed through legitimating vehicles (myths, social positions, religious dogma, ritual practice, gender roles) which undergo historical and cultural change, paying attention to poetic strategies necessarily entails awareness of the existential possibilities available at a given historical moment. In choosing to look at representations of the inner life – itself nowadays an increasingly problematic notion – through four American poets, I have confined myself to two generations: the postwar generation represented by Robert Lowell and John Berryman, and the present generation represented by Rita Dove and Jorie Graham. These choices are



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relatively arbitrary, but they have the advantage of displaying rather little overlap in the themes of the poets.

I have wanted, with respect to the thematic material of each poet, to discuss some personal *donnée* which the poet could not avoid treating, and to see how he or she found symbolic equivalents for it, and developed that material imaginatively over time. Lowell's primary phantasmagoria is history; Berryman's the Freudian myth of the Id; Dove's, the imagination of forms of blackness; and Graham's, the realm of the virtual or invisible and its relation to the material world. These are developments from inescapable existential *données*: Lowell's genealogy gave him history; Berryman's uncontrollable manic-depressive illness and severe alcoholism gave him the disgraceful Id; Dove's skin-color gave her blackness. In Graham's case, her trilingual education gave her a sense of multiple linguistic, and therefore virtual, realms to square against material life.

These poets bring with them an interesting heap of inner burdens and advantages; and they are poets good enough not to give up on the vexations of complex representation. The gender divide between generations as I take them up here is in itself unimportant, but perhaps of historical interest, given the recent flourishing of American women poets after the relatively solitary eminence, in their respective moments, of Dickinson, Moore, Plath, and Bishop. I want to trace, for each of my four poets, the literary and imaginative problems that arise as he or she attempts to represent an inescapable *donnée*, and to emphasize the structural and symbolic aesthetic strategies to which each has been driven in coping with those problems over time, and making, out of the problematic, the aesthetic.

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**I**  
**ROBERT LOWELL**  
**AND HISTORY**

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**'History was his eye-opener and his nightcap.'**<sup>1</sup>



The wonderfully tense relation between history and lyric was certainly not new when Lowell encountered it: his models Milton and Wordsworth, in their political sonnets, had faced it and outfaced it. Yet lyric history was not the central problem for either Milton or Wordsworth, since their ultimate interest lay in the narrative continuity proper to epic rather than in the glimpse proper to lyric. In epic, their genius had room to expand historical narrative – whether Biblical or personal – into the form its crowdedness would seem to require. The problem of history was more acute for Whitman, who remained a lyric poet all his life, yet whose ambitions were also epic. In an 1860 poem now called ‘Thoughts–6: “Of What I Write”’ Whitman declares that histories, ‘however complete’, are ‘less complete’ than what he writes from himself, which he names ‘the resumé.’<sup>2</sup> For Whitman, as later for Mallarmé, the world exists in order to end up in a book; and the book is one written by a single lyric poet. The actions we call history, and their written chronicles which we also confusingly call history, need to be converted into what Whitman in 1876 Platonically named ‘eidólons.’ These are images, images already invested with compelling form, that form which can be conferred only by the imaginative mind:

## THE GIVEN AND THE MADE

Ever the mutable,

Ever materials, changing, crumbling, re-cohering,

Ever the ateliers, the factories divine,

Issuing eidólons.<sup>3</sup>

The ways in which Whitman folded epic images into lyric, history into feeling, are themselves worth a study. Lowell continues and reworks these strategies in his public political poems, but he had to find new means to record private history. Lowell's youthful idea of history, which was a public one stemming from the participation of so many of his ancestors in public history, was gleaned at first from his omnivorous and compulsive reading of chronicles, from the Bible and Homer to biographies of French and American political and military heroes. He then began to convert his reading into verse: we hear of him at his preparatory school planning a long work in Spenserian stanzas called 'Jonah' (echoes of which survive in 'The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket'), and later, going to call on Robert Frost 'with a huge epic on the First Crusade, all written out in clumsy longhand on lined paper.'<sup>4</sup> At Baton Rouge, he envisions a long blank verse 'hell and damnation poem against England,'<sup>5</sup> taking, we may suppose, a fiercely political stand. Yet, when Lowell reminisced later about the connection between poetry and events, he refused *engagé* poetry, saying of his generation:

We believed in form, that *that* was very important. . . . We would say that the ideal poet is Shakespeare, who is not a poet of ideology but a poet of experience and tragedy.<sup>6</sup>

Lowell could dispense with ideology, but never with history: as Randall Jarrell's prescient review of *Land of Unlikeness* says of Lowell, 'His harshest propositions flower out of facts.'<sup>7</sup> Lowell could not escape historical facts – he was bursting with

them all his life – but he needed to decide which facts mattered. Lowell spent his whole career defining public and private forms of poetic history made out of different sorts of ‘poor passing facts’ – facts which are not, it is important to say, taken singly, but constellated in fixed relations (different at each of his phases) to each other.

