

3. The Text as Evidence

The ideas that a poem has to be experienced in a certain way in order to be fully appreciated, and that the text may reflect whether it is meant for listening or for visual reading, are not new. In *A Preface to "Paradise Lost"*, for example, C. S. Lewis makes a comparable distinction between the Primary and the Secondary, the oral and the literary epic. Homer's epics and *Beowulf* are of the first, Virgil's and Milton's epics of the second type. The Primary epic is the "loftiest and gravest among the kinds of court poetry in the oral period"; it is connected with "stately and ceremonial festivity." The Secondary epic "aims at even higher solemnity than the Primary; but it has lost all those external aids to solemnity which the Primary enjoyed. There is no robed and garlanded aoidos [singer], no altar, not even a feast in a hall - only a private person reading a book in an armchair." The private person must be made to feel, with the help of an elevated style, "that he is assisting at an august ritual, for if he does not, he will not be receptive of the true epic exhilaration." The verbal style of *Paradise Lost* thus indicates, according to Lewis, in what kind of situation the poem should be experienced - an observation that I shall discuss in more detail later (chapters 5 and 6, especially pp. 38-39 and 51-52).

If we apply Lewis's distinction between texts for performance and for private reading to poetry in general, we must also deal with a problem which does not arise in the discussion of the epic, because the epic is, by definition, a long poem. Not only style, but also length may indicate how a poem should be experienced. As Geoffrey Crump has observed: "Poetry as brief and concise as the epigram is difficult to speak effectively - it is apt to be over before the listener has begun to take it in." The epigram, like the proverb and other short forms, depends on a situation already established in all its details, including its mood. It is not able to create, only to complete a situation. It may be quoted to make a point in debating, or to summarize the drift of a conversation; it is therefore often allusive and personal.

If, however, the poem is to be at the center of a situation, if it is to form a focal part of it, we have to consider the dimension of time. The experience of the poem is a process of a certain duration, and that duration shapes the

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experience. In criticism that defines the poem as an ideal structure, on the other hand, this aspect of the poem is not recognized: the closer the reading, the more appropriate the experience will be.

Because a situation in which the experience of poetry is central also has to be defined temporally I am going to replace the term "situation" by "event" from now on.

Edgar Allan Poe, in his attack on long poems, places much emphasis on this point:

a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul ...But all excitements are, through a psychal necessity, transient ... After the lapse of half an hour, at the very utmost, [the excitement] flags - fails - a revulsion ensues - and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such.

Not all poems reckon with creating the feverish pitch of excitement Poe has in mind; and his view may not therefore be generalized directly. It may be wiser to define the duration of the event in the terms of a process. The attention of the person experiencing the poem must be caught and concentrated, and the expectations that have been raised must be fulfilled* in a way which allows him, for example, to close the book, or to turn to another text.

Tediousness marks the upper limit to the duration of the event. Long poems are usually divided into books or cantos of roughly equal length, which structure their experience. If we allow for variation in section length by one third from the average, we find that in *Paradise Lost* all the sections are of similar length (on the average 880 lines), in *The Prelude* eleven out of fourteen (563 lines), and even in Byron's *Don Juan* fourteen out of sixteen (977 lines). Dramas, too, tend to be of comparable length. According to the same rules, 33 of the 35 Shakespeare plays in the Folio are of similar length (2851 lines) - the exceptions being *The Comedy of Errors* and *Hamlet*.

Poe mainly concerns himself with attacking long poems, like *Paradise Lost*. In the discussion of modern poetry, on the other hand, it is rather brevity which presents problems. There are several ways of making sure that the event in which a text is experienced lasts long enough to make a full experience possible. The text may consist of so many words as to require a certain amount of time to

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be experienced. The canto or book of an epic is the most obvious example of this type, but there are also others. Short poems usually form groups in our experience, often because they are clearly meant to be experienced as such: e. g., sonnet sequences, or the *Liederkränze* in German literature. In recitals, the performer usually groups short poems around a central idea, and his or her aim is to present a complete programme, "which has a beginning, middle, and end, builds to a climax, and creates a unified effect." Another method of providing duration, particularly frequent in sung texts, is the repetition of phrases or stanzas in refrains. Alternatively, the process of experiencing the text may be slowed down - by making the combination of words and their meanings so rich and complex as to require slow and careful reading or even study for a satisfying experience. The closer the study invited, the shorter the text may be.

