Introduction

TO WHOM does a poem speak? Do poems really communicate with those they address? Is reading poems like overhearing? Like intimate conversation? Like performing a script? In this book I pursue these questions by reading closely a selection of poems that say *you* to a human being, and by trying to describe the reading process as it encounters these instances of address. In the diverse poems I discuss here—poems not just addressing different categories of fictive and real persons but written in several different eras and languages—the address itself always becomes an axis of the poem's concern. The poem persistently revolves around, or thinks about, the contact that it is (or is not) making with the person to whom it is speaking.[1]

I have wanted to study this kind of lyric address because collectively such poems suggest a way of talking about poetry as a form of contact.[2]

1. I leave aside, as not raising the same questions, both apostrophe to nonhuman entities—houses, tigers, the age—and most poems addressing groups of people.

Readers interested in the *you* of advertising and recruitment posters ("Uncle Sam wants YOU") should see Spitzer's 1949 essay "American Advertising" (350–51). Spitzer stresses the ambiguities permitted by the English *you*, which can correspond to five distinct forms in some other languages (singular and plural familiar and polite, as well as the impersonal pronoun). French and Russian poems frequently address a polite *vous* or *vy*, whereas the formal *Sie* is rare in German poetry. (I have no account of why this should be so.) The classic study of the *T* and *V* pronouns (as they are called) across languages is by Brown and Gilman.

2. I speak of "poetry" and "lyric" interchangeably throughout the book. This practice is

It is arguable whether, as W. R. Johnson claims (3), every human addressee in a poem is directly or indirectly a figure for you, the poem's actual reader; might the reader not find herself identifying with the poetic speaker more than with that speaker's addressed beloved? But there is a continuity between poems addressing the poet's friends, lovers, or missing dead and those other works—the later focus of this book—that dwell on their own reception by a reader. When poems address their readers, the topic of the pronoun *you* and the topic of reading (what it is like to be a person reading a poem) become two sides of a single coin. This, then, is the end to which my investigation of lyric address leads: the claim that we as readers may feel in second-person poems, in a poem's touch, an intimation of why poetry is valuable, why it matters to us, and how we might come to feel answerable to it.[3]

Readings that bring poetry's *you* to the fore lay before us an unusual perspective. At least since the Romantics and Hegel, the preponderance of attention has gone to the "lyric I" and lyric subjectivity. Poems are still commonly thought of as sheer expression, the voice of the *I* "*over*heard," as John Stuart Mill put it, distinguished by "the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener" (12). Lyric is famous for calling upon things that do not hear—the west wind, a skylark, death, one's pen, and so on—and this could make us think that the word *you* in poetry is suspended from doing what it usually does. All that hailing of abstractions, objects, and people can look like so much empty rhetorical flourishing, address cut off

not new—see Preminger s.v. "lyric"—but I am aware of two possible objections: first that the English term "lyric" should be reserved for its narrow sense of poems with a special relationship to music, and second (a different point) that "poetry" is anyway too broad a category to be critically useful. For the first, I prefer to acknowledge that "lyric" has come to have, in English as in German, both narrow and broad senses; context makes clear the intended use (see Lamping 76–78 for a critique of the notion that lyric is related to song). For the second objection, I hope the book will prove itself, even without being able to say what poetry is.

3. I do not take up the question of how reading poems (silently or aloud) is different from reciting them or hearing them read aloud or recited. I write, and mostly think, of readers; many points hold true for listeners as well. Also, "second-person poems," as I use the phrase, are poems preoccupied with address, though many of them also say *I* and could therefore be called first-person poems as well.

Certain critical conventions hold that instead of touch we must always speak of an unbridgeable gap between the linguistic and the real, or between the ostensible act and its meaning (as when saying *you*, for example, is taken to be an attempt to hoodwink or dominate the other). What has not been clear, however, is how to square these ideas with the way people actually read, and with what makes us care about reading.

from any possible efficacy and so gone slightly mad.[4] A consequence of this view is that address would be incidental to the real matter of a poem. Who (or what) gets addressed, when and how, will say little about the work's artistic or human concerns if all a poem's hailings are equally void of effect and therefore essentially interchangeable.

