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Helen Vendler: Invisible Listeners

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INTRODUCTION Invisible Listeners

©© The chapters of this book investigate the odd practice by which certain poets address their poems, in whole or in part, to someone they do not know and cannot set eyes on, their invisible listener. George Herbert speaks to God; Walt Whitman to the reader in futurity; John Ashbery to a painter of the past. What are we to make of this choice of addressee? With many visible listeners presumably available—the beloved, the patron, the child, the friend—why does the poet feel he or she must hold a colloquy with an invisible other? And what is the ethical import of speaking to such a nonexistent being? To think about such a choice, we must look first at the more common sorts of address within the lyric.

In its usual form, the lyric offers us the representation of a single voice, alone, recording and analyzing and formulating and changing its mind. Although no one else is present in fact, the solitary poet is frequently addressing someone else, someone not in the room. It has even been claimed that apostrophe—literally, a turning away from one's strophe to address someone else—is the essence of the lyric (although there are many lyrics of solitary internal meditation that do not address another person; such a lyric is, as Arnold paradoxically said, a "dialogue of the mind with itself"). One possible absent addressee of lyric is a person whom the fictive speaker knows—a lover, a patron, a family member. The speaker of Shakespeare's sonnets may address the friend or the mistress; Donne may address his patron, Ben Jonson his dead son. This sort of human address could be called "horizontal": although the poet may adopt a tone of formal

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respect (in the case of a patron) or one of adoring warmth (in the case of a lover), the addressee is, after all, merely another human being. But there exists also the “vertical” sort of address: in this case, the speaker’s apostrophe is directed to a person or thing inhabiting a physically inaccessible realm conceived as existing “above” the speaker. The vertically situated addressee may be a god (Christian or classical) or a nightingale or a Grecian urn, and may be situated in Heaven, on Parnassus, or on a Platonic plane where Truth and Beauty are one. The tone adopted by the speaker in vertical apostrophe rises above the level of respect shown to a worldly patron or the veneration shown toward a beloved, and manifests a humility suitable to a speaker addressing the divine.

The loneliness experienced when one lacks an adequate relation to others is mentioned by many poets. “This is my letter,” says Emily Dickinson, “to the World / That never wrote to Me.” The painful asymmetry of the relation between expressive poet and indifferent audience compels the continuous production of her letters to the silent world. “Where art thou friend, whom I shall never see?” asks Hopkins, estranged from both family and fellow students by his conversion to Roman Catholicism. Hopkins imagines two locations for the permanently invisible friend. Perhaps he is only somewhere else in the contemporary world—“sunder’d from my sight in the age that is”—but more probably, given the unconventionality of Hopkins’s character and verse, the friend remains the “far-off promise of a time to be”:

Where art thou friend, whom I shall never see,
Conceiving whom I must conceive amiss?
Or sunder’d from my sight in the age that is
Or far-off promise of a time to be;
Thou who canst best accept the certainty
That thou hadst borne proportion in my bliss,

That likest in me either that or this,—
Oh! even for the weakness of the plea
That I have taken to plead with,— if the sound
Of God's dear pleadings have as yet not moved thee,—
And for those virtues I in thee have found,
Who say that had I known I had approved thee,—
For these, make all the virtues to abound,—
No, but for Christ who hath foreknown and loved thee.¹

Although Hopkins's invisible friend more probably lives in the future—"a time to be"—than in the present, the poet adopts toward him a tone of plangent present intimacy, confident that the friend would like in him one or another trait. At the same time, Hopkins recognizes the "weakness of the plea" of recommending religious conversion on the basis of a putative intimacy conceived over an impassable gulf of time. The extreme hunger of the present casts its desire for intimacy forward, imagining a society that could produce a companion who would bear proportion in the poet's bliss.

