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Edward Young's Estranged Readers

Werner Brönnimann

Some kinds of linguistic deviation are distancing in their effect, they can even be truly off-putting. I will examine readerly estrangement that has been caused by linguistic strangeness, focusing on the distance – be it potential or real – between the writers and recipients of familiar letters and between poets and their readers. In spite of their generic difference, letters and poems will be treated as comparable in their pragmatic effect. My example of linguistic strangeness will often, though not always, be repetition and its alienating effect on interpersonal communication. The correspondence I will discuss is from the eighteenth century, and I will begin with letters written by the novelist Samuel Richardson to Edward Young, a poet whose alienation from his readers will be investigated in some detail.

In January 1758 the novelist Samuel Richardson, who was Edward Young's printer and friend, wrote the following letter to Young:

> I am sorry that sleeplessness is your complaint: but when you sleep [*sic*: *sc.* not] you are awake to noble purpose, – I to none at all; my days are nothing but hours of dozings, for want of nightly rest, and through an impatience that I am ashamed of – because I cannot subdue it. (Pettit 1971, 469. Subsequent references in parentheses are to page numbers in this edition.)

On 22 December of the same year Richardson had the following consoling words for Young:

> I am sorry that sleeplessness is your complaint. But, when you sleep not, you are awake to noble purpose: I to none at all; my days are nothing but hours of dozings, for want of nightly rest; and through an impatience, that I am ashamed of, because I cannot subdue it. (484)

To modern readers such a twice-told tale seems tedious and difficult to excuse; it can easily estrange us from the writer. Of course we might suspect that in the eighteenth century we can presuppose greater tolerance for such repetitions, because letter writing was a routine performance – similar, as it were, to today's use of the telephone. But this analogy is inadequate, since letter writing, like conversation, was in that period an art whose rules of decorum would not be greatly tolerant of tediousness. Thus Lady Montagu makes it clear that repetition is undesirable when she informs her correspondent, the Countess of Bute, "when you do not answer any part of my Letters, I suppose them lost, which exposes you to some repetitions" (June 19, 1751: 485).

But why can we posit an almost ahistorical, invariable distaste for repetitions such as Richardson's verbatim reiteration? Our reaction is not really motivated by impatience about overinformation, it is rather that we take offence: something seems to go wrong on the interpersonal level. Richardson's epistolary repetition depersonalizes discourse, we feel that we are not taken seriously as interlocutors, that we are given an impersonal, mechanical treatment.

This discussion of the recipient's potential reaction is hypothetical insofar as Richardson's letter did not jeopardize the two writers' friendship and correspondence. Furthermore, there may be a textual problem. The originals of the letters from which I culled these two echoing excerpts are not extant, and the repetition may thus be based on erroneous transmission. But by speculating about the causes of Richardson's lapse we can attempt to reconstruct Young's mental manoeuvres which allowed him to justify his friend's apparent negligence and we can gain some insight into the process by which we maintain communication when it is under strain. We can thus describe the reader's methods of obviating estrangement.

By December Richardson had most likely forgotten what he had written in January, but he remembered what he would usually say to people who could not sleep, and so he gave his standard advice to the notorious insomniac Edward Young, the author of the *Complaint or Night Thoughts*, this poem being the "noble purpose" to which Richardson is referring in his two letters. This explanation is not quite satisfactory, however, because Richardson's consolation is *personal* and does not smack of general routine advice. We must take into account that what had developed between Young and Richardson was a fairly intense exchange of personal experiences. The *complaint* had indeed become a sort of private

genre in their correspondence. Between these two, complaining had grown into a routine discourse involving set phrases and stock formulations. Such plaintive formulae could be inserted by the complainer at appropriate moments, albeit of course with the proper verbal variation. A *verbatim* duplication as in Richardson's case could be explained by an erroneous double use of a draft for such a set formulation. Furthermore, Richardson kept copies of his letters, and his correspondence – including the letters that he received – served as source material for his novel writing (Anderson 73). The duplication of his comforting lines to Young almost looks like an erroneous double use of his file on consolation.

