

# *Yon* and the Pragmatics of Poetry<sup>1</sup>

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Linguistics and the study of literature have long parted company. Linguists tend to consider the language of literature too specialized to warrant much attention; students of literature usually take for granted the phenomena linguists analyse. The two disciplines may even be disdainful of each other: many linguists cannot see what is scientific about literary criticism; and literary critics feel that linguistics deals with problems that are uninteresting at best. But this situation is to the detriment of both disciplines.<sup>2</sup>

One area where collaboration between them is urgent is literary pragmatics—the study of how words of literature are situated in the context in which they are used. This area of study has become crucial since the demise of textual autonomy and the new interest in the social function of literature and its history. Questions arise like: what kind of use is taken for granted by a text? Does the text address the reader directly? Or is it supposed to be overheard, as it were? Does this relationship change in the course of history? And how does it affect the understanding of a text?<sup>3</sup>

Here deixis is central, because it may reflect the relationship between text and context, between a work of literature and its recipient, in the structure of language itself. The most obvious instances are demonstratives like *this* and *that*, personal pronouns (*I, you, he, she*), time and place adverbs like *now* and *here*, tenses, etc. Many of these deictics may be used for referring to earlier or later passages, i.e. for discourse deixis. But where their use is non-discursive, they help to determine either a situation created by the text (*Othello*: Look, where he comes. *Enter Iago*) or one that

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<sup>2</sup> There are exceptions to any generalization of this kind. I am thinking in particular of what has come to be called Stylistics in Britain. Cp. also Traugott and Pratt.

<sup>3</sup> Cp. Engler (*Reading and listening*), where some of the problems involved are discussed.

defines the relationship between the speaker in the work of literature and the recipient (“Reader, I married him.”).

Here I should like to concentrate on some deictic words that are never used discursively, but *always* link a text with the outside world, and therefore seem particularly useful for the study of literary pragmatics: *yon*, *yond*, and *yonder*.<sup>4</sup>

I shall use *yon* as shorthand for the whole group from now on. Charles Barber, in his account of Early Modern English, distinguishes the function of *yon* from other deictic words as follows: “*this* implies ‘near the speaker’; *that* implies ‘remote from the speaker’; *yon* implies ‘remote from both speaker and hearer’” (Barber 227). In other words, it implies a shared point of view that neither *this* nor *that* can express; these carry no implications about position relative to the hearer. *Yon*, on the other hand, always relies on three elements and the relationships between them; they create a triad, a *ménage à trois*. By distancing the third element each reference made with the help of *yon* also reinforces the link between speaker and addressee and creates something similar to the “inclusive we” in some languages.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, according to Barber, *yon* carries the additional implication “visible”, in sight. Almost invariably, therefore, it accompanies (or replaces) a pointing gesture: the speaker is saying “Look, that one over there.” (Barber 228)

There is a historical problem, however, in using *yon* as evidence for place deixis. As Barber explains:

Characters in Restoration Comedy sometimes use the adverb *yonder*, but rarely the determiner *yon*; when it does occur, it is not usually in the mouths of ladies and gentlemen, but of non-standard speakers, like the sailor Ben Legend in *Love for Love*. It is also found in Bunyan, and continued to be used by the lower classes after it had disappeared from the speech of polite society. It also continued to be used in Scots, and in many English regional dialects, where it is still heard. (Barber 230)

By the late seventeenth century *yon* was becoming literary, largely confined to poetry—indeed, it is a characteristic feature of eighteenth-century poetic diction. Its force may therefore have to be questioned, along with that of other

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<sup>4</sup> They have the additional advantage that, unlike other demonstratives, they are always listed in concordances and therefore can be helpful in finding examples of non-discursive deixis in large corpora of texts.

<sup>5</sup> On “we-inclusive-of-addressee” see Levinson 69.

deictic elements, as being mere convention. This is George N. Shuster's view on the ode:

[T]he element of address is of no especial significance, being merely a reflection of the classical influence. All the verse of antiquity was addressed to somebody, primarily because it was either sung or read in the traditions of song and recitation required that there be a recipient (Shuster 11–12)

This view assumes that poetry is not addressed to anybody, that texts are autonomous, an assumption that was more acceptable when it was expressed in 1940 than it is today. But even if we were to accept Shuster's position, we should still have to explain why poets should risk confusion between classicist convention and the deictic force of words outside poetry.

