

## EDITORIAL

Last October, when Princeton University Press published Helen Vendler's *Invisible Listeners*, about the silent interlocutors (real or invented) whom certain poets address in their poems, they provided a thumbnail portrait of their author. 'At 71, she is unashamed of her bookishness -- she does not "do" email, has never voted and has never gone to church.' Is the 'A. Kingsley Porter Professor of English at Harvard University' so smug about these accomplishments as to foreground them? Is there a wry effort at self-caricature in this reductive portrait of 'the "Grand Dame" of poetry criticism' or does she really believe that her eccentricities enhance her poetic savvy? The poets she writes about belong in and to their ages: George Herbert does more than just go to church; Walt Whitman is a voice for his democracy; John Ashbery does email and has a brilliant website devoted to his work. But Professor Vendler says never and no to a lot of ancient and modern activities.

Her most emphatic 'no' this year has been reserved for Alice Quinn's edition of work from Elizabeth Bishop's note-books and manuscripts, *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts and Fragments*. In *The New Republic* Vendler says the book should have been called *Repudiated Poems* because it contains writing that Bishop excluded from her published collections: '...Elizabeth Bishop had years to publish the poems included here, had she wanted to publish them. They remained unpublished (not "uncollected") because, for the most part, they did not meet her fastidious standards (although a few, such as the completed love poem "It is marvellous to wake up together," may have been withheld out of prudence).' A tiny, but a crucial, concession underlining how proprieties, like expectations, change. Vendler adds, 'Students eagerly wanting to buy "the new book by Elizabeth Bishop" should be told to go back and buy the old one, where the poet represents herself as she wished to be known. The eighty-odd poems that this famous perfectionist allowed to be printed over the years are "Elizabeth Bishop" as a poet.'

Alice Quinn, poetry editor of *The New Yorker*, has had the temerity to bring 120 poems and fragments to light; she is not adding anything to Bishop's self-defined *oeuvre* apart from context, a context supplied with tact, hedged with scholarly and critical caveats. Bishop's literary estate has been managed with exemplary tact by Robert Giroux, her long-time editor, and Alice Methfessel, her literary executor, and the new book is part and parcel of a carefully paced process of addition. Did Vendler attack Mr Giroux's brilliant edition of Bishop's letters, which were clearly never 'intended for publication'? I don't believe she did. When Bishop gave or sold her papers, including working drafts and cancelled poems, to an archive, she would not have expected that they would remain sealed for all eternity. Twenty-five years after her death, when she has emerged as one of the defining poets of her time and one of the best-loved American poets of the century, the quality of critical engagement with her work can surely pass beyond yet another interpretation of 'The Fish', to the kinds of scholarship which engage the remarkable process of her writing.

There is nothing secret about some aspects of that process. The biographies and biographical essays on her work (some of them truly invasive and presumptive in the ways Vendler unfairly suggests this new book is) have stressed how she hung poems on the wall 'ten years imperfect' (Lowell's phrase, in a poem celebrating his friend), with gaps, her imagination visiting and revisiting, looking for precisely the right

word. But this is not how *all* the poems were written. Some came with enviable fluency, some she distrusted because she could not quite understand them, where they came from, what they were saying. She set them aside, they disappeared in the slowly incrementing volume of notebook pages she did not, perhaps, think to revisit. Meticulous she could be, but like Marianne Moore her own processes could surprise her. Hagiography makes of the words 'fastidious' and 'meticulous' transcendent virtues. They could of course be paralysing vices, as Bishop found during some long, painfully fallow periods.

When Vendler declares, 'I am told that poets now, fearing an Alice Quinn in their future, are incinerating their drafts,' she undermines her own argument. Bishop knew what scholars did with drafts and allowed her work to be archived. An archive exists for the sake of scholarship, and old-fashioned scholarship exists in the service of readership. She knew that if her work proved to be of moment, it would be studied. She did not, like Eliot or Larkin, declare what was unpublished out of bounds. She did not make a bonfire or ask her executors to make one. Had she done so, had they done so, Vendler might have had a point. But then we remember uneasily that Virgil, dying when the *Aeneid* was as yet imperfect, ordered its destruction: the *Eclogues* and *Georgics* would have to suffice. And Auden, tampering with his own earlier published and unpublished work... And Kafka, and Hopkins... We reflect on what we would have lost had writers' injunctions to tidy up their scrolls and work tables after their deaths been observed. That cancelled phrase of Keats's, 'The feel of not to feel it'...