In fact, the prevailing critical approach to poetic address—when critics have attended to address at all—presumes a version of this idea. Northrop Frye followed up Mill's aperçu by proposing that "the poet . . . turns his back on his listeners" (*Anatomy* 250). Jonathan Culler responded with a seminal essay, "Apostrophe," in which he argues that the figure of poetic address *is* essential to lyric. Culler writes that apostrophe—principally calling on beings that do not hear—is "the pure embodiment of poetic pretension" (143); when he goes further and proposes that one might seek "to identify apostrophe with lyric itself" (137), he, like Frye, suggests that lyric is radically turned away from any actual hearer and is preoccupied instead with the poet's own effort to sound like a poet ("poetic pretension").[5] Numerous critics have since developed Culler's theory of apostrophe, but the arguments continue to imply that a poet turns his back not just on his listeners but also on any differentiation between the entities he addresses (listening or not).[6]

There were admittedly good reasons for the line of thinking that developed these various notions of poetry as overheard or as not genuinely communicative (bent on fictive addressees). Theorists from antiquity onward have spoken of the lyric as a monologic genre, and though that term originally meant that only one voice speaks, it is often understood as if it meant instead that a poem has no hearer beyond the poet himself, no true *you* (and so only a plethora of false ones). The ways a poem resembles ordinary communication (as a short form that can consistently be an ad-

4. The variety of unhearing addressees in lyric increased with Kenneth Koch's book of witty apostrophic poems *New Addresses* (2000), poems that speak "To Orgasms," "To My Old Addresses," "To My Fifties," "To World War Two" ("You were large . . . "), and so on.

5. Throughout this book I restrict the term "apostrophe" to mean only address to unhearing entities, whether these be abstractions, inanimate objects, animals, or dead or absent people. Some writers (Jonathan Culler and Barbara Johnson, for example) implicitly follow this same practice; other writers, by contrast, speak of "apostrophes to the reader," which in my own usage would be a contradiction in terms. In chapter 4 I discuss in detail the end of Culler's essay, where he turns to a poem that does address a person.

6. Writers who have developed or critiqued Culler's notion of apostrophe include Clymer, Engler, Findlay, Barbara Johnson, and Kneale. See also de Man, "Autobiography" and

dress from one person to another) make us especially aware of how it differs, too; and one of the chief differences is that much poetry is unconstrained by the care for an interlocutor that governs conversation or letter writing.

But key facts have been lost to view in the critical focus on address as a rhetorical trope or as a maneuver of the monologic poetic self.[7] For one thing, the implication that all poetic addresses are equally fictive distorts literary history: like J. S. Mill himself, critics in this vein have, consciously or not, been taking the Romantic lyric or ode as a prototype—"feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude" (12). But countless poems have been addressed to a patron, or "To the Reader"; more than one epoch has given pride of place to these forms. Such poems *are* mindful of their addressees and are concerned to guide their uptake, and this fact must weigh against the view just presented. Still more crucially, in many poems of every kind and era—and this topic, more than literary-historical concerns, will occupy me in this book—address is deeply bound up with what the work intends to express. Saying *you*, and the irreplaceable particularity of that addressee, can be the center of a poem's gravity. This may be true even when, as in elegy, the addressee is a person who cannot hear. For example, in Catullus's celebrated lament addressed to his dead brother, the poet says he has traveled across many peoples and seas to the funeral rites

> ut te postremo donarem munere mortis
> et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem
>
> so that I might present you with the last gift of death
> and might address in vain the mute ash.[8]

The paradox of a difficult journey undertaken "in order to" do something "in vain"—namely address the dead, as he is now doing—touches near the heart of the poet's anguish and the poem's act. But this hopeless address to the absent is, as much as any other rite, itself the "last gift of death" that the poet brings. The address and its futility are both utterly integral to Catullus's poem. To discuss this address chiefly as an example of apostrophic trope would miss seeing that the reality of the human addressee is what this poem is about, and is why it is so affecting.

7. Sell 86–88 reviews the arguments of language theorists against the notion of monologue as "not interactive"; Preminger s.v. "monologue" makes similar points concerning literary monologue specifically.

8. Catullus 83, poem 101; trans. Fitzgerald 187.

In this book I will be especially concerned to draw attention to those poems, like Catullus's, which have been shaped to bear or transmit the specific force of the poem's direction and manner of address. But as for the countervailing arguments about the ways poetry is suspended from real communicative exchange and about the excessive array of *you*'s it has been hailing, as if compensatorily, since the earliest Greek lyrics—these arguments are (I will suggest) also present in the poems themselves. For example, doubts about the effectiveness of poetic address may become, as in Catullus's lines, integral to the quality of that address. In other poems, the lyric's removal from any set interlocutor opens new possibilities of self-invention or self-forgetfulness, which are in turn new forms of relation to the world, not given in quotidian language; these find their expression in the poem's conduct of its own specifically poetic ways of saying *you*.

