7. Sound and Silence: Historical Perspectives

In the introduction I put forward the claim that different ways of experiencing poetic texts are historically determined, and should therefore be studied as part of literary history (p. 16). The illustrations used in the previous four chapters, even though historical considerations were deliberately neglected there, may have suggested a progression - from song to silence, from pacing to study. I shall now try to substantiate the historical claim made at the beginning of the study, and to make explicit the temporal order the examples seem to suggest. What we badly need is a comprehensive history of how poetry has been experienced through the ages**,** and how this has affected poets - what we might call a social history of poetry. Some important work has been done in this field, especially in dealing with the transition from oral to literate culture. But as soon as we move into the literate sphere, as soon as we come to deal with printed poetry, historical studies become scarce.

The task of writing such a social history of poetry would be massive and complex. It is difficult to make adequate general statements even about the poetry of a particular epoch. There are, for example, differences among the genres in use; older forms of experience survive alongside experiments anticipating later periods. Aural poetry to be performed on specific occasions, for example, has occurred in all periods - we may think of the effusions of the Poets Laureate - but it is only central to literary tradition in times when literary life is restricted to a relatively tight social group, like the court.

This study cannot offer a comprehensive social history of poetry. All it can do is to make patent the usefulness of the project, and to offer a modest contribution towards it, by

showing how textual evidence may help in writing it, and how a few poems would be treated in it.

In dealing with the historical aspects of the evidence for aural and visual poetry, I shall first return to some of the distinctions made earlier concerning spelling, punctuation, and typography, and show that they have a historical dimension. Then I shall turn from historicity to history. I shall concentrate on the lyric, and sketch the development of the relationship between poet and recipient, as it is reflected in the text. This section will serve as an introduction to three chapters on single authors and their works.

The relationship between sound and spelling in English, which I earlier discussed from the point of view of the experience it suggests, is also a phenomenon of linguistic history. Generally speaking, spelling represents the words as they were pronounced about the year 1500; later changes in the spoken language are rarely reflected in spelling.

We may wonder why spelling has so persistently withstood the changes in speech, the source from which it was originally derived. The answer is that the written language has developed a tradition of its own, independent of speech, which has become so strong that it has sometimes overwhelmed that of speech and produced the phenomenon of spelling pronunciation.

A major aspect of the tradition of spelling was the movement towards standardization, a process that, by and large, was completed only in the eighteenth century, after the publication of Samuel Johnson's dictionary in 1754. The standardization did not always aim at simplifying the relationship between spelling and speech; it often followed other principles. Etymological spellings, which link the word to an original form, according to the essentialist view of meaning, became standard: *victuals,* derived from Middle English *vittels,* was associated with Late

Latin *victualia;* and *debt,* derived from Middle English *det, dette* was connected with Latin *debitum.*

Often differences in spelling seem to have been introduced to remove possible ambiguities, notably those created by language changes such as the Great Vowel Shift: *hole* (Old English *hol)* and *whole* (Old English *hāl).* Words of the same etymology, but different meaning in modern English, were distinguished in spelling, like *metal* and *mettle,* or *flower* and *flour.* The influence of meaning on spelling was so strong that even words of different origin, but of meanings thought to be related, were linked in spelling, e. g., *light* (an Anglo-Saxon word) and *delight* (derived from Middle English *deliten,* a Romance loanword), *reign* and *sovereign* (from Old French *sovrain).* The modal verbs *should, would* (from Old English *sceolde, wolde)* and *could* (from Old English *cuðe)* were similarly reduced to orthographic uniformity.

The fact that sequences of visual signs came to be directly linked with meanings - a phenomenon I discussed earlier when dealing with visual morphemes (p. 27) - indicates that spelling increasingly served visual reading.

It is no surprise, therefore, that attempts to reform spelling, in order to bring it closer to the sounds of speech, have usually failed. The only one to be moderately effective, the reform of Noah Webster in the United States, succeeded, we do well to remember, not because it did away with some cumbersome archaisms, but for nationalist reasons. Spellings like *color* for British *colour* could serve as visual morphemes indicating Americanness.