In Lowell’s rebellious first idea of history, the lens of the converted present determines the description of the blighted political past; and no contemporary poet could be more ‘politically correct’ than the young Lowell standing at the cenotaph of his Winslow ancestors in the King’s Chapel graveyard and referring to John Winslow not as governor of the Plymouth Colony but as an Herodian ‘Indian Killer’ in King Philip’s War, sacrificing the Indian king as Herod did John the Baptist:

Philip’s head  
Grins on the platter, frouns in pantomime  
The fingers of kept time:  
‘Surely, this people is but grass,’  
He whispers.<sup>8</sup>

Flanked on the left by their Indian victims, the Winslows are flanked on the right by the Irish who have usurped their city. The dead Winslows cannot see the present ‘Easter crowds/On Boston Common or the Beacon Hill/Where strangers hold the golden Statehouse dome/For good and always.’

This recipe for public lyric history – the disaffiliated son rebuking with grim triumph his rotting ancestors – is one repeated, with variations, throughout the lyrics of *Land of Unlikeness* (1944), and *Lord Weary’s Castle* (1946); it governs the narrative of *The Mills of the Kavanagh’s* (1951), in which the Kavanagh line ends with the descent of its last male into homicidal madness and death. If Harry Kavanagh is the

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allegorical figure for American ancestry, his wife Anne represents modernity; their marriage is damned because Red Kavanaughs, Harry's ancestor, 'burned and buried child/And squaw and elder in their river bed,/A pine-tree shilling a scalp.' Harry had hoped that his marriage to Anne would

renew the cleft  
Forests and skulls of the Abnakis left  
Like Saurian footprints by the lumber lord,  
Who broke their virgin greenness cord by cord  
To build his clearing.<sup>9</sup>

Renewal of the genocidal past proves to be impossible, and Lowell's implacably vengeful writing of history pairs Harry's modern mental collapse with the historical massacre of the Abnakis, thereby proving Lowell himself, ideologically at least, a predestinarian Calvinist of the very stripe he condemns, and a believer in causally-structured narrative.

This politically correct version of American public history-by-hindsight could not long appeal to a mind of any intelligence. Even Lowell's own strategies in uttering it speak of his divided mind. 'At the Indian Killer's Grave,' though it is partly modelled on the Protestant *Lycidas*, ends (most peculiarly for a New England historical poem) with a Roman Catholic representation of Mary twining an Indian warlock with her flowers, her 'whole body an ecstatic womb,/As through the trellis peers the sudden Bridegroom.' *The Mills of the Kavanaghs*, on the other hand, keeps its historical material Protestant, and places it under the Augustan control of heroic couplets and heroic quatrains; its mythical allusions refer to Pluto and Persephone rather than to Christ and Mary. In the narrative itself, a cyclic determinism replaces the myth of corrective and redemptive history dominating 'At the Indian Killer's Grave.' But in the case of both poems, the present imposes its reality



on that of the past, whether by the poet's surveillance of the past through a Roman Catholic lens or by the poet's unclassical momentum pulling Augustan couplets and quatrains into a hectic modern enjambment. As William Carlos Williams said in his review of *The Mills of the Kavanaghs*, noting this prosodic paradox, 'Mr. Lowell appears to be restrained by the lines; he appears to *want* to break them.'<sup>10</sup>

There is a distinct pause in Lowell's career between these early allusive public historical poems – where the reader is expected to know intimately the history of New England, and the 'facts' are extrinsic to the poetry – and the 1960 publication of *Life Studies*, which, in its sequence of that name, dwelt exclusively on family history. Lowell had written to Peter Taylor in 1952,

It's hell finding a new style or rather finding that your old style won't say any of the things that you want to, and that you can't write it if you try, and yet the petrified flotsam bits of it are always bobbling up where you don't want them.<sup>11</sup>

Though Lowell here puts the problem in linguistic terms – wanting a new style that would repudiate petrified phrases – this formulation is the outward sign of an inward imaginative upheaval. Lowell then moves out of strictly metered and rhymed verse, a move that reveals his inward revulsion against his own past practice. Lowell began to read Freud with mounting excitement, and wrote in 1953 to Elizabeth Hardwick, 'I am a slavish convert. . . . I am a walking goldmine.'<sup>12</sup> Though his mother's death, following closely on his father's, sent him into a prolonged manic-depressive episode treated with Thorazine and electroshock, he recovered to write the *reminiscences of childhood* that became *91 Revere Street*. In the hospital, as he later recalled, 'My bluster and manic antics died away. Images of my spoiled childhood ached inside