One can easily imagine a literary-critical endeavor that would isolate some grammatical feature of texts—say, certain patterns of verb tense or mood—and identify a body of poetry that deploys this grammar with cunning or large effect. It is vital to see that address is not a linguistic feature of this kind. Rather it is the meridian of all discourse, the plumb line without which pragmatics, and so language, are strictly unthinkable. Every coherent utterance aligns itself to, is coherent with respect to, some conception of its intelligibility, and intelligibility means uptake, receivability. Even self-address is modeled, as the term itself shows, on address in the more general sense. So address is not in the strict sense a grammatical category at all; it is the fiber of language's use and being, inseparable from every word in every sentence.

In both speech and writing it is context, rather than a vocative form or the pronoun *you*, which shows us that a stretch of language is addressed to someone.[9] Most of the sentences I say to people, or write in a letter, contain no formal marker of address at all, because context has sufficed to make it clear to all interlocutors who is speaking to whom, in what situation. Short written poems, however, usually lack the cues that would play this role. Appearing without disambiguating context, such works

9. Sperber and Wilson's principle of "loose talk" (233–37), which governs human communication strategies in general, is one way of accounting for the context-determination of addressedness. Vocatives are noun phrases that refer to the addressee but are "not syntactically or semantically incorporated as the arguments of a predicate" (Levinson, *Pragmatics* 71), like "Ah, sunflower" or "grave Sir." (Vocatives also may include, or be closely akin to, greetings, partings, and ritual formulae, like "Gesundheit" said after a sneeze. I discuss the character of greetings in chapter 2.)

feel not so much unaddressed as underspecified for address, a crucial observation that accounts, in turn, both for the great importance of those markers of address that do appear in poetry and, as I will argue later, for a pattern of critical anxiety about *whom* poems are addressing which has left its mark on poetry criticism.

The second person and the vocative do not exhaust the ways in which poems can signal their addressees. Third-person phrases like "the reader" or "the listener"—as in the title of John Ashbery's poem "But What Is the Reader to Make of This?"—touch actual readers without addressing (saying *you* to) them. Questions, too, may find a place on the spectrum of ways an interlocutor's presence is felt; but the profusion of rhetorical questions produced by apparently solitary poetic speakers ("O how shall summer's honey breath hold out / Against the wreckful siege of battering days?") makes it a vexed issue to what extent interrogatives in general convey an explicit direction of address.[10] It would be wrong to think that every question in poetry marks the presence of a hearer. Finally, Ashbery's title "But What Is the Reader to Make of This?" illustrates also how the demonstrative *this* in a poem can designate the poem itself and so foreground the situation of reading in a way that resembles direct address to the reader.[11] These indirect allusions to the addressee lie on the periphery of my scope here; I come to self-referential lyric deixis ("this") briefly in the penultimate chapter, "The Continuance of Poems." For the most part, this book is given over to the rich variations on explicit second-person address that run through lyric poetry from antiquity forward.

The topic of poetry's addressees, to say nothing of the larger questions it raises, has attracted modest scholarly attention. John Stuart Mill opened and shut the case for most later critics with his apothegm that "poetry is *over*heard," since by these lights all poetic *you*'s must be apostrophic in the rhetorician Quintilian's sense: they turn aside (ἀπο-στρέφειν) to someone, or something, that is not the principal listener. Since Culler's essay

10. Shakespeare, sonnet 65. On questions in poetry, see Wolfson.

11. See Shakespeare's sonnet 18 or 55, for example. Compare the various forms of third-person phrases that gesture toward the moment of reading, each with a slightly different effect, like "my book" (Jonson), "the poem" (Ashbery), "this verse" (Shelley, "West Wind" l. 65), or "black ink" (Shakespeare, sonnet 65); there are many more. Smith (*Poetic Closure* 150) claims that reflexive reference of these kinds "is possible only in a poetic tradition in which the concept of the poem as literary artifact is acceptable. As we would expect, it is rare in the Romantic lyric or wherever the illusion of the poem as a direct unartful utterance must not be jeopardized." (Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" would be a famous exception.)