In these passages, Dickinson and Hopkins convert the normal intimate address to a known other into a rarefied form—intimate address to an unknown human other. What all lyrics of apostrophe, horizontal or vertical, offer us are tones of voice through which they represent, by analogy, various relations resembling those that we know in life. Lyrics can replicate the tenderness of a parent, the jealousy of a lover, the solicitude of a friend, the humility of a sinner. Such lyrics reveal the social relations in which the speaker is enmeshed, and they often embed within themselves the social norms embodied in various institutions such as the family, the church, or courtly love. But what is the poet to do who wants not to *express* such relations but to *redefine* them, who yearns, for example, to adopt a more intimate relation to God than that offered by the church,

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who intends to model an erotic relation between men not yet sanctioned by society, or who seeks an aesthetic identity currently unfashionable among living artists, but visibly present in the past? The intrinsic and constitutive ability of the lyric to create intimacy is perhaps most striking when the object of intimacy can never be humanly seen or known, yet can be humanly addressed. In such a case, the unseen other becomes an unseen listener, anchoring the voice of the poet as it issues into the otherwise vacant air.

I will here be reflecting on the creation of intimacy with the invisible in the work of three poets. George Herbert, not finding in conventional prayer adequate verbal expressions of his relation to the divine, invents a new constellation of tones and structures with which to address a God who, though sometimes seeming to reside above the poet in an eternity inaccessible to human thought, more often resides (in the horizontal plane) not only within the poet's room but inside his heart, and, in an extraordinary way, inside poetry itself. Walt Whitman, not finding in conventional social intercourse, or in the lyrics he knew, the intimate relation with a man that he yearns for, invents an invisible comrade-reader in futurity somewhat resembling Hopkins's imagined friend. But whereas in Hopkins that friend appears only once, in Whitman the ideal addressee is evoked constantly throughout the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass*, creating and sustaining an intimacy that more and more casts itself from present hope into future dream. In *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, John Ashbery, not finding a fellow-artist of his own time who shares his aesthetic of partial distortion accompanying figuration, addresses the sixteenth-century Mannerist painter Francesco Parmigianino not as someone dead but as someone alive and listening. In fantasizing new personal relations not available in the conventional present, the poets intimate a Utopia in which such closeness would be an accessible part of the known—where the sinner would find unforeseeable tones of intimacy toward a loving

Savior, where society would allow openly demonstrated love between men, where artists—no longer feeling obliged to align themselves exclusively with a figurative or an abstract school—would recognize that all art bends reality into aesthetic abstraction and distortion.

How does a poet make real, in language and in form, both the invisible addressee and his relation to that addressee—or, to put it differently—how is the “intimacy effect” produced on the page?² As I’ve said, creation of this sort of intimacy springs from a fundamental loneliness, forcing the author to conjure up a listener unavailable in actual life. And yet something in the current social world must help to create in verse the image of the ideal listener. The poet may look for textual evidence of the hoped-for listener (Herbert searches the Bible in this way for hints of a God more familiar than distant); or the poet may stabilize and prolong on the page a love that in actual life has been transitory (Whitman’s reader-in-futurity satisfies the erotic connection that, in life, Whitman found fleeting). When there is nothing in current life that can give hints of the intimate link for which the poet longs, the envisaged new addressee may be summoned up by a reaction against the present: Ashbery, a twentieth-century artist unable, at the moment of writing *Self-Portrait*, to find a congenial aesthetic among his contemporaries, discovers (with surprise, relief, and joy) a painter of the past demonstrating an intermediate manner of composition—partly representative, partly abstractly distorted—similar to his own.