Such explanations help the reader to preempt a possible estrangement from his correspondent, and in fact it is Edward Young who is definitely aware of the precariousness of epistolary communication and thus of the need for justification. Young anticipates and actually thematizes a possible estrangement between writer and recipient in the second of the following two letters. The first is addressed to Samuel Richardson, dated 16 November 1746:

> The shortness and uncertainty of life is so evident, that all take it for granted; it wants no proof. And what follows? Why this, because we can't deny it, therefore we forget it; because it wants no proof, therefore we give it no attention. That is, we think not of it at all, for a very odd reason, viz. because we should think of nothing else. (248)

Seven days later Young writes to the Duchess of Portland, who is his patroness and friend:

> The shortness, and Casualty of Life, & ye Certainty of Death, are such obvious, & quite Indisputable Points, yt it seems nonsense to talk about them. And from not Talking, they come to not Thinking, about them too. Those Points want no Proof, & therefore they give them no Attention. That is, They think not / [verso] / of them at all, for ye odest Reason in ye World, (viz) Because ye Points are so very Certain, that they shd think of little else. (249)

These two letters are certainly not repetitive in the same way that Richardson's duplicated consolations are, since Young addresses two different recipients. The first version goes to the moralist Richardson, who will identify with the letter's message and moral. The second version is addressed to the skeptical Duchess of Portland, who will not immediately

identify with the moral and message, and who is thus a potentially estranged reader, although of course she cannot know of the duplication. Nevertheless Young explicitly thematizes her potential reaction to the repetition, almost as if she did know; perhaps he felt slightly guilty about it, so that he imagined and anticipated a resistance of another kind, namely her skepticism. He must have been aware of the duplication, since only a week separates the two letters. His letter to the Duchess thus continues as follows:

> By this time, I hear your Grace say — 'Tis pity this Gentleman had not continued in his Pulpit; He preaches very well; I suppose his Parishioners will have ye Favour of my Letter next Sunday' — Why truly, Madam, This is naturally enough sayd. But how comes it to be Natural? This, I conceive, is the Reason; (viz) That on any serious Subject a man can't talk common Sense, but it will fall in with Something we have heard from ye Pulpit, & hence we naturally enough call it *Preaching*. But this is not so much to ye Discredit of wt is sayd, as to ye Credit of ye Pulpit; showing evidently, that Religion & Good-understanding are ye Same Thing. (250)

Young here expects quite a different reader from Richardson, a reader who dares him to offer a preemptive list of explanations for her potential estrangement. Her negative response is indeed anticipated in a mock-dialogue between the writer and his reader, and the Duchess's possible estrangement is foreseen to have the following reasons: because of its moralistic content Young's text belongs to another genre than the familiar letter, and this generic breach is insulting to the recipient. His letter — Young conjectures — is insulting because it is not private, but bears the stain of public dissemination: the Duchess is treated as if she were a collective of parishioners listening to a sermon, she is as it were fobbed off with a mass product. Furthermore, his reader's estrangement is rooted not only in the loss of the privacy of communication, but also in the loss of its singularity: he will repeat the same ideas, his parishioners will have "ye favour of my Letter next Sunday." As we know, Young is here covering up for another — as it were a "private" — reiteration, possibly to alleviate his conscience about his self-plagiarism, but his immediate pragmatic aim is to preempt his reader's resistance or even refusal.

If strangeness of *genre* has thus been exposed as a major cause for losing a reader, a strange self-presentation of the speaker can do the same. Such is the case if a speaker is unwilling to reveal his true opinion and

being, if he remains as it were a stranger. As an example of such noncommittal evasiveness take Young's following letter to Thomas Tickell, his friend from his school days at Winchester. On June 8, 1715, Tickell had published a translation of the first book of Homer's *Iliad*, two days after the appearance of Pope's famous version. Young had the difficult task of responding to Tickell's translation, knowing well that his friend expected a fair assessment as well as loyalty. Young's task was all the more difficult because Pope was also a friend of his. The eager anticipation on the part of Tickell and even a certain impatience about the slowness of Young's response is clearly evident in the first sentence of Young's diplomatic piece of evasive praise: "Be assurd I want no new Inducement to behave my self like Yr friend." The letter continues:

> To be very plain, ye University almost in General gives ye preference to Popes translation; they say his is written with more Spirit, Ornament, & Freedom & has more ye Air of an Original. I enclin'd some, Harison & c: to compare the Translations with ye Greek, wh was done; it made some small alteration in their Opinions, but still Pope was their man. The bottom of ye case is this, they were strongly prepossest in Popes favour, from a wrong notion of Yr Design, before ye Poem came down; & ye sight of Yrs has not had force enough upon theem to make theem willing to to [*sic*] contradict theemselves, & own they were in ye wrong, but they go far for Prejudict persons & own Yrs an excellent Translation. . . . (5–6)

Young here only talks about the opinion of others and about his own actions, which indeed bespeak solidarity, but he carefully avoids any explicit evaluation of his own. As he hides his opinion, we can only guess whether he preferred Pope's or Tickell's translations.