Considering the deictic function of *yon*, but also its becoming non-standard and literary, how can it help us in situating poetic texts in their historical contexts? Trying to answer this question we have to consider both the addressee, and the kind of reference made. In the following I shall restrict myself to discussing a few examples from Milton, from the poetry of the mid-eighteenth century, and from Wordsworth. They have been chosen because, with one exception, they are typical of how *yon* is used in poetry. Still, I am aware that what I am saying cannot be anything but suggestive, sketching a problem rather than solutions.<sup>6</sup>

In Milton, the use of *yon* follows the rules set out by Barber: both speaker and addressee are clearly defined, and the reference is one that can be pointed to. The words frequently feature in *Paradise Lost*, as one would expect in an epic poem full of dialogue, a poem too which in many respects is about distancing and separation (and therefore perspective), but also about the crossing of thresholds between different worlds. The most memorable example of this is probably Satan's approach to Paradise in Book IV, 172ff.<sup>7</sup> The field of reference is wide, including features of the landscape (I. 180, 280, II. 183, etc.), structures erected (II. 684, V. 367), and celestial phenomena (IV. 1011). The use of *yon* that perhaps best illustrates its function, however, comes in *Arcades* (p. 155-61), which forms part of a masque, where the Genius of the Wood addresses the other players, referring to "the great mistress of yon princely shrine" (36), the person to whom the entertainment

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<sup>6</sup> 1 I am revising and developing an argument first sketched in Engler ("Deictics and the Status of Poetic Texts").

<sup>7</sup> References are to Milton (*The Poems*).

is dedicated, Alice, Dowager Countess of Derby. She is watching, and at the same time being drawn into, the performance.

There is only one passage in Milton, where the use of *yon* is not in accordance with Barber's analysis. Sonnet 1, probably written in 1629, begins with the words:

O nightingale, that on yon bloomy Spray  
Warblest at eve, when all the woods are still,  
Thou with fresh hope the lover's heart dost fill,  
While the jolly hours lead on propitious May.  
(Milton, *The Poems* 90)

As the context makes clear the speaker is alone. There is no triad of elements therefore, only the speaker and the nightingale; and the nightingale is both the addressee, and the element referred to as being distant. Both make the use of *yon* unusual. If this is not a blunder, of a kind we should not expect to find with Milton, we can only assume that the use of *yon* as a deictic has become problematic, at least in certain types of poetic texts. This may be the case here: commentators have pointed out that Milton is following an Italian model, probably Bembo's sonnet beginning with the words *O rosignuol, che'n queste verdi fronde* (Milton, *The Sonnets* 51). This would suggest that convention plays an important role in this use of *yon*, although the very fact that it is linked with direct address also indicates that it has deictic force.

In the course of the eighteenth century another use of *yon* becomes common in poetry, one where the addressee who is part of the triad, is no longer defined. We find an example of this in Gray's "Elegy written in a Country Churchyard" (1750).<sup>8</sup> The opening describes a scene, rather like a painting, but from line 4 onward a detailed spatial framework is established with the help of deictic words. Even though *yonder* here appears as the determiner of a highly conventionalized expression, it clearly has retained deictic force:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,  
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,  
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.  
Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,  
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,

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<sup>8</sup> Gray et al. 103–41. The function of deictics in Collins's "Ode Occasioned by the Death of Mr Thomson" (1748/49) is discussed by Tillyard.

Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,  
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;  
Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower  
The moping owl does to the moon complain  
Of such as, wandering near her secret bower,  
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

Who is addressed by these words in the situation created by the poem? Unlike the Milton passages the text does not define the addressee. The text leaves a gap for the reader to fill. Is the addressee somebody accompanying the speaker? This identification is frustrated by the indication that the poem is supposed to have been *written* in a country churchyard. The addressee cannot really be the reader either because the reader is by definition absent from the scene. In the first place the speaker is certainly addressing himself, reflecting, trying to define his own position towards what he sees. This puts the readers in a difficult position. On the one hand, they are addressed by the poem in the way any poem addresses its readers. At the same time, they have to fill the gap, are drawn into the situation, and have to imagine themselves as being present in it; and they can only do this by identifying with the speaker and the addressee, who are both the same person.

This need for identification with the speaker is even more marked in Romantic poetry. In Wordsworth, for example, we find a striking example in “The Solitary Reaper,” which begins with the words:

Behold her, single in the field,  
Yon solitary Highland lass!  
Reaping and singing by herself;  
Stop here, or gently pass!  
(Wordsworth 1.659-660)<sup>9</sup>

The triad that *yon*<sup>10</sup> presupposes is already established by the first word of the poem, a command to take note of something that is in sight. Who is addressed by the speaker's words? There is the same gap as in the Gray poem. Is it somebody accompanying the speaker? Is it the reader to whose imagination a scene is suggested? If this is the case, how should we deal with the second imperative (“Stop here, or gently pass!”)? As Robert Graves has observed, the

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<sup>9</sup> This is not the only poem which follows this pattern. Cp. also “The Pass of Kirkstone” Wordsworth 2.354-356.47.

<sup>10</sup> The question to what extent the word *yon* is here poetic or dialectal is difficult to judge without a detailed study of Wordsworth's language; the first is certainly more probable than the second. Austin has nothing about this.

reader cannot stop because he is not there. (Graves 75) Is the speaker addressing himself? Or does the address alternate between the reader and the poet himself? This is what Geoffrey Hartman assumes: he takes the first imperative to be addressed to the reader, the second “is certainly said also by the poet to himself” (Hartman 7). But can it be addressed to both at the same time? There seems to be considerable confusion about the interpretation of the address, and readers are required to consider the possible intentions of the author. Interestingly, neither Graves nor Hartman discuss as a serious possibility what grammar would suggest—the address of a partner present in the scene.

In the end the addressee is most likely the poet himself, who, in Wordsworthian fashion, is trying to recreate a moment of intense experience — thus forcing the reader to identify with the poet.<sup>11</sup>

As I have indicated, the material presented, though in many ways representative, is very sketchy. Three conclusions may still be drawn.<sup>12</sup> First, there is no evidence that the deictic force of *yon* would have disappeared, making the word a mere marker of poetic diction. In all the examples discussed, it appears in conjunction with other deictics whose force cannot be questioned; the uncommon use in a Milton sonnet remains exceptional.

Secondly, the evidence of deixis suggests that texts of the seventeenth century demand a kind of reading different from texts of the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the early texts the situation created in the poem and the one involving the reader and the poem are clearly kept apart. Later the dividing line between the two becomes blurred, drawing the readers into the poem's internal situation and forcing them to project themselves into the mind of the speaker. Increasingly, they have to ask themselves why these words have been used rather than others.<sup>13</sup> This process may be described as one of interiorization, as a movement from a poetics of dialogue to one of empathy. At an early moment we can observe the

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<sup>11</sup> This has also been seen as a kind of dialectic—on premises quite different from mine in Hartman 16.

<sup>12</sup> In doing so, I am also taking into account findings based on passages not discussed here.

<sup>13</sup> This is in accordance with generic changes that may be observed in the same period, for example the disappearance of the verse-letter as a major poetic form.

emergence of what T. S. Eliot calls *poetry of the first voice* (Eiot 89–102)

Finally, as far as literary pragmatics is concerned, a note of caution is in place. As the Wordsworth example shows, the evidence of poetic texts, which has been studied here, cannot be sufficient for determining how a text should be used; otherwise, the text itself would actually contain its context — the very opposite of a pragmatic view of literature. The evidence of the text has to be complemented by evidence from outside it, from reports and critical accounts of how people read and how authors wanted their texts to be used—material that is often readily available but has not yet been collected systematically.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For a good account of Keats and reading, see Goellnicht. He uses Tompkins as a model.

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