These general observations about spelling only provide a context for looking at poetic texts since such texts offer more resistance than others to visual reading. Sound-effects like alliteration and rhyme may remind even

the silent reader that it is not enough to link sequences of letters with meanings. It is not surprising, therefore, that the norms of spelling were challenged in poetry almost as soon as they had been established. Archaic spelling was used in Bishop Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), and by Chatterton in the 1770's. Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" stands in this tradition in its earliest form (see above, p. 31). Spellings that placed the description of sound above the compliance with norms were employed in dialect poems, like those of Burns. In general, however, standardization took over even verse.

The general development from aural to visual experience can also be observed in punctuation. Mindele Treip, in one of the few historical studies of punctuation, claims that there was a movement away from rhythmical-oratorical punctuation to grammatical-logical usage between about 1580 and 1680. The theoretical discussion about which system should be preferred continued throughout the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. It was only in the decade of the 1840's that the grammatical-logical theory finally triumphed. For a long time the two systems were used side by side. In the late eighteenth century, for example, James Burgh, in *The Art Speaking,* defines the comma, semicolon, colon, and period as pauses of different length, but adds:

> In some cases there is *no stop* to be made at a comma, as they are often put merely to render the *sense clear;* as those, which, by learned editors of books, are put before every *relative.*

This reminds us that we must be careful with generalizations. Again, as with spelling, many poets seem to have resisted the notion of visual reading implied by grammatical-logical punctuation. The style of punctuation used by Milton in *Paradise Lost,* for example, is remarkable, according to Mindele Treip,

in being a far-reaching though by no means isolated exception to the increasing trend of the mid-seventeenth century toward greater correctness in writing. The style of punctuation in *Paradise Lost* is in the tradition of the livelier and more dramatic, the more rhythmical and flexible, altogether more poetical punctuation of the Elizabethans.**

Once we have become aware that spelling and punctuation have changed through history, and, especially, that both tell us something about how a text should be experienced, we will feel the need to pay more attention to them than we usually do. We will further deplore the fact that "modernized" texts are so common in the study of literature. They may make reading easier, because they comply with our habits; but modernization translates a text, with all the losses that translation may entail.

The evidence of typography supplements that of spelling and punctuation in a striking way. However, typography does not tell us so much about the change from aural to visual experience, because from the start it was associated with visual reading. In many cases typography is little more than an attempt to arrange lines of a given length in an attractive manner on the page. But, as we have seen earlier (pp. 31-37), typography may also be used in a way that is not simply a consequence of the poetic form, but contributes to the total effect of the poem, by commenting on, contrasting with, or contradicting the aural structure. The most interesting pheno-menon is perhaps the shaped poem, like Herbert's "Easter-wings" (see above, p. 32). It plays a significant role in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and again in the early twentieth century; it rarely occurs in the period between. This is no coincidence.

Communicating on visual and aural levels simultaneously, and even playing off the two against each other, presupposes an awareness of tension between them. This is something we share with the Elizabethans. As Marshall McLuhan has observed:

> We are today as far into the electric age as the Elizabethans had advanced into the typographical and mechanical age. And we are experiencing the same confusions which they had felt when living simultaneously in two contrasted forms of society and experience.

And, indeed, both the Elizabethan age and ours have been characterized by the introduction, on a large scale, of new media, print then and electronic media today.

This suggests that the time between the Elizabethan age and ours may be considered a relatively solid entity, despite blurred edges at the beginning and the end - the age of print, of typography. J. W. Johnson's excellent entry on "lyric" in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, for example, traces the history of the genre from ancient Greece to the Renaissance in the terms of the media involved. In the Renaissance,

> poets began suiting their work to a visual rather than an auditory medium ... The lyric poem, nominally successor to a well-established poetic method, inherited and employed specific themes, meters, attitudes, images, and myths; but in adapting itself to a new means of presentation, the lyric found itself bereft of the very element which had been the foundation of its lyricism - music.

At this point the historical account ceases. It is implicitly suggested that the lyric poetry since 1600 should all be designated "modern" and be regarded as uniform in medium.

We can, however, extend the historical account beyond the initial impact of printing

and be more precise about the role of the aural element in the development of lyrical poetry, by studying the relationship between audience and poet implied in the text. In doing this, we will make use of the diagrams introduced in chapter 2. In particular we will refer to distinctions between three different situations - the audience's situation (situation a), the poet's situation (b), and the internal situation (c) (See above, p. 22).

