

11. Reading and Listening: Conclusion

At the beginning of this study I put forward several claims to which I shall now return in summarizing its results. I started from the simple distinction between reading on the page and listening, which is sometimes made on principle - for example by Winters and Bateson (p. 15) - but I found that there are no simple, generally valid answers to the question of how literate poetry should be experienced. Instead, there is a broad range of possibilities. I have distinguished listening to song and to speech-verse, and other types of experience, which depend on the kind and size of the audience (chapter 5). Reading on the page can be divided into four types: pacing, halting, repeating, and studying (chapter 6).

The situations in which literate poetry is experienced offer particular possibilities to the recipient, and impose restrictions on him. The performer's voice, for example, gives the listener a sense of being addressed (p. 42), usually as the member of a group, and removes ambiguities in the text by intonation. Oral delivery allows sound-effects to develop fully, but it also demands that the text should be fairly easy to understand (chapter 5). Reading on the page, on the other hand, allows the recipient to choose his own speed. The poem may therefore be difficult; and ambiguity may become one of the chief effects perceived in the text (chapter 6).

As I have shown in the chapters on Browning, Hopkins, and Pound, the differences between the types of experience are reflected in the way critics have interpreted various poems. The reception of Hopkins's poetry, in particular, is a striking illustration of how different ways of experiencing texts can affect a poet's reputation.

To some extent, a poet can indicate how his poems should be experienced, not only by stating his intentions, but as I have tried to show, by suiting his texts to a particular situation.

In order to describe the relationship between the text and the situation I have had to introduce a notion of the text different from the one used, for example, by Wellek and Warren in their *Theory of Literature*. Instead of a "structure of norms" independent of place and time, I described the text as part of a speech-situation, to which the recipient and the poet, as we see him, also belong (chapter 2). The text will reflect the situation to which it has been suited, and thus the way it is meant to be experienced (pp. 24-28). But as the text is only one of the elements of the situation we need to reconstruct, the evidence it offers need not be conclusive.

Four kinds of evidence have been adduced: the relationship between the visual and the aural elements in the text; the degree of its difficulty; its length; and the relationship between the poet and his audience as reflected in the text.

The visual elements of a text, spelling, punctuation, and typography, and the aural ones, sound, rhythm, and intonation, may be related to each other in five typical ways. The visual elements may indicate how the text should sound, i. e. serve as a score. They may give additional information without affecting the aural elements, i. e. comment. They may complement the aural elements, contrast with them, or even contradict them. The first two types are suited to listening, the others require visual reading (chapter 4).

The second kind of evidence is the difficulty of a text. The syntax may be so complex or indefinite, the words and collocations so rare, the allusions so obscure as to demand close reading, i. e. the study of the text on the page. Study, which includes juxtaposition of words and clauses not immediately contiguous, presupposes the simultaneous presence of all the elements of the text, a demand which can only be met in a visual context (chapter 6). As the example of *Beowulf* (p. 23) shows, the difficulty of a text alone need not, however, be a reliable criterion.

The third kind of evidence is related to my thesis that the experience of a poem has to be of a certain duration to constitute an event of its own (p. 25). Difficult texts, which demand study, may be short, as I have tried to show in my chapter on Hopkins (chapter 9). On the other hand, extremely brief poems will present problems unless they are considered difficult; and long poems have to be easy enough to be understood as they proceed lest they break up into a series of loosely related events. Major works by Pound illustrate both these points (see chapter 10).

Finally, the relationship between author and recipient as reflected in the text may serve as evidence. Poetry in which the recipient feels addressed as a partner by the speaker in the text requires an experience different from that of a poem where the recipient must, in the absence of the force of address, himself find out what has produced the words with which he finds himself confronted. I have distinguished these two functions of texts as eloquence and evidence. One suggests performance or pacing, the other study.

It is this last kind of evidence in particular, along with the historical dimensions of spelling, punctuation, and typography, which I have used in support of my claim that the different ways of experiencing poetry are historical phenomena and should therefore be studied as part of literary history (p. 16). In chapter 7 I have given a short sketch of how this relationship between the poet and his audience can be reflected in the texts. In particular, I have tried to show how the recipient in eighteenth and early nineteenth century lyric poetry increasingly faced the dilemma between two roles. The presence of a speaker in a clearly defined speech-situation cast him in the role of the addressee. At the same time the text offered itself as a document of the mood that had produced it. The tension between the two approaches could be used by the poet to achieve certain

responses - as I have shown in the case of Browning's "My Last Duchess" (chapter 8).

