

## 2. Text and Experience

In their highly influential book *Theory of Literature* Rene Wellek and Austin Warren devote a chapter to the question: How does a poem exist? They set out by rejecting four traditional answers. The poem is not identical with the black lines on the paper; these are only a *record* of the poem. The poem is not the sequence of sounds uttered by a speaker or reader of poetry; every reading is a *performance* of the poem, which may be influenced by the reader. The poem is not identical with the experience or the intentions of the poet; that view implies that there is no divergence between the poet's intentions and the actual result and fails to take into account the fact that the poet's experience is inaccessible to us. Finally, the poem is not the experience of the reader:

It is true, of course, that a poem can be known only through individual experiences, but it is not identical with such an individual experience ... The view that the mental experience of a reader is the poem itself leads to the absurd conclusion that a poem is non-existent unless experienced and that it is re-created in every experience. There thus would not be one *Divine Comedy* but as many *Divine Comedies* as there are and were and will be readers. We end in complete scepticism and anarchy and arrive at the vicious maxim of *de gustibus non est disputandum*.

This conclusion is only valid if we posit a reader who is totally independent from his fellow human beings, from the traditions in which they live, and the values they share (e. g., those of the community of scholars or of readers of literature) and from the situation in which he experiences the poem. This assumption is so reductionist that any argument based on it can only be of very limited value.

Having rejected these four definitions of a poem, Wellek and Warren propose their own:

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A poem is not an individual experience or a sum of experiences, but only a potential cause of experiences. In every individual experience only a small part can be considered as adequate to the true poem. Thus, the real poem must be conceived as a structure of norms, realized only partially in the actual experience of its many readers ... The norms we have in mind are implicit norms which have to be extracted from every individual experience of a work of art and together make up the genuine work of art as a whole.

This idealist view cannot solve one basic problem. On the one hand, it has to concede that the work of art cannot be approached by any way other than individual experience. On the other hand, it postulates an ideal structure independent of this experience: the true poem, the genuine work of art. But it does not offer us any help in distinguishing between the structures that the reader projects into the poem, and the structures that are independent of individual experience.

We have to assume that the individual experiences correct each other, and that the conclusions from them gradually lead us to a clearer and more complete view of the structures immanent in the poem. The history of literary studies would then be one of continual progress, of deepening insight. This view is difficult to accept in any but the shortest perspective. Otherwise, the methods applied as well as the results achieved are often difficult to reconcile with each other.

Wellek and Warren are aware of this problem; they ask themselves:

In what sense can we speak of an identity between the *Iliad* as the contemporary Greeks heard or read it and the *Iliad* we now read? Even assuming that we know the identical text, our actual experience must be different. We cannot contrast its language with the everyday language of Greece, and cannot therefore feel the deviations from

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colloquial language on which much of the poetic effect must depend. We are unable to understand many verbal ambiguities which are an essential part of every poet's meaning. Obviously it requires in addition some imaginative effort, which can have only very partial success, to think ourselves back into the Greek belief in gods, or the Greek scale of moral values.

In spite of these problems Wellek and Warren insist on their notion of an immanent structure: "Still, it could be scarcely denied that there is a substantial identity of 'structure' which has remained the same throughout the ages." It comes as a surprise, therefore, that one reads in the next sentence:

This structure, however, is dynamic: it changes throughout the process of history while passing through the minds of its readers, critics, and fellow artists. Thus the system of norms is growing and changing and will remain, in some sense, always incompletely and imperfectly realized.

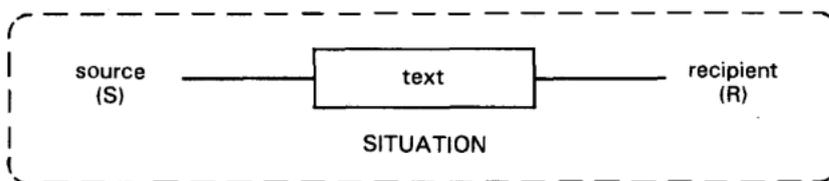
Again, it is the relationship between the so-called structure of the poem and the individual experience of the poem which creates difficulties. If this structure is stable and changing at the same time, then critical theory is simply a mystery. In fact, it seems that the term 'structure' is being used in two different senses: to denote the stable structure of the poem itself, and the changing structures observed by individuals at different times in history - always assuming that it is possible to distinguish between the two!

This group of problems can only be avoided if the notion of the 'true poem' is given up, and a concept of literature adopted that makes allowance for the person experiencing the text. In such a notion of literature all the traditional answers reviewed by Wellek and Warren have a role to play: the black ink on the paper, the sounds in the air, the experience and the intentions of the poet, and the experience of the reader/listener. These are involved not as single

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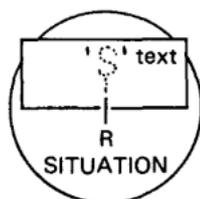
phenomena, but in their mutual relationships. Many of these are difficult, even impossible, to describe, but they must not, therefore, be disregarded.