Evidently there are thus numerous reasons for an estrangement between writers and readers. Crude repetitions point to a lack of personal concern and will ultimately lead to alienation. Readers who feel they are given a mass or routine treatment will in time also become disillusioned, and a letter writer's refusal to take a clear stand can be understood as a lack of commitment. Furthermore, we shall see that a speaker who *does* show he is concerned, but describes and defines himself in ambiguous or even contradictory terms, can also jeopardize the metaphorical conversation between speaker and reader. In the case of the letter writer Edward Young, the clashes between contradictory self-definitions which the reader has to cope with involve Young's ambiguous roles as a wit, as a moralist, and as a macabre joker.

Wit and serious moralizing are of course not necessarily mutually exclusive modes of communication, but when their combination begins to obstruct clear role definitions, the reader's work becomes increasingly difficult. As an example take Young's aphoristic pronouncement on the topic of marriage:

> There is but One Objection against Marriage; & that is one wh ye wise world amongst its ten thousand Objections never makes; I mean that ye Husband and Wife seldom die in one Day, & then ye Survivor must be necessarily miserable. (133)

The undeniable truth of this *aperçu* (unless it be taken as a cynical sneer) comes as a surprise, but the surprise is an unpleasant one. Although Young's observation is in its pointedness comparable to a witty maxim (in particular because "objections against marriage" often occur in the supercilious context of facile and jesting advice to those about to get married), it is a maxim with a difference. Young accordingly distinguishes his own objection to marriage from the "ten thousand" facile ones by calling his the only valid one, and it is true that his pronouncement stands out by its insistence on the topic of death, which is not commonly associated with marriage. Not only does Young offer an ambivalent presentation of self, he also mixes genres: he joins the theme of comedy (marriage) and of tragedy (death). Is the reader to smile and applaud or to nod in dejected agreement? Such uncertainty about the adequacy of one's response reflects the uncertainty about the role assumed by the speaker as well as the genre within which he is writing. In the presence of such speakers many will feel uneasy, although the Duchess of Portland herself, who was the recipient of this letter, seems to have enjoyed the particularly Youngian mixture of genres and roles. A similar example occurs towards the end of one of his letters to her, where he mentions a woman whose brother had died. He comments on his own mentioning of this sad fact:

> Thus You see, Madam, tho we begin gayly we end otherwise. Death steals into ye Latter end of my Letter, tho He has hitherto spard the Latter end of my Life. . . . (172–73)

In a thankyou note to the Duchess, who had sent him some medicinal powders for his rheumatic pains, he makes an analogous joke:

> I return many Thanks for ye Powders, I am, I bless God, better, but not quite free from Pain; & hardly expect to be so, until I am Powder myself. (296)

Such facetious or macabre punning with allusions to death again leads to an uncertain role definition and to a generic indeterminacy. Such indeterminacies can be interpreted differently. Some readers will think the tragic tone is the genuine Young and the macabre jokes are inserts offering comic relief. Others, however, will come to the conclusion that the moralizing and tragic strains are merely a cover-up for an essentially light-hearted, even facetious, person who does not really worry about death or about the consolation of his readers. If this impression is generated not by a poet's private letters – and Young's letters were not intended for publication – but by his published poems, the effect on the author's reputation can be deadly. This did indeed happen in the case of Young, where readers looked for confirmation of their suspicions about the seriousness of the poet's morality in the poet's private life. The culmination of this development was George Eliot's attack on the integrity of Young's character, published in 1857 under the title *Worldliness and Other-Worldliness*.

