

## 1. Introduction

The situation in which poetry is commonly experienced has been changing over the last few decades. In the United States public readings have become a familiar feature in college and avant-garde settings. Poetry and music have entered into a new and diverse relationship in the performances by the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance, the experiments of John Hollander, and in the ballads of Adrian Mitchell in England. Poetry has increasingly been broadcast on the radio, especially in Britain and Canada. Yet, as an article in *The New York Times* pointed out in August 1979, "the number of people who read poetry and buy books of verse remains as small as ever ... There is a hardcore number of people who regularly buy poetry: 900 for hardbacks; 2,500 for paper ..."

Many poems in the contemporary English speaking world actually reach their audiences through the ear rather than the eye - a situation we may expect to have a profound influence on the texts. The poems need not be simple, but they have to be immediately accessible to the listener in some way, unlike poems that are intended for reading. Yet criticism rarely takes any notice of this: The distinction between poems to be read in a book and poems to be listened to, between aural and visual poetry, is generally recognized only in situations where it cannot be avoided, with Concrete poetry, aleatory sound poetry and related forms.

This may be so because this difference is often thrown in the shade by another, more radical distinction, between oral and literate poetry, a distinction that is important in the efforts to return to or learn from the poetry of oral cultures, as exemplified by some recent Black and Asian American poetry, and by the study of ethnopoetics.

In an oral culture, the material of a poem may, within rules set by tradition, vary according to the singer, his listeners, and even the occasion on which it is performed. By contrast, in our literate culture, we have become used to poetic texts that are recorded in a fixed form and published in print. This has made it possible to adopt a view of the text as complete in itself, as an object, and to neglect the fact that the poem only comes into being in performance, whether in reciting or silent reading.

The view of the poem as an object has dominated the practice of academic criticism for decades, under the banner of the New Criticism, and current theory, in a wide variety of ways, is still struggling to free academic practice from the limitations of that approach.

Some of the reasons for its currency are associated with the establishment of the critical study of English and American literature as an academic discipline. When programmes of English were founded, an approach to literature was adopted that was suited to the Modernist poetry of the period (see pp. 65-66 below) - a type of poetry that demanded detailed analysis of a "verbal amalgam." This became problematic when the New Critical inquiry was extended to other periods and other types of poetry, as Cleanth Brooks' interpretation of the imagery in *Macbeth* drastically indicates.

The New Critical approach was reinforced by the situation in the classroom. Close reading is an excellent way of introducing students to all the devices a poet has at his or her disposal. The assumption that everything important is contained in the text offers the student the reassurance that he is able to "make something of it," even without knowing much about literary tradition.

Finally, as John Bayley has pointed out:

To get a great deal out of a poem is the justification for academic study of it, and an English School tends to set up, in self-defence, professional and mental disciplines which will compare with those required in other subjects. If poetry is to be read as part of an academic course, moreover, the pleasure of reading it becomes altogether too simple a criterion. The analysis and 'evaluation' of poetry must be seen to be an arduous process only to be acquired with practice.

All these reasons have favoured ways of experiencing poetry which not only contrast violently with those in an oral culture, but also neglect the basic task of listening to a poem. New Critical reading looks for juxtaposition rather than sequence, and for spatial rather than temporal relationships, which may be appropriate for a poem by T. S. Eliot, but not for one by Chaucer.

As a result of these developments, the art of reciting and of listening to poetry has been neglected in the teaching of literature. Oral interpretation, where it is at all taught, is part of the programme of the schools of speech, not the English departments.

The divergence between the practice of poetry and the critic's approach to poems is not a matter of little concern. We have to ask ourselves: Should poetry - recent or older, local or exotic - be listened to or read in a book? The answer with oral poems is obvious; it may be less so with literate poetry. Can a poem only produce its full effect through the ear, lest sound and rhythm will be lost? Or does the voice of the reader

distract from the poem itself? Is the literary poem for the stage of for the page? These simple questions will help us to approach a problem that is more complex than they suggest.