In order to describe these relationships I am going to use a simple model of communication. Any communication process involves a source (S), which communicates something (the text) to a recipient (R). Further, it takes place in a particular situation, which depends on and influences all the other components mentioned. This can be set out in a diagram:



Diagrams of this kind may suggest the wrong sort of objectivity, and lead us to forget that in experiencing poetry we are ourselves part of the process. We are among the recipients, not because the poet has necessarily chosen us for his audience, but because we cannot help being part of it. This has important implications. Seen from the recipient's point of view, the source is not the poet himself (S), but the poet as we imagine him on the basis of the text we are experiencing, and of what we have learnt about him elsewhere. In Ong's phrase, the audience's poet is always a fiction. We can indicate this in the diagram by placing the source between single quotation marks ('S').

The diagram may then be redrawn as follows. For once, as things are not complicated yet, we can present it from the perspective of the recipient:



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The definition of the text has to reflect its position between the recipient and the source: We may define it, with Louise M. Rosenblatt, as "a set or series of signs interpretable as linguistic symbols." This phrasing has the advantage of emphasizing that the black ink on the paper or the vibrations in the air can only constitute a text "by virtue of their being potentially recognized as pointing to something beyond themselves," that is as symbols. Another advantage of this definition of 'text' is that it is general enough to be applicable to both visual reading and listening.

This brings us to the last term in the diagram, 'situation', another term that can be understood in a general sense. As Aldous Huxley has reminded us, it makes a difference if we read Wordsworth's nature poetry in England or in the tropics; and it similarly matters whether a text is used as a work-song or read in an anthology of English poetry. In this study, however, I shall restrict myself to discussing two basic situations: listening to poetry, and reading poetry with one's eyes.

The difference between the two situations is difficult to illustrate fully in a book. The text of George Herbert's poem "Coloss. 3.3: Our Life is hid with Christ in God" may serve as an example:

My words & thoughts do both expresse this notion,  
That *Life* hath with the sun a double motion.  
The first *is* straight, and our diurnall friend,  
The other *Hid* and doth obliquely bend.  
One life is wrapt *In* flesh, and tends to earth:  
The other winds towards *Him*, whose happie birth  
Taught me to live here so, *That* still one eye  
Should aim and shoot at that which *Is* on high:  
Quitting with daily labour all *My* pleasure,  
To gain at harvest an eternall *Treasure*.

If the poem is listened to, the motto running obliquely across the text, and alluded to in the imagery at the beginning, cannot be noticed. Obviously, the text can only be fully appreciated if it is seen. And, indeed, this is the way Herbert meant it to be experienced; as we are fortunate enough to know, he had it painted at his wife's seat in Bemerton Church.

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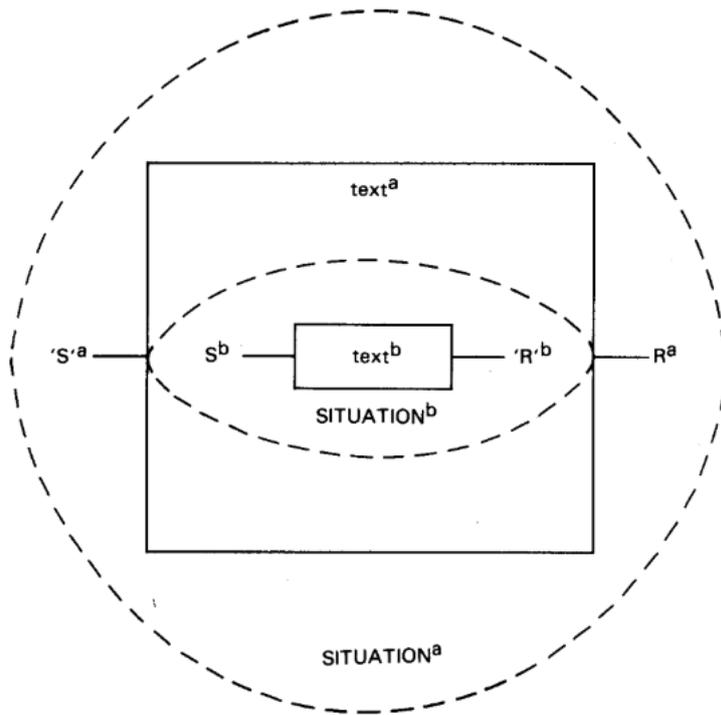
What is almost too obvious to need pointing out in this case is, I shall contend, true for poetic texts in general: The written text tends to indicate if a poem is meant to be listened to or read visually.

This claim is so cautiously worded because the situation can only be derived from the text, where the text *excludes* or makes marginal certain kinds of experience - as in the example from Herbert just offered.

Even given this qualification, texts offer us surprisingly rich evidence of how they should be experienced. In this study four types of evidence will be discussed: the relationship between the visual and the aural elements in the text; the degree of the text's difficulty; its length; and the relationship between the poet and his audience as reflected in the text.

