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Deictics and the Status of Poetic Texts

Balz Engler

One of Keats's last poems, which he probably wrote in November 1819, is untitled, and runs as follows:

> This living hand, now warm and capable
> Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
> And in the icy silence of the tomb,
> So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
> That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood,
> So in my veins red life might stream again,
> And thou be conscience-calm'd. See, here it is —
> I hold it towards you.[1]

Whose hand is extended? Who is addressed by the words? What does "now" refer to? These questions are immediately suggested by the deictic elements, which presuppose a situation of which the words of the poem are part: Somebody holding *this* hand towards somebody else addressed as *thou* and *you*, at a particular moment. The deictics suggest that the text is part of a situation; the situation in turn suggests conversational implicature.[2]

In other words, we are faced with a problem that the text itself cannot answer, and that makes dubious the notion of a text's autonomy. Answers to the question, *Who is the addressee?* can range over a wide area. It may be argued that, in general, deictics in Modern, as contrasted to Classical poetry, have lost their force; that, in this poem, the person addressed is the reader; that it is Fanny Brawne, Keats's financée, and, finally, that the text was meant to become part of a play.[3]

[1] *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. by Jack Stillinger (London: Heinemann, 1978), 503.

[2] See Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics*. Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), chapter 3.

[3] The poem has traditionally been considered to be addressed to Fanny Brawne,

Deictics in poetic texts, specifically words of address, have rarely been studied by literary critics;[4] Jonathan Culler, in an essay on "Apostrophe" in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* even claims that they have deliberately been neglected because they are considered an embarrassment.[5]

Culler tries to remedy this situation. His essay discusses only one type of deixis, but it reflects concerns that affect deixis in general. In discussing apostrophe, however, it accepts and makes explicit views that are widely held but need to be criticized. Culler's attempt to tackle a problem baffling to critics, therefore, also exposes the weaknesses of his own approach.

In describing how deictics have been neglected by literary critics Culler quotes George N. Shuster's introduction to *The English Ode from Milton to Keats*:

> The element of address is of no especial signifcance, 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 and the traditions of song and recitation required that there be a recipient.[6]

This position denies address in Modern poetry any deictic function. Culler, on the contrary, considers address in the form of apostrophe crucial to lyrical poetry; he emphasizes "the fact that the apostrophic

a view no longer held by many. Walter Jackson Bate comments: "The general feeling now is that the lines were a passage he might have used in some future poem or play" (*John Keats* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963], 626–27); the dramatic interpretation is certainly suggested by the strong gestic energies in the text (cp. on dramatic language Rudolf Stamm, *The Shaping Powers at Work* [Heidelberg: Winter, 1967], esp. 11–84). The speech seems to belong to a figure confronting its mortal enemy, or even its murderer, seeking reconciliation. In a letter to John Taylor of 17 November, 1819, Keats speaks of "The Earl of Leicester's history" as a "promising" subject for a play (*The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821*, ed. by Hyder Edward Rollins. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958, vol. II, 234).

[4] There is a rich literature on deixis in linguistics, especially in the areas of ethno-linguistics and language-acquisition.

[5] Jonathan Culler, "Apostrophe." In *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 136. He took a similar position already in *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), 166, and confirms it in "Changes in the Study of the Lyric". In: Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker, eds. *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 38, 49–50.

[6] George N. Shuster, *The English Ode from Milton to Keats* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 11–12.

postulation of addressees refers one to the transforming and animating activity of the poetic voice".[7] He quotes Shelley's "On Life" in support of this view: "[T]he words, *I, you, they* are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblage of thoughts thus indicated but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind".[8] This links up with Shelley's famous distinction between story and poem in *A Defense of Poetry:*

> ... there is this difference between a story and a poem, that story is a catalogue of detached facts which have no other connection than time, place circumstance, cause and effect; the other is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds.[9]

Shelley's essay, according to Culler, suggests a general distinction between "two forces in poetry, the narrative and the apostrophic," and he concludes "that the lyric is characteristically the triumph of the apostrophic".[10]

Culler closes his discussion of apostrophe with a short analysis of the poem quoted at the beginning, which he calls "perhaps Keats's most fascinating poem".[11] He takes it for granted that the poet is addressing us, his readers, and that the present created by the deictics is "a *now* of discourse, of writing".[12]

Culler's discussion of apostrophe is disappointing for two reasons: First, he fails to do what the title of his essay would suggest, i. e. he does not offer a convincing definition of apostrophe. He begins by discussing apostrophe and ends by discussing the Keats poem, which does not offer any – a confusion that, as we shall see, is typical of textualist criticism. Secondly, his discussion lacks historical perspective; he generalizes the use of deictics in poetry from the way they are used by Romantic poets. I should like to say something about both points in turn.

