

The Poem and Occasion¹

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The following essay deals with a single text. As an experienced reader you will probably want to read this text first, to judge critically the argument that follows. In proceeding like this you would be following established practice, summarized in the advice offered in one of the most influential teaching anthologies, Brooks's and Warren's *Understanding Poetry*. There we are told to “begin with as full and innocent an immersion in the poem as possible” (Brooks and Warren ix), and, even when we have consulted critical material, to keep in mind that criticism and analysis. [...] is ultimately of value *only insofar as it can return readers to the poem itself* - return them, that is, better prepared to experience it more immediately, fully, and shall we say, innocently. (Brooks and Warren 16 emphasis in original)

In literary stylistics we find a similar commitment to the text as something that can be singled out as the object of study. With the help of linguistic insights “language effects” are analysed to offer a basis for “a fuller understanding, appreciation and interpretation” of literary texts (Carter and Simpson 7; Short 1082–1083).

In privileging the text in the manner indicated, certain other linguistic insights are neglected, in particular those of pragmatics, i.e., those concerning language use. Either the pragmatic dimension is suppressed, as in Brooks and Warren, where we find the notion of *the poem itself*, clearly marked off, isolated, autonomous. Or pragmatics is reduced to something secondary, as in Carter and Simpson, where its task is “to account for those aspects of meaning which cannot be recovered by straightforward references to the semantic properties of the sentences uttered” (Carter and Simpson 289).

But there is no innocence of the kind postulated by Brooks and Warren; instead of positing it as an ideal to be striven for (can we strive for innocence?), we should consider the

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implications of its absence. And there are no “straightforward references to the semantic properties,” as posited by Carter and Simpson. What is straightforward, and what is not, is itself determined by language use, i.e., by what is considered secondary in their definition. Such attitudes are reflected in the terms that are employed in discussion; the word *context* presupposes the primacy of *text*. Here, however, I shall argue for the primacy of *context*.

EXPERIMENT 1

Think of poems and songs that you are fond of. What do you associate them with? Certain other texts? Certain moments in your life? Try to remember when, under what circumstances, you got to know them. Does this affect what they mean to you (in both meanings of the word)?

Certain important moments and situations play a role in determining what texts mean to us—texts always convey some meaning to somebody. This suggests that it may be useful to introduce the term *occasion* for these, in the sense of a “(particular time marked by) special occurrence” (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*), the specialness of the occurrence consisting partly in the role of the *text* in it. At least three other factors contribute to such an occasion. It presupposes certain forms of preparation; it takes place under certain conditions; and it follows certain patterns.

Even before we start reading a literary text what it will mean has been fixed to a considerable extent, no matter whether we are aware of this or not. We have learnt certain rules according to which we deal with various types of texts, rules which are usually passed on in the family (where children, for example, learn from their parents to consider literature something worthwhile) and, to a more limited extent, at school and university.² According to these rules, much will depend on where or from whom we get the text, from an airport bookstall, a university bookshop, or as a gift from a friend, etc. (cf. Pratt 116–25). And much will depend on what we got it for; we may be curious, seeking comfort, looking for a thrill, or preparing a course, etc.

² These conventions, which authors and readers share (or rather assume that they do), may in some cases leave marks in the texts—marks like deictic words, the ones that have often been studied by discourse analysts. But these marks are themselves impossible to interpret without reference to an occasion posited by the reader.

We also read texts in specific situations, which not only sharpen or blunt our perceptions, but also shape them, and thus contribute to what we make of them. We may be sitting in an evening class in November or resting under a blossoming apple-tree; we may just have fallen in love, or we may have lost a good friend. We may see the texts in the light of specific other texts, for example, those in the same collection or anthology.

Finally, and most importantly, we follow certain patterns in reading. Beginning to read, we leave our everyday activities behind; in Yeats's memorable phrase, the reader "lays away his own handiwork and turns from his friend" (Yeats 207). And afterwards we return to them seeing the world, however slightly, in a different light; and, to the extent that we define ourselves in relation to the world, we also emerge as, however slightly, different people. As such, this process shows striking parallels to an initiation ritual (Engler, *Poetry and Community* 72–79).

There is one further critical point. As we always encounter texts as part of a particular occasion, never in isolation, there is no way of distinguishing between what has been contributed to the result ("the work of literature") by the as yet uninterpreted black marks on the page ("the text"), and what by the other factors of the occasion. A stylistic analysis of the type described above does not, therefore, give us a *fuller*, but a specific type of understanding, which may be new, more sophisticated, and more satisfying to us, but which cannot claim to be *closer* to the text and therefore of intrinsically higher value than other readings.