In lyrical poetry the poet's situation and the internal situation tend to be closely related - the poet may be the speaker in the internal situation. As we shall see there is a historical correlation between the uniqueness of the situation and the individuality of the speaker. We shall also see, perhaps more surprisingly, that there is a correlation between the individuality of speaker and situation and the kind of experience the text calls for.

The internal situation is created with the help of deictic elements that point beyond the text. They indicate that the words are part of a speech-situation. These deictic elements may include forms of address *(dear, love, listen* etc.), pronouns and adverbs expressing pragmatic and space-relations, like *I, we, this, here,* or *you, he, that, there,* and - particularly popular in poetry - *yon,* and *yonder.* Time-relations may be expressed by adverbs like *now, then,* and by verb-forms, like the present tense progressive form.

The emergence of lyrics with detailed internal situations centered on the poet-speaker takes place around the middle of the eighteenth century. In the Romantic period the use of these elements reflects a momentous change in the function of the text in poetry (see below, pp. 59-61). Before examining this emergence, however, I should like to cast two brief glances backwards to oral and courtly poetry.

In oral poetry the singer does not appear as an individual in his poem. As Walter Ong has put it, in an oral performance

> everyone is saying everything to everybody through the mouth of the poet or other narrative performer.

The situations of the audience and the poet (a and b) are thus almost identical. They share knowledge of the story, and are familiar with the rules that have to be applied in performing it. The poet reports events as having happened in the past. References to the singer's situation concern the event of the performance: we find invocations, calls for attention, appeals to the feeling of fellowship in the group, etc.

In courtly lyrics there is a speaker whose mood is at the centre of the text. The speaker is not an oral aggregate or a Pre-Romantic individual; rather he is typical. As Graham Hough has observed: "The lyric poet traditionally claims one of a few recognized roles: the lover, the courtier, the patriot, the sage, or the religious contemplative";* and one should add that the situations, the moments in which the speaker appears, are also typical. The lover, for example, may be rejected or forsaken, or far from his beloved. This reliance on types is related in part to the impersonal characteristics of song (see p. 40), but also to the fact that the text must conform with conventions accepted by the audience in order to be appreciated in performance.

The emergence of poetic texts that declare themselves to be part of unique speech-situations - defined in time and space - can be best observed in the transition from Augustan descriptive poetry to the Romantic poetry of experience. This transition is characterized by a growing sense of perspective, i. e. by a more and more precise placing of the speaker in the internal situation of the poem.

The gradual fusion of description and subjective experience - of the internal situation and that of the poet - can first be observed in lyrical forms like the elegy.* Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (completed in 1750) is an early and incomplete example of the fusion. The scene, whose pastoral elements are still typical rather than unique, is presented from the point of view of the speaker in it. The time of the experience, evening, is indicated, though, again, it is a typical moment rather than an event in the life of the speaker. Thus the speaker does not yet show traits of an individual either. In the following quotation - the first four stanzas of the ode - I have emphasized the words whose deictic force establishes the perspective of the scene.

> 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.*

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,
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.

Beneath *those* rugged elms, *that* yew-tree's shade,
    Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
    The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

As the poem proceeds, the scene becomes vaguer; the meditation on the villagers' lot

becomes the centre of interest. In lines 93/94 the speaker addresses himself as

> thee who, mindful of the unhonoured dead,
> Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;

He thus indicates his distance from the situation he is experiencing. This distance is increased further when the speaker imagines a scene in which a villager remembers him after his death. In "The Epitaph," the section that closes the poem (lines 117-128), the speaker is finally no longer present in person. The poet's and the internal situation are no longer fused, for reasons that I shall discuss below (p. 61).

In the late eighteenth century it became fashionable to link poems to particular occasions in the life of the poet, and to pretend that the texts were actually composed on the spot. Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784) and William Lisle Bowles' popular *Sonnets, Written Chiefly on Picturesque Spots During a Tour* (1789) are examples of this; the most famous poem of the kind is certainly Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey." Even though the poet only finished the poem four or five days after his experience, its full title is "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798." The text is tied to a moment of repose on a specific day's journeying, and it revives the previous visit, also specified.