The problem of definition may be approached by way of linguistic pragmatics. According to Stephen C. Levinson deixis "concerns the ways in which languages encode or grammaticalize features of the *context of utterance* or *speech event,* and thus it also concerns ways in which

[7] Culler, 148.
[8] "On Life." In *Shelley's Prose,* ed. by D. L. Clark (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1954), 174.
[9] Clark, 281.
[10] Culler, 149.
[11] Culler, 153.
[12] Culler, 152.

the interpretation of utterances depends upon the analysis of that context of utterance".[13]

Three among the descriptive notions and terms introduced by Levinson are of particular interest to us: person deixis, time deixis, and place deixis.[14]

Person deixis, of which apostrophe is obviously an example, encodes the roles of the participants in a situation: Who is the speaker (first person), who is the addressee (second person), who is referred to without being either the speaker or the addressee (third person). Apostrophe can be described as *the move between two types* of addressees. Quintilian's definition in terms of forensic rhetoric makes this quite clear. He defines apostrophe as "a diversion of our words to address some person other than the judge".[15]

It is therefore wrong to say, as Culler does about the Keats poem quoted: "The fact that it eschews apostrophe for direct address makes it possible to speak with more confidence about its effects and the way in which they are produced".[16] This seems to suggest that direct address in a lyric is, after all, a kind of apostrophe, at least as far as its effect is concerned. As his essay shows, Culler accepts, without questioning, John Stuart Mill's dictum that the lyric is not heard but overheard.[17] The passage in Mill is well-known; it runs as follows:

> Eloquence is *heard,* poetry is *overheard.* Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude.[18]

[13] Levinson, 54. Culler does not mention a single study from the field of linguistic pragmatics – a branch of semiotics, which is mentioned in the title of his book.

[14] The two additional types are discourse and social deixis: Discourse deixis does not link the utterance with its context, but concerns the utterance itself: "As I said then", "I am now turning to another topic" (see below note 19). Social deixis may be of interest where it defines the relationship between the speaker and the addressee in the poem; but it is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with this.

[15] Quoted by Culler, 135. The primary addressee is temporarily put in a third person position. At the same time some kind of complicity between the speaker and addressee is established, as both are placed in the same position vis-à-vis the apostrophee (if there is such a word). The implications of this are of great interest, but cannot be discussed in detail here.

[16] Culler, 153.

[17] Culler, 137, *via* Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism.*

[18] *Mill's Essays on Literature and Society,* ed. by J.B. Schneewind (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1965), 9.

On this premise, namely, that the poet is speaking to himself, any address to somebody else must be considered an apostrophe, and a poem like "This living hand . . ." must appear as a particularly striking example of the "triumph of the apostrophic". But can Mill's dictum be accepted as generally valid?[19]

This brings me to my second criticism, which concerns the lack of historical perspective. Culler (like so many before him) uses the Romantic lyric, a historical phenomenon, in constructing a generic system that is not explicitly limited to a particular period. He even goes one step further: He derives the function of deictic elements in poetry from the *theorizing* of Romantic poets. In doing so he shows himself, for different reasons, to be as severely limited as Shuster, whose position he attacks. Small wonder that all his illustrations come from Romantic and post-Romantic poetry.

Misconceptions often begin with the vagueness of the term *lyric*. The only trait shared by lyric poems, according to a recent collection of essays, seems to be "the single undisputable feature of [their] relative short length".[20] Yet the same collection also contains an essay on *The Prelude* (which may be called of relative long length). This is possible because the words *lyric* and *lyrical* are casually associated with Romantic notions like the intense moment, and the expression of personal feeling.