I should like to illustrate the primacy of occasion with a series of imagined examples. The occasions sketched can, of course, only represent a selection from all those possible.³ Having established the primacy of occasion and the way it brings a work of literature into being, I shall then continue by moving in the opposite direction, as it were, from the text to the "fringe of the printed text which in reality, controls the whole reading" (Lejeune in Genette, "Introduction to the Paratext" 261) from the text to what Genette, who still accepts the primacy of the text, has called the *paratext* (Genette, *Seuils*).

Let us assume then that, at a family gathering on the Sunday before you begin your first job, your father gives you a text, which he has typed out for you (without indication of its

³ The differences between reading and listening, for example, cannot be discussed here. Material on this can be found in Engler (*Reading and listening*).

author or its title), and he comments: “This tells you how things were during the Depression in the 1930s. Remember this, when you are fed up with your job, or when you lose it.” The text will then be important to you because it embodies *a general truth* validated by somebody whom you trust in this matter, and who, by being related to you, also gives you yourself a place in history.

Now let us assume that you are reading the text in a book, which you bought after an author’s reading, because you liked what you had heard; you may even have asked the author to sign your copy. The same text is now associated with a voice; it has itself a personal signature, as it were. In reading it you are reminded of another occasion. The poem you are reading is important to you because it says something about *the work of the author*, his or her “making,” the relationship between the privacy of writing and the writer's public role.

Finally, let us assume that you are reading the text from a teaching anthology, in the meeting of a course on twentieth-century literature.⁴ You will most probably study it as an artefact, one validated by the authority of literary criticism. It is important to you as *representative of a certain period*, its style, and its preoccupation with certain themes. You are interested to a considerable extent in its place in literary tradition and the skilful use it makes of poetic devices. Your teacher may also want to introduce you to specific ways of reading, if a formalist by emphasizing the role of imagery, if an adherent to a certain type of stylistics to the problem of textual coherence.

In all three examples it is the authority of the occasion rather than that of the text which has formed the basis of the result (“the work of literature”); in all three cases, by the way, this authority is also closely associated with that of a personality dominating it.

But we may still have a nagging doubt. What if three people who, having read the same text as part of the occasions sketched, meet and discuss «the text»? Does not their agreement on what they are discussing confirm the authority of the text that has remained unchanged throughout the three occasions? The poems resulting from the three occasions will largely complement each other, but not simply because the three have read the same text. For one thing, they have a shared social and cultural

⁴ The third example of an occasion is deliberately introduced last here, even though or just because, unfortunately, it has for many become representative of the experience of literary texts in general.

background, otherwise they would not have met, and would not have read the same text. They share interests, otherwise they would not be discussing poetry. In discussion they will all give up part of what they have associated with their readings in some cases and try to insist on their views in others. Together, they create a poem that is acceptable to all. As such, it has the authority of this new occasion, the kind of authority we traditionally ascribe to the text.

None of the occasions sketched (and, as has been indicated, there are many more) deserves to be privileged over others. None of them is intrinsically *better* than the others, even though some of them may be valued more highly than others by those who study and teach literature. Rather, the occasions are all representative of certain uses of literature. It is important that we are aware of the differences between them, precisely because the poem that comes into being on each occasion is different.

But let us turn things around, and, instead of beginning with the occasion, in which texts are embedded, start with the text, the black shapes on the page, and move, in more traditional fashion, from there towards the “paratexts” that contribute to the occasion.

EXPERIMENT 2

Read the following text and try to “make something of it.” What kind of text is it? Take down your observations and try to group them. What criteria have you been using in grouping them?

Here is the text, in what Genette would call its “naked state” (Genette, “Introduction to the Paratext” 261).

On sticky summer Sunday afternoons there would be lots of people standing around in the yard, mostly relatives and neighbours in cotton dresses and white shirts. They would come and go until dusk, talking, talking, talking about jobs, bread lines, foreclosures, about Hoover and Roosevelt, about the latest layoff or suicide. Someone, usually my father or one of my unemployed uncles, would be scratching in the dirt with half a hoe or ragged rake, not to plant, not to cultivate, but to do something, to be busy, as if idleness was some kind of dark shame or red pimple of embarrassment. I was there, too, a silent child with my blue wagon and blue spade, making little mountains of dirt and patting them down with my fist. When the lemonade ran out, my mother or a maiden aunt would

bring out a pitcher of water and someone would always say, “You can't beat good old water when you have a terrible thirst.” The Ford in the driveway was ours. It was leaking oil, drop by drop, and the battery was dead. We were obviously going nowhere.

