

## Preface

In recent years the role of the recipient in literature has become a focus of critical attention, following a period in which that role was neglected due to a preoccupation with the 'immanent structures' of the literary work. The new approach has opened up fascinating areas of inquiry, but progress has been hampered by two unstated assumptions about the relationship between text and recipient. These assumptions are in part the heritage of earlier critical approaches, and in part they are derived from the fact that the role of the recipient was first studied in connection with fiction rather than other types of texts.

The first of these assumptions is that literary texts elicit an adequate response when they are read on the page. Except in the case of drama, other forms of experience have usually been neglected or dealt with as derivative (e. g., listening to the recital of a text). This may reflect a narrow, etymological view of what constitutes a "literary" text, but in most cases it is also an expression of the belief that the ways in which a text is communicated are insignificant for the recipient's response.

The second assumption is that the reading process is a continuous one, a steady advance through the text. This assumption may be correct in many cases, especially in the reading of prose. Even there, however, the reader may pause to think, re-read passages, or return to earlier pages. He may even feel urged to find out how the text is going to end. All this will affect his synthesis, the total meaning he gradually assembles. Words, images, and incidents may obtain a significance different from the one they have in continuous reading.

Both assumptions - that reading a text on the page allows an adequate response, and that the reading process is continuous - will be questioned here.

In the context of poetry, the situation is slightly different. Here, the assumptions just described are often contradicted by practice - especially in the classroom. Close reading, the analysis of passages in non-linear fashion, is exercised as the most profitable way of reading. This

approach forecloses the question, *How should poetry be experienced?*, the subject of this study. I shall try to show that the texts indicate that there are no simple and generally valid answers to this question.

I first became aware of the problem when, while working on a study of German Shakespeare translations, I noticed that texts prepared for book publication looked different from those intended for the stage. My interest in the question of how poetry should be experienced steadily grew after this. When I try to summarize a process that took place in small and often uncertain steps, I can isolate three reasons, one scholarly, one didactic, and one personal.

My teacher at Basle University, Professor Rudolf Stamm, was one of the first scholars to insist that dramatic texts should be discussed as scores for stage-performance. He has shown how dramatists incorporate their vision of the performance into the language of their plays. It seemed to me that the question of how a text is meant to be experienced should also be asked of other types of literature, in particular with poetry - even if the answers were less obvious and of necessity vague in many cases.

I have had the opportunity - one of the advantages of working in a small department - of teaching courses in English literature and phonetics at the same time. In the literary courses I felt dissatisfied with the kind of verbal analysis that commonly takes place in the classroom. I was struck by the inability of most students to read texts aloud, with the inflections of speech; they read monotonously, like print, a deficiency that can only be explained by deep-seated habits of reading. In phonetics, on the other hand, I became aware how closely the ability of the students to produce sounds is related to their hearing them. This suggested that most of the students are not able to listen to poetry, which is immensely more complex linguistically.

Finally, the personal reason. Some years ago, on one of the few occasions when I read poetry of my own in public, I had a curious experience. When I had finished reading a short poem, I was asked to repeat it. I was surprised

by the request. Something that, I thought, expressed everything I had wanted to express had obviously not come across. When I read the poem the second time I felt that it was becoming something different. I wondered why. To some extent, this study is an attempt to find out.

I cannot offer here a complete account of the problems mentioned. I rather feel as if I have tried to hew my way through a dark wood. In trying to reach the other end, I have crossed many clearings which would have been worth lingering, and followed many paths for a short distance which were inviting enough to be followed to their ends. The map of the area offered here is therefore full of white spaces, and, at times, of necessity somewhat schematic. But it may be useful to other explorers.

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B. E.

*Note:* An asterisk in the text indicates that the note to the passage concerned offers important material additional to the identification of sources.