The history of the word *lyric* itself should make us wary: Its deriva-

[19] The same problems also arise with place and time deixis. Additional ones can only be hinted at here. For example, we have to distinguish between two types of usage: endophoric (pointing forwards or backwards in the text) and exophoric (pointing outside it). This distinction is based on the assumption that the beginning and the ending, and thus the inside and the outside of an utterance, as it were, are clearly marked; but this need not be the case. When I am saying that *here* I am only discussing *exophoric* deictics, does this mean that I am not going to deal with any other types in my paper, or that I am going to deal with those later? You cannot tell.

Most deictic elements can serve both the endophoric and the exophoric functions (the definite article, demonstrative pronouns, like *this* and *that*, personal pronouns, like *he* and *they*, adverbs of place and time like *here* and *there* or *then* and *now*, and the tenses of verbs (with the important possible exception of the preterit). Others, like the personal pronouns *I*, *you* and *we*, and the place deictics *yon*, *yond*, and *yonder* always have an exophoric function.

[20] Hošek and Parker, 13. E. M. Forster at least gave us the approximate number of words when he tried to define the novel along similar lines. Among more obvious examples the following poems are discussed in their collection on *Lyric Poetry:* an epitaph by Surrey, Jonson's *Under-wood*, and Wordsworth's *Prelude*.

tion from music and song is too obvious to warrant discussion; we still use the word for song-texts. The dissociation of the lyric from song, leading to a semantic definition of the lyric rather than one according to medium, is relatively late;[21] indeed our problem of defining the lyric may be due to our attempt to force together meanings widely different and historically remote from each other.

The use of address and other deictic elements in the Romantic lyric cannot, therefore, serve as a general model, but must be considered the result of a historical process. This can be studied in eighteenth century poetry. Faas, among others, has described the increasingly close relationship between descriptive poetry and the ode, and at the same time, the increasingly precise definition of the situation of which the words of the poems are supposed to be part.[22] This is done with the help of deictics of person, place and time: the speaker is individualized, the scene particularized, the time condensed to the moment of intense experience. Conversely, we might say, it is increasingly the text that defines the situation, a situation that is different from, even incompatible with, the one in which the recipients find themselves.

Two examples may be suggestive of such changes: In Pope's *Windsor Forest* (1713) deictics are mainly used as rhetorical devices for juxtaposition and structuring catalogues, i. e. they function on the level of discourse:

> There, interspers'd in Lawns and opening Glades,
> Thin Trees arise that shun each others Shades.
> Here in full Light the russet Plains extend;
> There wrapt in Clouds the blueish Hills ascend:[23]

In Collins's *Ode Occasioned by the Death of Mr Thomson* (1748–49), a scene is indicated ("On the Thames near Richmond"), and the movement of the poem follows the movement in the situation presented, that of a boat gliding past Richmond church.[24]

[21] An historical dictionary is of limited use here, because the examples make it difficult to judge to what extent the word refers to song, to what extent it is used metaphorically. The *O. E. D.* gives first examples for the modern meaning of *lyric* from the sixteenth century. *Lyricism,* a word in which the transferred sense has become dominant, is first recorded for 1760.

[22] Egbert Faas, "Die deskriptive Dichtung als Wegbereiterin der romantischen Naturlyrik," *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* N. F. 22 (1972), 142–61.

[23] Alexander Pope, *The Poems,* ed. by John Butt. One-volume edition (London: Methuen, 1963), 195–96.

[24] *The Poems of Gray, Collins, and Goldsmith,* ed. by Roger Lonsdale (London: Longmans, 1969), 486–91. The movement implied by the poem is discussed

Elsewhere I have sketched the consequences of this development for the relationship between the poet and the recipient.[25] They may be summarized as follows: The addressee is rarely identified or even defined as clearly as the speaker and the situation; the Keats poem is no exception to this. As recipients we may feel considerable pressure to take on the role of the implied addressee; our own situation as recipients may then conflict with that of the addressee in the text. We may find ourselves confronted with the question whether we should identify with the speaker or consider ourselves addressed by him.