Trying to make something of a text we immediately attempt to place it according to as many criteria as possible, for example, author, addressee, genre, period, tone, style, etc., all the criteria we have learnt to apply. This text looks like a section from an autobiography, which describes with how much patience and dignity unemployed people spent their days in the Depression of the 1930s. English readers will find certain Americanisms fitting, like *yard*, *layoff*, *wagon*, *driveway*, etc. People well-versed in literature may be reminded of James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), a documentary account of the life of southern sharecroppers. The text does not look like oral history, mainly because there is something literary about it, like the alliterations in “sticky summer Sunday afternoons” or in “half a *hoe* or ragged *rake*”, the repetition of *talking*, and the *would*-forms, or the metaphor of the “red pimple of embarrassment”.

The text is actually a poem. This is how it is visually presented in the source from which it has been taken:

On sticky summer Sunday afternoons
there would be lots of people
standing around in the yard,
mostly relatives and neighbors
in cotton dresses and white shirts.
They would come and go until dusk,
talking, talking, talking, talking
about jobs, bread lines, foreclosures,
about Hoover and Roosevelt,
about the latest layoff or suicide.
Someone, usually my father
or one of my unemployed uncles,
would be scratching in the dirt
with half a hoe or ragged rake,
not to plant, not to cultivate,
but to do something, to be busy,
as if idleness was some kind of dark shame
or red pimple of embarrassment.
I was there, too, a silent child
with my blue wagon and blue spade,
making little mountains of dirt
patting them down with my fist.
When the lemonade ran out,

my mother or a maiden aunt
would bring out a pitcher of water
and someone would always say,
“You can’t beat good old water
when you have a terrible thirst.”
The Ford in the driveway was ours.
It was leaking oil, drop by drop,
and the battery was dead.
We were obviously going nowhere.

Our reading is affected by the presentation. It will be slower, more deliberate, slightly drawn out at the end of the lines.⁵ The use of pure colours, in *white shirt*, *blue wagon*, *blue spade*, *red pimple*, will acquire a stronger symbolical dimension. What is slightly unusual, “literary,” when the text is read as autobiography will now have its place. Obviously, it is the visual arrangement of the text that indicates to us what kind of reading we should be practising, and it is this practice that produces the effects (cf. on this Fish). The visual presentation may therefore be considered the first type of paratext.

The poem was first published in the *Ohio Review*, the literary magazine published at Ohio University (Etter, “Summer of 1932”). It appears in an anthology of twenty, usually single new poems by contemporary American authors, presented without any commentary. Only the names of the authors and the titles are indicated.

EXPERIMENT 3

(a) Think of different titles for this poem, for example: “Dead End,” “Sunday Afternoons,” “Scratchings,” “A Silent Child,” “Talking.” How do they affect the poem? (b) What difference does it make that the author's name is indicated? How important is it to know who he is?

Titles are *about* the text and as such have a status different from what is usually called “the body of the text.” They create expectations and make us read the text in a certain manner. As such they are a particularly powerful

⁵ The form of the poem, which favours a conversational tone in delivery, is unusual; the author writes: “I count syllables when I write poems and they almost always make some kind of pattern, as well as enhance the rhythms in the poem. . . . I have 32 lines. Half of those lines contain eight syllables; then eight lines have seven syllables; four have nine; two have ten; and two lines have eleven syllables” (private communication).

thematization device (Brown and Yule 139–40);⁶ as Genette points out, “How would we read Joyce’s *Ulysses* if it were not called *Ulysses*?” (Genette, “Introduction to the Paratext” 262).

The title of the poem quoted is “Summer of 1932”. It indicates a precise moment in the past, and by doing so suggests a relationship with the present, between the silent child introduced in the second half and the present of the person speaking. As there is no specific indication that the speaker is not the author, we tend to read the text as a personal statement of the author, as autobiographical.⁷

The author is Dave Etter, as the *Ohio Review* indicates. He (1928-2015) was a highly respected poet of the American Midwest, who published more than twenty volumes of poetry, most of them dealing with the everyday experience of people in contemporary Midwestern towns. He was four years old in the summer of 1932.