In fact, a possible discrepancy between Young's moralistic self-presentation and his private demeanour struck readers as early as 1753:

> Dr Young indeed, my memoranda inform me, was a very different character from what might be conjectured from the general gloomy strain of the *Night Thoughts*, being, when in health, a man of very social habits and the animating soul of every company with whom he intermixed. (Forster 278)

Whereas this particular response by Young's admirer, Thomas Maurice, does not see this discrepancy as morally contemptible, such a neutral reaction is rather the exception. "Young's cheerfulness in company, indeed, quite offended the more solemn of his admirers, who wished the author of the *Night Thoughts* to behave always in character with his poem" (Forster 278). Thus Elizabeth Carter (1717–1806), a member of the Blue Stocking circle, "was much disappointed in [Young's] conversation. It appeared to her light, trifling and full of puns" (Forster 278). Similarly, one disappointed reader writes in 1797:

> When I first read Young, my heart was broken to think of the poor man's afflictions. Afterwards, I took it in my head, that there was so much

> lamentation there could not be excessive suffering. . . . On talking with some of Dr. Young's particular friends in England, I have since found that my conjecture was right; for that, while he was composing the "Night Thoughts," he was really as cheerful as any other man. (Pettit 1957, 28)

This disaffected reader is clearly of the opinion that for a poem to be successful, the poet's and the persona's voices must be identical. If at the time of composition the poet Young did not suffer as deeply as the speaking voice of his poem, the poetic communication is endangered. "Truth" is the moralizing criterion by which the man and his poem are judged, and "truth" entails unity of character, as the Reverend Richard Cecil (1748–1810), one of the leaders of the evangelical movement, asserts in his verdict on Young:

> Young is, of all other men, one of the most striking examples of the disunion of piety from truth. If we read his most true, impassioned, and impressive estimate of the world and of religion, we shall think it impossible that he was uninfluenced by his subject. It is, however, a melancholy fact, that he was hunting after preferment at eighty years old; and felt and spoke like a disappointed man. (Pettit 1957, 29)

"Disunion of piety from truth" means the disunion of Young's impious *ambition* from his persona's principles of truth. From a strictly moralistic point of view the disgruntled parson may in fact be quite right, although he greatly underestimates Young's own ironic self-awareness. In the question of ambition the private person and the poetic speaker do not really diverge greatly, if Young's poem is read more carefully. Witness the poetic persona's view on ambition as it is expressed in *Night Thoughts*, IV. 66–76, first published in 1743, but here quoted in the 1750 edition:

> Twice-told the Period spent on stubborn *Troy*,
> Court-Favour, yet untaken, I besiege;
> Ambition's ill-judg'd Effort to be rich.
> Alas! Ambition makes my Little, less;
> Embitt'ring the Possess'd: Why wish for more?
> *Wishing*, of all Employments, is the Worst;
> Philosophy's Reverse! and Health's Decay!
> Was I as plump, as stall'd Theology,
> *Wishing* would waste me to this shade again.
> Was I as wealthy as a *South-Sea* Dream,
> *Wishing* is an Expedient to be poor.

The speaker admits to personal ambitions; he has unsuccessfully sought advancement through court favour for more than twenty years. Such ambition is declared to be unreasonable, because it makes him dissatisfied with what he already has. An analysis of the motives behind ambition leads to a disapproving assessment of the "wish for more," because the energy needed to maintain this wishing consumes all material gains.

On the level of such a superficial paraphrase the Reverend Cecil's moral "truth" is indeed expressed in Young's text, because it exposes the vanity of striving for worldly advancement and praises modest renunciation and retirement to rural simplicity. The passage contains, however, very little piety, although its *message* may be considered pious. The persona confesses to his fault of ambition, but he says "I besiege" the court's favour, the present tense indicating that he is continuing his siege in spite of knowing better. Furthermore, the comparison of the court with Troy and the use of siege imagery for his futile endeavours either add an aggrandizing touch of self-importance to his enterprise, or – a more probable reading – the martial imagery is meant to be self-ironically mock-heroic. In either reading there is a strong note of apologetic self-indulgence. But Young's persona not only indulges in coquettish irony about his own weaknesses, his argument is also impious in so far as it is purely rationalistic and calculating. Ambition and the wish for more are not condemned on the basis of a moral code, but because they do not pay. Even if he became installed as a fat bishop, the "wish for more" would soon reduce his weight and restore his former leanness. Such frustrating circularity makes for the futility of ambition; stoic, not pious, considerations determine his thinking. If the Reverend Cecil had read Young correctly, he would have been estranged as a reader much earlier.

I have tried to show that a simple dichotomy (disdain of ambition in his poetry / ambitious behaviour in private life) is not adequate, because Young's poem has one more level of awareness: he readily confesses to private inconsistencies. Furthermore, in order to grasp the estrangement of more tolerant readers who will understand that principles expressed in poetry can easily be broken in real life, we must choose a different approach. As a sample text I propose the very beginning of Young's *Night Thoughts*, here quoted in the first edition of 1742:

Tir'd nature's sweet Restorer, balmy *Sleep*!
He, like the World, his ready visit pays,
Where Fortune smiles; the wretched he forsakes:
Swift on his downy pinion flies from Woe,
And lights on Lids unsully'd with a Tear.