The feeling of being addressed by a speaker was a hindrance to the recipient's identification with the source of the mood expressed, and the speaker would therefore become the subject of the poem. The alternative of abandoning the distinctiveness of the speaker leads to giving up elements that have the force of address, rhetoric, syntax, and even sound. In the English speaking world the impact of poetry stimulated by these alternative possibilities was fully felt only at the beginning of the twentieth century, under the influence of French symbolism (chapter 7).

The works of Hopkins and Pound discussed here represent a situation of crisis. Hopkins's poems are so difficult that their meaning must remain obscure if they are listened to, though he insisted they should be heard. Pound's poem *The Cantos* is so long that it cannot be read as one poem without losing much of its meaning.

This study began by criticizing the way in which the art of close reading dominates classroom teaching, and I should now like to return to my claim that the question of how poetry should be experienced must become an integral part of literary studies (p. 16). I used a sentence from C. S. Lewis as an epigraph to this study with this claim in mind:

If literary scholarship and criticism are regarded as activities ancillary to literature, then their sole function is to multiply, prolong, and safeguard experiences of good reading. (Lewis 1961, p. 104).

As I have tried to show, the close reading of a poem may be the appropriate experience of post-Romantic, and in particular, modernist poems (pp. 64-66). It cannot do justice to poetry written before the Age of Sensibility, and, in particular it cannot, in the way it is practised, take account of the fact that there is a whole range of possibilities of how poetry can be experienced. Some of the reasons for the predominance of close reading in the classroom may be found in the ascendancy of modernism in the period when the study of English and American literature was established as a discipline, in the usefulness and ease of close reading as a teaching device, and in the attempt to justify the necessity of the academic study of literature by producing systematic work (p. 14).

When close reading is practised almost exclusively, the vertical, semantic dimension of the text is at the centre of the critic's interest (p. 50). The horizontal dimension, in which the effects of rhythm, sound, and intonation develop, tends to be neglected. This neglect has resulted in the predominance of explanation and textual interpretation in literary studies, and the naiveté of discussions of metrical questions, not to speak of other aural qualities.

This does not mean that close reading should be given up. It must retain an important, if more clearly delimited,

function in literary criticism. It is not the most appropriate, complete, and profitable way of reading any kind of poetry. It may serve a particular purpose in the general effort of determining how a text should be experienced. It may even help us to find out how events which seem irretrievably lost may be reconstructed and, to some extent, reproduced in a translated form. A reader/student should critically examine the poem in the same way a director examines a play he wants to put on stage. He should try to determine what kind of production the text requires if it is to offer an adequate experience.

Such a reading is only possible if readers, especially students, are provided with texts that are as close as possible to the spelling, punctuation, and typography intended by the poet (p. 56). The intentions of the poet may be difficult, even impossible, to ascertain, especially where his manuscripts have been lost. The difficulty of getting at these intentions does not relieve us of the task of trying to reconstruct them. In particular, the aims of the kind of reading under discussion would strongly discourage the use of modernized texts.

The attempt to determine the appropriate experience also requires that the reader/student should know about changes in the function of spelling, punctuation, and typography, subjects rarely taught in literary studies today.

Because adequate experience of a poetic text may consist in listening, the ear of the student should be trained, a task often neglected due to the strong emphasis on close reading. Experience in language teaching shows, moreover, that the ability to hear a sound, and the ability to produce it are often linked. In the study of poetry, therefore, both listening and reciting should be practised.

In the present circumstances, when the question of how poetry should be experienced is often neglected, the student may feel uncertain about how to approach a poem. There may be conflicts between how he is used to reading other texts and how he is taught to read poems, and between experiences he has not learned to distinguish. He may read as if he were supposed to listen; and listen (or speak) as if he were supposed to read.

This need not be so. We can choose from a wide range of possibilities. If we choose carefully, we may allow the poem to come into its own. Our experience of poetry will become richer and more varied. Occasionally we shall be able to close the book, having noticed that the letters on the page are not always necessary for the experience of poetry.