The description of a typical landscape in Augustan poetry has been altered to the suggestion of a particular scene experienced by the poet at a particular moment of his life. In the terms of the diagram introduced earlier in this study, this means that the poet's situation merges with the internal one, that situations b and c become one.

This is of some consequence for the recipient. He may feel considerable pressure to take on the role of the implied addressee, especially if the addressee is not identified

in the text. His own situation as a reader or listener (situation a) then necessarily conflicts with that of the addressee in the text (in which situations b and c have already merged). Given that the role of the addressee in the text is often problematic - the poet may, for example, be addressing himself - the recipient may find himself confronted with the question whether he should identify with the poet or consider himself addressed by him.

Wordsworth's poem "The Solitary Reaper" (1805) illustrates this problem.

> Behold her, single in the field,
> Yon solitary Highland Lass!
> Reaping and singing by herself;
> Stop here, or gently pass!
> Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
> And sings a melancholy strain;
> O listen! for the Vale profound
> Is overflowing with the sound.

This first of the four stanzas creates a situation. The singing girl is standing in the field, the speaker at some distance from her, indicated by *yon* and *here.* The most striking feature of this stanza, however, is the frequency of direct address *(Behold, Stop, pass, O listen).* The speaker tries to share his experience with someone who may not otherwise notice the extraordinary beauty of the scene. It is improbable, therefore, that he is addressing himself; the detachment implied by the imperatives would stand in contrast to the excitement produced by the scene. But it is difficult to say who else might be addressed. Robert Graves, in his acid commentary on the poem, doubts that Wordsworth is addressing his readers and asks: "How can readers stop, pass, or listen if they aren't there?"

The problem of the addressee persists, as the third stanza shows:

> Will no one tell me what she sings? –
> Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow

> For old, unhappy, far-off things,
> And battles long ago:
> Or is it some more humble lay,
> Familiar matter of to-day?
> Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
> That has been, and may be again?

The address in the first line is not only vaguer than the forms used in the first stanza; it is also marked as being directed to an undifferentiated body of people. The stanza contains a note of disappointment at receiving no answer, and is followed by a number of guesses that are no longer addressed to anybody.

In the fourth and last stanza the tense suddenly changes to the preterit:

> Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang
> As if her song could have no ending;
> I saw her singing at her work,
> And o'er the sickle bending: -
> I listened, motionless and still;
> And, as I mounted up the hill,
> The music in my heart I bore,
> Long after it was heard no more.

The change of tense destroys the immediacy of the situation. The event presented in the first three stanzas is now reported as a thing of the past, a change similar to the one observed in Gray's "Elegy." The poet's situation and the internal one no longer coincide, and the problem of the recipient - In what role is he being addressed? - ceases to exist. The recipient becomes a simple listener. The initial speech-situation is not maintained because of the contradiction between the attempt to present the immediacy of an experience and the fact that it is simultaneously spoken about - a problem to which I shall return later in the chapter.

The problem from which the last stanza offers an escape remains: Who is the addressee in the first stanzas? Given that he cannot really be the speaker himself (see above, p. 60), there are only two other answers. In spite of Graves' doubts it may be

the recipient who is addressed and expected to imagine himself into the situation, and to share thus the feelings of the speaker; or the poet himself may be the addressee, the poet who is playing the role of the speaker, in order to create, or re-create an experience for another form of himself.

In both cases, the recipient cannot just 'listen' to the speaker, as he can in the last stanza of the poem. He has to identify with him, to re-create the mood that produced the words of the poem. This means that the recipient has to exert himself, to be active in creating the experience. He cannot let himself be carried along, despite the simplicity of Wordsworth's style.

It is this kind of poetry to which John Stuart Mill's dictum applies:

> Eloquence is *heard,* poetry is *overheard.* Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude.

The recipient has to work his way into what he has overheard, to determine the mood from which the words may have originated. The text takes on the traits of a riddle (see above, p. 49) that has to be solved with all the intellectual and intuitive power at the recipient's disposal. In contrast to what Mill calls *eloquence,* we can call this function of the text *evidence.* The presence of a speaker in the text, however, makes it difficult to take the text as evidence. On the one hand, the speaker is clearly presented as addressing somebody - that is, his words have the function of eloquence. On the other hand, the reader is expected to work his way into the experience of the speaker - that is, to consider the words as evidence.