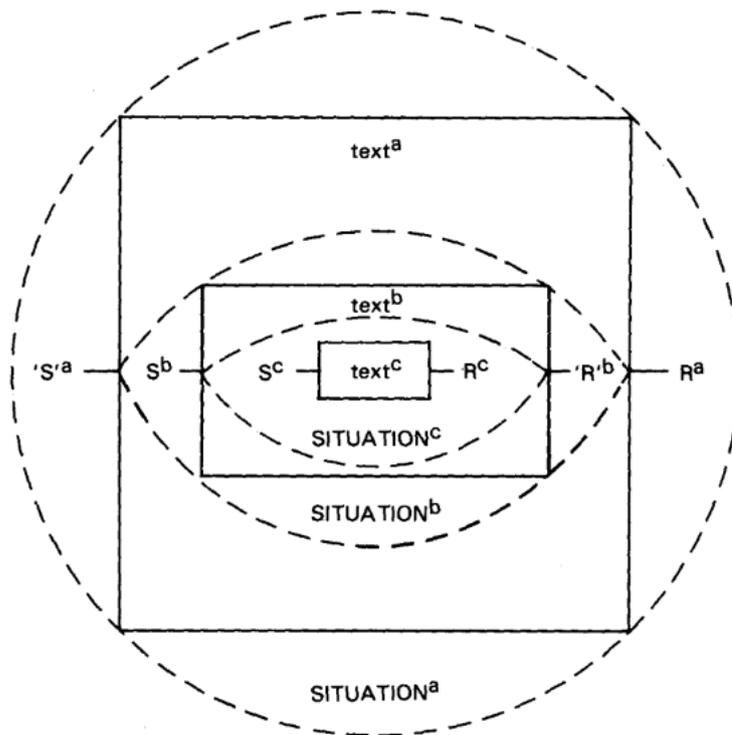
In our diagram, we can take account of the situation intended by the poet by introducing a second situation.\* In situation b everything is seen from the point of view of the poet ( $S^b$ ), and it is the audience that is only partially known to him ( $\hat{R}^b$ ): It may consist of his mistress, of his friends, of the performer, or of those whose reaction is implied in notions like "success," or that the poem is "not of an age but for all time."

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Text b may imply one more situation, a world which the poet creates within the poem. In Donne's "The Sun Rising," for example, the speaker is presented as lying in bed with his mistress, addressing the sun. This situation c is of particular interest in poems with a speaker other than the poet, e. g., in the dramatic monologue.

The complete diagram then looks as follows - and in our experience of poetry it always operates as a whole:



SITUATION<sup>a</sup>: the situation in which we experience poetry (recipient's situation)

SITUATION<sup>b</sup>: the situation in which the poet composes (poet's situation)

SITUATION<sup>c</sup>: the world which the poet creates within the poem (internal situation)

Situations b and c may coincide if the speaker in the poem is the poet himself. Situations a and b can only be close to each other in oral poetry (see below, pp. 57-58). But the distance between the two is particularly large if it is also a distance across history (cp. our notion of 'George Herbert'). To experience a poem adequately, i. e. in the way it was intended, we should try to reconstruct situation b and to take account of it in our experience.

With some poetry, especially the poetry of preliterate ages, this reconstruction has been attempted. With *Beowulf*, for instance, the situation of experiencing the poem forced upon us by history is quite different from the one it was intended for. Few of us are familiar enough with

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the language of the poem and the views it takes for granted to be able to enjoy and understand it in the way its original audience did, i. e. by listening to a performance at a solemn feast. Often, even detailed analysis with the help of dictionaries and grammars does not yield a coherent reading, and we are forced into making conjectures about the meaning of a passage - a way of experiencing in almost every respect different from listening to the poem.

If we take a critical position that denies the importance of historical changes in poetic communication, i. e., if we do not allow for the difference between situations a and b, we may agree with the conclusions of Paull F. Baum that the *Beowulf* poet

adopted a tense crowded style and convoluted method of narration, the very antithesis of a minstrel's, most unsuited for oral recitation, and if he looked for an audience of listeners he was extraordinarily, not to say stubbornly, sanguine. But all the signs (they can hardly be called evidence but they are all we have) point to a very individual man, a serious and gifted poet, steeped in the older pagan tradition from the continent, moved perhaps by a pious desire to compromise his two religions, and above all delighting in his unusual skill with language (as all poets do) - all the signs point to such a poet sitting down to compose a quasi-heroic poem to please himself, in the quiet expectation of pleasing also just that "fit audience though few."

It is not surprising that in Baum's description the *Beowulf* poet can hardly be distinguished from a modern poet in the Romantic tradition.

The passage from Baum gives an example of how the style of a text, the way it is supposed to be experienced, and the notions of the poet and the audience are so closely related as to make the isolation of one of them impossible.

But it also serves us as a warning: The consideration of a single criterion - like difficulty - may lead

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to conclusions that contradict the findings suggested by other kinds of evidence.