Although in the usual lyric the speaker is alone, this solitude does not mean that he is without a social ambiance. It means only that his current social conditions are presented as they are reflected on in solitude, embodied not in “live” interaction with other persons but in lexical and intellectual reference. The necessary solitude of the lyric speaker has caused socially oriented critics to conclude that lyric lacks information about their fields of interest: the clash

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of classes, the domestic and political mediations of sexuality, the fabric of community. On this view, once a speaker is alone in his room, nothing interactively interesting can happen, nothing of social value can be articulated.³

It is of course the poet-speaker's own ethical choices that become articulated in the language creating the elastic space between himself and the other. With each cast of his imagination, as it formulates an encounter with the divine, Herbert chooses the sort of God he desires; the qualities of that God, as He is brought into view, are extrapolated from Herbert's own best ethical principles. When an unsuitable ethical principle is proposed by the poet (that God should find suitable "employment" for His priest, or that the soul's "dust and sin" should find condign punishment), Herbert's God finds ways to set the errant principle gently, but firmly, aside. With each conceiving of his desired comrade Whitman, too, creates an ethics: his ethics not only ratifies extant democratic principles (liberty, equality, fraternity), but, by tone and metaphor, carries such principles to unexpected extensions—imagining liberty of gender-choice in lovers, or an equality between himself and the divine, or the fraternity between himself and a "common prostitute."

In the chapters that follow, I will say relatively little about the ethical dimension in Herbert and Whitman, since their ethical positions are frequently outspoken ones. Ashbery, however, is not usually thought of as a poet with ethical concerns. Yet in his command of volatile tonality he succeeds in suggesting a gamut of ethical relations, from the hostile to the dismissive, from the amorous to the self-denying. Beyond the formal domain there is the fictive one, and there, as Ashbery creates a relation to a past artist, we see embodied, in moving delineation, the qualities of envy, love, ambition, fear, and even enmity that motivate the poet's relation to his precursor. Ashbery's elaboration in his poem of an aesthetic relation across centuries is as lonely and full-bodied as

the Parmigianino painting from which it departs: each of these two works of art is conceived as a self-portrait alive to its own reception by another.

Considerations of the ethical importance of literature usually ground themselves in case histories drawn from such socially oriented texts as Greek tragedies or complex novels. The lyric, however, conveys ethical import less by narration of character in action than by believable tonalities (which may be of any sort—appealing or truculent or repellent), tonalities that are invented and expended as the poet structures and elaborates the emotions of his fantasy. As the lyric contrives its web of relation with another person (or with a thing—an urn or a nightingale—imagined as an addressable being), the filaments it flings (to use Whitman’s metaphor) catch at that “somewhere” (or someone) implicit in all poetic address.⁴ The tones summoned up characterize not only their utterer but also his relation to his addressee, creating on the page the nature of the ties between them.

Julia Kristeva analogizes intimacy to the discourse of the psychoanalytic hour,⁵ but the discourse projected outwards by the lyric poet is of a verbal deliberateness unavailable to either analysand or analyst. The poet’s “written speech” must obey (as discourse directed to an analyst does not) laws of structural and formal poetics.⁶ And these, because they are inherited from the past, may bear an equivocal or problematic relation to the revisionary ethical formulation that the poet aims to fashion. Insofar as every human relation-of-two entails an ethical dimension (of justice, estimation, reciprocity, sympathy), so, too, does every lyric representation of the linkage of two persons. This ethical dimension, though self-evident in novelists or dramatists or even lyric poets addressing other human beings, is even more provocative in the poetry of the invisible listener. Can the projection of models of verbal intimacy—one of lyric’s greatest powers—be considered as a form of ethically serious activity?

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I will be examining how the poet's strange imagined relation with a listener who is invisible—either because he is divine, or because he exists only in the future, or because he is long dead—can be made psychologically credible, emotionally moving, and aesthetically powerful. But it is not only a neutral depiction of a relation that the poet has in mind: he aims to establish in the reader's imagination a more admirable ethics of relation, one more desirable than can be found at present on the earth. Such is the Utopian will of these poets, as desire calls into being an image of possibility not yet realized in life, but—it is postulated—realizable. This possibility is brought to life on the page with a tenderness, wonder, and confidence that are borrowed from the closest moments of intimacy in life. Intimacy with the invisible is an intimacy with hope. Reading these poems, we take a step forward in conceiving a better intimacy—religious, sexual, or aesthetic—than we have hitherto known.