We find the poem again in *Electric Avenue*, published by the Spoon River Poetry Press in 1988 (Etter, *Electric Avenue*). The title of the collection is taken from a poem in it, which is about a man mowing his lawn (or rather cutting the grass) and observing the kind of unusual occurrence typical of a small community. Here, the text appears along with others by the same poet. Additionally, all the texts have been assigned speakers, their names indicating various ethnic, often German or Scandinavian, origins. The title of the text we are discussing now runs: “Elwood Collins: Summer of 1932” (Etter, *Midlanders* 15). This clearly assigns the text to somebody who is not the poet and makes an autobiographical reading difficult. The speaker is rather characterized as one member of the community among the many others who appear in the collection.

To somebody familiar with the American poetic tradition the new version of the title links the text with one of the great poetry collections of the American Midwest, with Edgar Lee Masters’s *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), which documents, along with Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg,*

⁶ There is the interesting case of anthologies where we find editors supplying titles to passages from long poems that they have selected for inclusion. cf. Helen Gardner’s titles for her selections from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*: “Immortal Hate” (1.76-124), “Holy Night” (III.1-55), “Evening in Paradise” (IV.598-656), “The Banishment” (XII.624-49). None of these selections (and their titles) emphasize the narrative character of the poem.

⁷ In this case such an assumption is correct, as the author confirms in a letter.

Ohio (1919), Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (1920), and the poems of Vachel Lindsay, the belief in a latent utopian community in the small town, one inherited from the Puritan tradition (Engler, *Poetry and Community* 110–21). The Midwest, it should be added, is a cultural area that has often been misunderstood and misrepresented by East Coast people and Europeans, because its features look all too familiar (like the ones that one despises in one's own culture), and what is original, even exotic about its traditions, is often overlooked (see Atherton).

But Etter's use of Masters's model also emphasizes differences: now none of the figures is defined by its role in the community ("Justice Arnett," "Dippold the Optician," etc.). Now the names of people no longer serve for full titles as with Masters's epitaphs, which make a single, definite statement on the fates of individuals in the town community. Rather, the combination of a speaker's name, the title, and the account of a single experience creates a sense of postmodern fragmentation and randomness.

In conclusion, I should like us to turn to an occasion where we need not rely on reporting and on our imaginations.

EXPERIMENT 4

You have got to know Dave Etter's "Summer of 1932" while reading this essay. Compare this occasion to those you recalled in Experiment 1. In what respects has this occasion been different, and how has it affected the poem?

Again, this occasion has been quite specific. Personal factors have been at work, which are difficult to gauge for the author of this essay, but which are not, therefore, less important. You have opened this collection of essays on twentieth century poetry (Verdonk) in a specific situation, at a specific moment in your life, with specific intentions, and with specific other texts in mind. Probably you would like to learn about new and better ways of understanding, discussing, and teaching poetic texts. And perhaps you are emerging from it as seeing things, however slightly, in a different light.

"Summer of 1932" has therefore been used as part of an occasion that is quite different from the ones discussed earlier. The selection of a single text for discussion was a stipulation of the editor, one that makes excellent sense for such a collection of essays. But it has also focused your attention on the one text in a way which is not in accordance with its publication elsewhere.

You have been asked to consider the text repeatedly, as part of various imagined occasions and together with various paratexts. The ensemble of these, together with the occasion as part of which you were asked to consider them, has produced a poem that is quite different from any of the ones described earlier.

What I have just said about Dave Etter's poem is, of course, valid for all the other poems in this volume as well, and certain general conclusions can be drawn. They concern the fundamentals from which we should start, and the questions that we should be asking ourselves as readers of poetry. First, we have to acknowledge the primacy of occasion and, therefore, the limited and elusive authority of the text. As we only have the occasions, it is impossible to determine what the black marks as such have contributed to the poem. If critics reckon with the possibility of straightforward references to semantic properties, or of the reader's innocence, they *project* authority into the text, which it does not have.

This means that we first have to pay attention to the occasions of reading and their effects on results, i.e., the poems. We may then become aware of literature as an activity rather than a body of texts, of a culture of using literary texts with its own rules and rituals. We will become aware of how limited, even limiting, the reading of poetry in the classroom may be; and we may again become aware of what place the experience of poetry deserves in our lives.

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