There are basically two ways out of this problem. Either the speaker must disappear from the text altogether or the speaker in the

internal situation and in the poet's situation must be clearly separated, as in the last stanza of "The Solitary Reaper." If the speaker remains in the internal situation, he will be seen as somebody different from the poet himself - as his persona or as a dramatic figure. The reader will then be interested in the speaker not because he is addressing the reader, but because he is part of the subject of the text. In this kind of poetry, the conflict between the need to identify with the speaker and the need to be addressed by him is not only the major problem of poetic strategy, it becomes the major problematic of the poem.

The best example of this problem-become-problematic is offered by the Dramatic Monologue, where the tension between sympathy and moral judgement reflects the mixed demands made on the reader by the text. This is a problem I shall deal with in the next chapter.

There are other approaches to the problem of identification and address. If the speaker does not appear in the text, it may serve to evoke experiences without the interference of address. The success of this procedure depends on how consistently the text avoids anything that suggests a speaking voice. It may, therefore, have far-reaching consequences. Not only will the internal situation and the poet's situation lose their definition, but also all trace of rhetoric will be rejected and the redundancy of speech will be given up for condensation. If taken to its radical conclusion, logical connectives will be erased (see p. 47), syntax will be abolished; traditional verse-forms, which offer a pattern of expectation, will be broken up; and even the sounds of speech may come to be regarded as intrusive. At the same time, the reader's contribution becomes an increasingly important part of the poem, and eventually the internal situation and that of the reader will no longer be distinct from

each other (i. e. situations a, b, and c in the diagram on p. 22 coincide).

In the absence of address the problem of presentation as against reporting can be solved. The page and the typography of the text may become an integral part of the experience. The disappearance of the speaker also results in a different function of sound in poetry. As poetry becomes increasingly notional - the extreme would follow from Hulme's theories (see p. 90) and Pound's experiments with the ideogram (pp. 95-96) - sound itself becomes notional. Sounds take on meanings that exist independently of the meanings of the words in which they occur and produce a kind of semantic music (see below, p. 87).

The generation of English and American poets after the High Romantics did not test the implications of such relation-ships between poet, text and reader with the same radicalism as the French symbolists. It was only the generations of Yeats and Eliot who felt the full force of their views.

T. S. Eliot's "poetry of the first voice" is a case in point. In his scheme of the three voices of poetry, such poetry does not address an audience. The poet is "oppressed by a burden which he must bring to birth in order to obtain relief." He has

> something germinating in him for which he must find words; but he cannot know what words he wants until he has found the words; he cannot identify this embryo until it has been transformed into an arrangement of the right words in the right order.

When the poem is finished he has gone through a kind of exorcism; "he may experience a moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution," and he loses his interest in the poem. He is able to say to it:

> Go away! Find a place for yourself in a book - and don't expect *me* to take any further interest in you.

For the poet the interest of the poem is in the process of its emergence rather than in the finished text. For the recipient, who has only the completed text, the experience is entirely different from that of the poet. For him it consists in the patient restoration, with the help of all his intuitive and intellectual powers, of the state of mind that may have produced the words.

In order to cope with the kind of high modernist poetry Eliot describes here, new ways of reading also had to be developed - in the same manner as the "explication de texte" in France established itself after the rise of Symbolist poetry. This was done in the 1920's, in such important books as I. A. Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and Laura Riding's and Robert Graves' *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927).

The book by Riding and Graves offers an opportunity not only to deal with modernist reading, the point from which this study started, but also to summarize the developments that led up to it. As a conclusion to my discussion of the historical aspects of reading I shall therefore analyze their views. Their definition of a poem is very similar to that of Wellek and Warren quoted earlier (p. 17). It shows further dependence on the notion of the reader's experience in Romantic and post-Romantic lyrical poetry:

The poem is not the paper, not the type, not the spoken syllables. It is as invisible and as inaudible as thought; and the only method that the real poet is interested in using is one that will present the poem without making it either visible or audible,

without turning it into a substitute for a picture or for music.

This kind of poetry "wishes the reader to have the same frame of mind as the poet had when he wrote, to help the reader to rewrite the poem for himself with the poet's mind."