Alice Quinn, long a critical advocate of the work of Elizabeth Bishop, has done a scrupulous job. Not only is the development of a poem through various drafts illuminating (product returned to process, the sense of process contributing to our understanding of the perfection of the product, what has been 'got over' to get *there*); so too is the selection process, whether dictated by political or sexual reticence or by qualitative imperatives. Nothing in Quinn's book is less than engaging; her selection (for it, too, is a selection from a far larger mass of material) has been made in the light of Bishop's 'official *oeuvre*' which Quinn must know by heart almost entire.

The controversy has been rather ugly. Quinn anticipated objections to her book, but must have been a little taken aback by the disproportionate vehemence with which her project and her motives were impugned. Still, she has kept her counsel. Of course Quinn, who though she teaches does not occupy a famous Chair, who addresses non-academic as well as academic readers through her work at *The New Yorker*, might appear to Vendler as an interloper in the house of scholarship whose door is fiercely guarded by 'the A. Kingsley Porter Professor of English at Harvard University'. The gown is affronted by what the town has got up to. Vendler is creating a demarcation dispute of the most conventional sort.

There is a measured case to be made about Quinn's book, but not against it. The first issue must be: how much authority is it proper for an author to exercise from beyond the grave? Are we to honour explicit and implicit injunctions? We make a habit (we are taught by academics to do so) of overriding authorial intentionality when we read a literary text; we trust the tale rather than the teller. What happens when it is not the poem but the poetry itself that is at issue? 'Had Bishop been asked whether her repudiated poems, and some drafts and fragments, should be published after her death, she would have replied, I believe, with a horrified "No",' Vendler declares.

How does she know? Might Bishop have been persuaded? I am sure that had Bishop been asked directly about her private life and many other matters that biographers have not scrupled to probe into, she would have answered with a truly horrified 'no'. Had she been asked about the publication of her letters, she might have said no as well.

There is another issue. Readers of Bishop's poetry are interested in the poems, in how they work, in how they came about. It is an arrogation on Vendler's part to speak for the poet who, in leaving her papers to an archive, spoke with sufficient, quiet eloquence, herself. To limit access to Bishop's *working*, to reserve the progressive spectacle of her creative process to academic scrutiny, to preserve it from the poet's common readers, is a very high-church thing to do. Billy Collins admitted that he was intrigued by the succession of drafts that led to Bishop's great poem 'One Art', but he wondered whether 'the public' should 'see the work behind the curtain'. This is Vendler's position: some activities go on behind the curtain and ought to be out of bounds to lay folk. Scholarship is a restricted zone. Quinn's transgression is not only in what she has done; it is in who she has done it for. And her publisher is also town not gown and has addressed the book to a general readership. The cat is out of the bag, and the degree of Vendler's indignation is proof that it won't be got back in.

The oddest aspect of the controversy is that, according to the *New York Times*, American poets are concerned about taking sides in public, even those who feel strongly one way or the other, because they fear offending either the poetry editor of *The New Yorker* or 'the "Grand Dame" of poetry criticism'. Such gutlessness is surely inconceivable in a freedom-loving Republic of Letters? Such cringing concerns belong more to an authoritarian world, to the age of state censorship in the Soviet Union, to the managed Writers' Unions with their kangaroo conduct? Or has the free literary marketplace become a place of tyranny?

The American ex-Laureate and poet-jester Billy Collins (him again) has a strategy for avoiding such conflicts in the future. 'I don't save my drafts,' he says. 'I just press delete, so the early work just vanishes into cyber void. A motto I've adopted is, if at first you don't succeed, hide all evidence you ever tried.' It's a relief that future scholarship will not be troubled by any ghosts in *his* machine.