Answers to them do not only have a bearing on the teaching of poetry; they also affect the way we understand a text. According to Helen Gardner, the "response to a work as having value is the beginning of fruitful critical activity." The values found and the response elicited are reflected in the result of the interpretation. The preference for complexity of texture among academic critics is a perfect example of this. It is crucial whether the critic first sees patterns of images and themes, or hears the development of sound sequences. The values and responses in question should therefore be made explicit and considered critically.

One part of this consideration is the question of how poetry should be experienced (listened to or read). This must become an integral part of literary studies.

Comprehensive answers to this question have been attempted; indeed, the problem may be that we get little else but comprehensive answers. Yvor Winters, for example, in his lecture *The Audible Reading of Poetry*, has stressed how essential to its proper understanding it is that poetry be heard. This may be done by way of the "inner ear," but the mind's ear can be trained only by way of the sensual ear.

Yet the readers are numerous who hear nothing when they read silently and who are helpless in their efforts to read aloud: some of them have defective sensibilities, some have merely never been trained; some have been trained by one or another of our psychological educationists to read in this fashion in order that they may read more rapidly ... Such "readers" are barbarians; literature is closed so them, in spite of the fact that they may think otherwise.

In Winters' view, then, inaudible reading is nothing but an aberration.

In the opposite camp we find F. W. Bateson, who reminds us, in *The Scholar-Critic*, of the etymology of the word *style* (Latin *stilus* - an instrument for writing). *Literature* (ultimately derived from *littera*) "carries with it the same original physical connotation of the written or printed word." The 'repeat', for example, "whether it is in prose or verse, is normally seen on the page before it is heard (even by the 'inner ear')." Therefore, literature does not need to be recited or read aloud." Many critics would hesitate to endorse this radical position. But their writings imply that they consider a visual approach to the poem basic. The most famous - and influential- example is probably the account of reading that I. A. Richards gives in his *Principles of Literary Criticism*.

The views of Winters and of Bateson summarized here contradict each other. At least one of them has to be wrong. This study is based on the assumption that they are both incorrect. There are no simple answers to the question of how poetry should be experienced; rather each poem requires an answer of its own. The most important possibilities are listening (to song, speech, chant, etc.) and privately reading from a book (reading faster than speech, studying, etc.). In this we follow Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*:

Words may be acted in front of a spectator; they may be spoken in front of a listener; they may be sung or chanted; or they may be written for a reader ... The basis of generic criticism in any case is rhetorical, in the sense that the genre is determined by the conditions established between the poet and his public.

Frye uses these distinctions to define drama, epic, and lyric. But this study claims such differences also within a narrower generic range.

One of the consequences of this narrowing down is that historical considerations become more important. As I shall try to show, the different ways of experiencing poetry are in part historically determined, and may therefore be studied as part of literary history.

This study will not attempt to formulate an integrated theory of literature, and offer a comprehensive history of poetry. Rather, the scope of the study will be that of a research programme.

I shall first discuss the notion of the 'text' as it still is commonly used in the practice of academic criticism, and shall offer an alternative view of it, as part of a situation to which also the poet and the person experiencing the poem belong (chapter 2). I shall try to show that this situation has to be of a certain structure and duration to be successful, and introduce the term *event* for it (chapter 3). I shall then deal with five different relationships of aural and visual elements in a poetic text (chapter 4). On the basis of the "event," I shall discuss the question of how texts to be listened to and texts to be read look on the page (chapters 5 and 6). Chapter 7 suggests how the two kinds of experience may be related to literary history. It also introduces the three following chapters, which deal with problems in the works of single authors: experience and interpretation in Browning, sound and meaning in Hopkins, and length and difficulty in Pound (chapters 8 to 10). In my conclusion I shall summarize results and make suggestions as to how they may be applied in teaching.