They discuss approvingly the example of Cummings' "Sunset":

> stinging
> gold swarms
> upon the spires
> silver
>
>   chants the litanies the
> great bells are ringing with rose
> the lewd fat bells
>
>   and a tall
>
> wind
> is dragging
> the sea
> with dream
> -S

Here, the reader finds "a complicated recipe for a sunset experience, as if l'or a pudding, not merely a description of what the pudding looked like or how it tasted." The modernist poem is, therefore, not strictly the author's poem, "but the poem of anybody who will be at pains to write it."

Riding and Graves review most of the characteristics of modernist poetry, the indefiniteness of its grammar, its ambiguity, its use of the visual means of typography, its allusiveness, and its rejection of traditional verse-form, characteristics which all demand that the poem should be studied. I shall review their opinions on only the two characteristics to be taken up in the chapters on Hopkins and Pound, brevity and the relationship between sound and meaning.

The authors stress that in a modernist poem form and subject-matter should be

structurally identical. They reject the long poems of former periods as loose in structure, and held together mainly by the unchanging metre. As the structure of a long poem will of necessity be weaker than that of a short one, the long poem has to conform to even stricter rules:

> A long poem must give good reasons for its length, it must account strictly for every line. Often the greater part of a long poem would be more properly put in a prose footnote. The apology of a long poem should be: "I am really a long *short* poem."

Eliot's *The Waste Land* accomplishes this task: It "has to be read as a short poem: that is, as a unified whole. The reader can no more skip a passage in it than a line in a short poem and expect to understand the poem." Even though it is one of the longest modernist poems, it has only 433 lines. Riding and Graves explain this brevity by the necessity that subject-matter and form should be structurally identical. They quote Poe's essay "The Poetic Principle" on the reader's limited span of attention (see above, p. 25), though they apply this element of duration only to the traditional long poem, not to the modernist one. The various processes of experiencing - listening, reading or studying - are neglected.

The problem of sound in poetry is raised by Riding's and Graves' definition of the poem's mode of existence. Sound can only have some kind of notional existence, parallel to that of the notions presented by the words. In their discussion of Cummings' "Sunset," for example, the authors take many words beginning with *s-* to evoke other such words, suppressed, like *sun* and *sea; bees* and *spires* evoke suppressed rhymes like *seas* and *fires.* Musicalness in modernist verse means "the treating of word-sounds as musical notes in which the meaning itself is to be found." Although they express reservations about the

view that particular meanings may be ascribed to sounds, as, for example, in Rimbaud's "Voyelles," they see it at work not only in French Symbolist poetry, but also in Cummings.

One could not wish for a more concise account of the experience demanded by modernist poetry than the one offered by Riding and Graves. Unfortunately, they suggest reading Shakespeare's sonnets along similar lines and thus generalize one way of reading beyond the poetry to which it is suited. They take Shakespeare's poems to be as carefully designed in the use of punctuation, for example, as those of Cummings. In their discussion of Sonnet 129 they find that

> Shakespeare's punctuation allows the variety of meanings he actually intends; if we must choose any one meaning, then we owe it to Shakespeare to choose at least one he intended and one embracing as many meanings as possible, that is, the most difficult meaning.

Shakespeare's intentions are taken to be the same as those of a modernist poet. The authors do not reckon with the possibility that his sonnets may have been meant to be listened to, nor, for that matter, with the fact that punctuation has changed its function in the course of history.

This lack of a historical consciousness was of grave consequence. William Empson's approach to poetry owes much to that of Riding and Graves (see also below, pp. 85-87); and the principles underlying his way of reading have long represented an orthodoxy in literary studies. They are helpful in dealing with modernist poetry, but because they do not take into account the fact that reading, too, has a history, they cannot help but distort our experience of poetry from earlier epochs.

This chapter can only do little to set right this ahistorical approach to reading, and I should like to conclude on the cautionary note with which I began. In sketching the relation between recipient and poet, as it is reflected in the text, I have deliberately omitted discussion of the problems of poetic tradition and theory, of social history, and of other forces contributing to change in poetry and the experience of it. What I have offered cannot, therefore, be more than a small contribution to the history of how poetry has been experienced; I hope, it is suggestive enough to serve as a starting-point. The following chapters will indicate some of the possibilities the approach offers.