All this suggests that there is a close relationship between the length and complexity of a text, and between these and the situation in which the text is supposed to be experienced. Long, simple texts are best suited to listening; short, difficult ones to reading in a book.

This distinction raises two problems. Many modern poems - Pound's *Cantos* spring to mind - are long and, at the same time, demand close study. I shall deal with this paradox in some detail in chapter 10. The second problem is suggested by the fact that Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Lewis's example of a poem to be read in a book, is definitely not short. Here, we have to keep two things in mind. As we have seen, one criterion alone is not sufficient to place a text in one of the two categories, and there are no texts (except in concrete poetry) which cannot be listened to as well as read even though one way of experiencing them may be more suitable than the other. Between the two extremes of experience there is a continuum of possibilities. In comparison to the Primary epic, *Paradise Lost* has more elements of the poem read in the armchair, but it does not, by any means, approach the opposite end of the continuum. In chapter 6 I shall try to show how elements Lewis considers typical of the Secondary epic appear in a much more radical form in the condensed modern poems that require study (pp. 51-52).

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Beyond these notions of length and difficulty, there is additional evidence for the claim that the text of a poem indicates how it is meant to be experienced. It is to be found in spelling, punctuation, and typography. These elements may, on the one hand, encourage the use of a printed text as a score for an aural experience; on the other hand, they may demand that the experience remain visual. In other words, they may either suggest speech-sounds - which in turn have meaning - or they may stand for meaning directly. Here I shall only indicate how this evidence may be used; illustrations will be drawn from all literary periods. Historical considerations will come up later in the study (chapter 7).

Spelling offers the most obvious pointer to the split between aural and visual reading. As Henry Bradley has observed, it has the merit "of saving written English from a good many of the ambiguities of the spoken tongue,"* especially by keeping apart homophones like *right - rite - wright - write*. Instead of suggesting sound, spelling may directly refer to meaning.

Spelling may also signal emotive meanings unrelated to pronunciation. The initial *gh-* in words like *ghastly*, *ghost*, *ghetto*, *ghoul*, for example, emphasizes the negative connotations of the word. In a similar way the suffix *-or*, as opposed to *-er*, in cases like *advisor*, as against *adviser*, can be qualified as "a visual morpheme of prestige."

Punctuation, too, may help us in finding out how a text is meant to be experienced. Punctuation may serve "the needs to outline the grammatical construction and stress the sentence as the basic component in writing, to show the relationship of each of the sentence parts to the whole and also show the connections in meaning between the various parts." On the other hand, it may follow "a scheme of time values and ... a breathing system divorced from or only loosely related to sense" and may thus "be used to help show the metrical structure and larger rhythmical movements of verse."

The colon, for example, at one time, was defined as "half a pause of a period." On the other hand, there are definitions according to which the colon is "used especially to mark antithesis, illustration, or quotation," i. e. a logical relationship.

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Where punctuation is used consistently in accord with either of these norms these differences may be so striking as to distinguish texts with rhythmical-oratorical punctuation from those with grammatical-logical punctuation. The two types are adapted to different ways of experiencing the text, as their relationship to meaning shows. Rhythmical-oratorical punctuation indicates effects peculiar to the speaking voice, and by this may, of course, resolve ambiguities in the syntax. Grammatical-logical punctuation, on the other hand, indicates the relations between meanings directly, but leaves open more than one way of communicating these to a listener.

The absence of punctuation, finally, which we occasionally find in the modern poetry since Mallarme, makes continuous visual reading difficult. It may create ambiguities and force the passive reader to become active* in considering or even balancing a large number of possible grammatical and semantic links. This kind of poetry can hardly be adequately experienced in listening because intonation will destroy many of the intended ambiguities. It has to be studied, a way of reading I shall discuss below (pp. 48-50).

The third kind of evidence, beside spelling and punctuation, may be the most striking in the case of poetry. Typography helps to characterize the poem as such. If the margins on the page are wide, and if the right hand margin is uneven, the text must be that of a poem; and until recently, the capitalization of the first letter in every line was a sign that the text was supposed to be a poetic one. But beyond this, typography may also indicate how the text should be experienced, as we saw in the Herbert poem quoted earlier (p. 20) and as further examples in the next chapter will show.