From short, (as usual) and disturb'd Repose,
I wake: How happy they who wake no more!
Yet that were vain, if Dreams infest the Grave.
I wake, emerging from a sea of Dreams
Tumultuous; where my wreck'd, desponding Thought 10
From wave to wave of *fancy'd* Misery,
At random drove, her helm of Reason lost;
Tho' now restor'd, 'tis only Change of pain,
A bitter change; severer for severe:
The *Day* too short for my Distress! and Night
Even in the *Zenith* of her dark Domain,
Is Sun-Shine, to the colour of my Fate.

Night, sable Goddess! from her *Ebon* throne,
In rayless Majesty, now stretches forth
Her leaden Scepter o'er a slumbering world: 20
Silence, how dead? and Darkness how profound?
Nor Eye, nor list'ning Ear an Object finds;
Creation sleeps. 'Tis, as the general Pulse
Of life stood still, and Nature made a Pause;
An aweful pause! prophetic of her End.
And let her prophecy be soon fulfill'd;
Fate! drop the Curtain; I can lose no more.

There are two references to Shakespearean tragedies in this opening of *Night the First*. The first allusion is couched in "balmy *Sleep*" (1). This refers to Macbeth's speech (II.ii.34–39), where he calls sleep the "Balm of hurt minds." The second Shakespearean allusion in Young's poem is in line 8: "Yet that [i.e. to wake no more] were vain, if dreams infest the Grave." The reference is to Hamlet's most famous soliloquy (III.i.56–69), in particular the lines:

To die, to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there's the rub:
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause –

Sleep may be innocent, but the insomniac is not, nor are his allusions. Indeed, allusions are never an innocent game, they are deliberate intertextual repetitions which have strong pragmatic effects that deeply involve both the poetic speaker and the reader (see Anderson 279–80). The speaker does not just allude to Macbeth's choice of words in "balmy *Sleep*," he shares Macbeth's predicament – insomnia – and he thus establishes an explicit proximity to this Shakespearean hero. Such deliberate establishment of proximity we usually call identification. The reader is also implicated, because she must first deduce what it is that Macbeth and Young's speaker share – villainy? cruelty? – and then construct the outlines of the speaker's identity. Only now can the process of identification with the reader begin. And only after a process of identification has been undergone, can estrangement set in.

Young's allusion to *Hamlet* and the idea that even in the sleep of death man might be plagued by nightmares also approximates his speaker to the suicidal prince, and the same questions are raised by this particular identification. What has Young's speaker in common with Shakespeare's Hamlet? This question points to a significant strand of strangeness in Young's poem: there is a considerable degree of presumption in the intertextual company the speaker assembles around himself. "No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be," says Eliot's Prufrock, thus being both modest and assertive (assertive because he dares even to consider such an identification), but to Young's persona such modesty is quite unknown. His speaker asserts: I think like Hamlet and I share his existential predicament. I am also just like Macbeth, in that we both cannot sleep: I am thus a tragic hero.

One parameter that determines the liminal line separating identification from estrangement is thus the poetic speaker's self-positioning in a cline between hubristic presumption and self-effacing modesty. Our own reading experiences prove that our responses and identifications are not absolute, that yesterday's exemplary hero may become today's preposterous braggart. In other words, we as individuals will often disagree with our former reading selves and will define excessive modesty or exorbitant hubris quite differently in the course of our lifetime. But such shifts in evaluation also occur at a larger, historical scale: Shakespeare's prestige being what it is today cannot but make Young's appropriating allusions look like unacceptable *folie de grandeur*.

If the estrangement based on tedious repetitions can often be explained by the *distancing* effect of depersonalization, the alienation occurring through allusions is usually rooted in excessive familiarity, in ingratiation, and in the imposition of what Hans Robert Jauss has called a regressive mode of identification. Provisionally we can define a regressive mode of identification as a state in which we as readers accept and assume self-elevating role models as they occur in daydreaming, and as a state in which we allow ourselves to enjoy the inflicting of pain on others and ourselves (as in Young, where we are cajoled into enjoying the painful thought of our own mortality). Both excessive strangeness and excessive familiarity thus alienate letter writers from each other and poets from their readers.

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