This conflict between being addressed and identification is characteristic of reading in general: The reader is both the addressee, and continually has to reconstruct the speaker from the few marks left by him or her on the page; reading therefore may be characterized as a dialogue between two selves.

The need for identification becomes urgent in Romantic poetry, where the speaker may indeed, as Mill suggests, be addressing himself. This creates a close link between the Romantic lyric and writing (or printing). Northrop Frye suggests as much, when he compares oral and literate poetry:

> If the poet does not read or write, the poem exists only in the one dimension of pure continuity in time, because such a poet is not thinking of lines on a page. If the poem is written, it appears in two spatial dimensions, across and down a page, as well as in time, and the crucial term "verse", with its associations of turning around or turning back, becomes functional. The poem may still be continuous, but in "verse", where we keep coming to the end of a line and then starting another, there is a germ of discontinuity. *The more this sense of the discontinuous increases, the more closely we approach the lyrical area.* (my italics).[26]

Deictics signal the changes in the role of the recipient, which are due to a changing relationship between text and situation. *At the same time* the changing relationship between text and situation also affects the function of deictics. They increasingly *become* what Shelley describes them to be in the passage quoted by Culler, "merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind," which is the mind of the

by E. M. W. Tillyard, "William Collins's 'Ode on the Death of Thomson'", *A Review of English Literature* 1 (1960), 30–38; reprinted in his *Essays Literary and Educational* (London, 1962), pp. 89–98.

[25] Balz Engler, *Reading and Listening: The Modes of Communicating Poetry and their Influence on the Texts.* The Cooper Monographs, 30 (Berne: Francke, 1982), 58–62.

[26] In his essay "Approaching the Lyric" In: Hošek and Parker, 31.

creator, and the image of all other minds. In other words, the deictics no longer tie the text to the situation in which it is used, but, having quasi-magical force, create a situation of their own in the imagination.

The use of deictics thus mirrors the change from a poetic of conversation, as we still find it in Augustan poetry, to a poetic of expression, a process we can describe as interiorization.[27] In his essay "The Poem as a Closed Field" Walter J. Ong sketches this process:

> With romanticism, the old agonistic poetic had been replaced by a new poetic of creativity. The poet is irenic, or at least neutral, uncommitted, free of dialogic struggle with an audience, since for the "creative" romantic imagination the poem is no longer a riposte but a simple product, an "object" rather than an exchange.[28]

In this view, John Stuart Mill's idea that "poetry is *overheard*" becomes a document of this change rather than a generally valid statement:

> The insulation of poetry from dialogue allows poetic in the romantic age (in which we still live) to deflect attention which had earlier been directed to the audience, back to the poet's own self. John Stuart Mill registered the changed emphasis, with no evident awareness of its deeper implications ...[29]

We do not have a detailed study of how this change in poetics affected deictics and vice versa. We need one if we want to overcome the limitations of an approach like the one of Culler. Here I can only suggest two small pieces of possible evidence: It is striking to notice that in the course of the eighteenth century at least two deictic words became, apart from their occurrence in dialects and sociolects, limited to literary usage. Both are crucial to the argument I have sketched here. One of them is *yon* and the words related with it (*yond, yonder*) – the only place deictic that had always been restricted to reference outside the discourse, to the situation in which it takes place. The other word, significantly, is the person deictic *thou*, the pronoun of address.[30] The complexities of the task are

[27] Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), has observed related changes due to writing in narrative texts, in particular how they can represent speech and thought indirectly. Her unspeakable sentences are often characterized by a conflict between different deictic elements (e.g., the preterit and *now*). In the lyric we find an equivalent conflict between the scene and the *now* of the reader.

[28] Walter J. Ong, "The Poem as a Closed Field," In: *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 222–223.

[29] Ong, 223.

[30] On *thou* cf. Thomas Finkenstaedt, *You and Thou. Studien zur Anrede im Englischen* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1963), especially 227–231.

daunting, as we must realize when we return to the Keats poem quoted at the beginning: Whose hand is extended? Who is addressed? Even: Why does Keats switch from *thou* to *you*? Simple answers may be esthetically more satisfying; but by suppressing one dimension of the work of poetry they also distort it.