"Apostrophe" (1977), modern criticism on the topic of poetic address has taken this type of addressee ("O wild West Wind") as its chief object.[12]

But a comparative study of address must also register multiple addressees within a single poem (rather the rule than the exception), and must concede uncertainty in the plentiful cases where a *you* eludes simple categorization. This is difficult ground. Theorists of narrative have developed a substantial body of work which at first seems to be pertinent here, focused at one very productive end on the reader and the operations of reading, and at the other on a taxonomy of the functions that the word *you* can fulfill in narrative fiction: designating narratee, protagonist, "mock" reader, inscribed or implied readers, and so on. (We have come some distance from the first puzzled critical responses to Michel Butor's 1957 novel in the second person, *La modification* [A change of heart]). But the pronouns and other deictics of the lyric poem are, as Käte Hamburger showed, epistemologically different from those of narrative fiction. And without diegesis (a "story"), lyric poems have no protagonist and thus cannot address him or her in the second person—which is the technique of so-called true second-person narrative, the chief object of recent narratological interest in the *you*-form.[13] Finally, narrative typologies, which are based on the concept of embedded levels, are helpless before poetry's freedom to move between communicative frameworks with a suddenness, or disregard, rare in any other use of language. The awkward fact is

12. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 4.1.63–70.

There are exceptions to the emphasis on apostrophe, and I cite some of them in the pages that follow. In overview: T. S. Eliot in "The Three Voices of Poetry"—in part an answer to Gottfried Benn's reflections on "monologic lyric"—had considered various aspects of poetic address but emphasized the "third voice," poetic drama. Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer ("Addresses") held an exchange regarding Dante's addresses to the reader in the *Commedia*. Holden criticized excessive use of an ambiguous *you* in 1970s American poetry. Grabher studies the use of *you* in Plath, Levertov, and Ammons in a philosophical matrix (Husserl, Heidegger, Buber, Sartre). Criticism of Ashbery and Celan, special cases, is hard to apply more generally, though Costello's fine essay on Ashbery is a notable exception. See also Holloway, and Masel. Shapiro and Shapiro venture to bring Bakhtinian dialogism to the study of the lyric. The fullest studies of reader address in poetry concern Whitman, that most insistent of all poets when it comes to hailing the reader: see Larson's excellent book, as well as Nathanson and Hollis (88–123). Hollander takes up poetic imperatives, and Jackson and Rosenthal provide valuable insights into the figure of address in Dickinson and in sixteenth-century French lyric, respectively. Anne Ferry sheds light on the history and interpretive implications of those dimensions of address relating to how poems are titled (see esp. chap. 4, 105–36).

13. The collection of essays and the bibliography edited by Fludernik provide good orientation to the *you* of narrative fiction.

that poetry, from the brash parlando of Archilochus to the pronominal lability of John Ashbery, enacts—for us, as readers, now—not so much a stable communicative situation as a chronic hesitation, a faltering, between monologue and dialogue, between "talking about" and "talking to," third and second person, indifference to interlocutors and the yearning to have one.

Part of the reason for this instability lies in the complex historical and cognitive shift between oral delivery and writing as modes of poetic transmission.[14] This shift (or tension: its still active forces can be felt in the difficulty of discussing poetry without metaphors of voice or speech) is lastingly implicated in what we readers experience as poetry's *désancrage*, or "uprootedness," from any specified communicative situation.[15] Who is speaking (or writing), to whom, in what context? It is difficult to answer these very basic pragmatic questions with respect to a poem. The resulting kinds of ambiguity have become integral to modern written poetry, so that to read a poem is, again, to enter an underspecified communicative act.[16]

It was not always this way. Lyric compositions were once embedded in a context of use to a degree that would be exceptional today. But they were dislodged very early, with developments in ancient Greek lyric around the fourth century BCE.[17] As Gordon Williams explains:

14. The accumulated scholarship on the relationship between literature's forms and orality-and-literacy is vast. To mention a handful of starting places: the classic works are by Havelock (*Preface to Plato*), Derrida, and Ong (*Orality and Literacy*). See also Svenbro and Thomas on ancient Greek literacy. Concerning medieval Europe, see Zumthor and also Doane and Pasternack. Coulmas takes up various aspects including ideographic versus alphabetic cultures; Ehlich discusses deixis; and Tedlock provides an anthropological perspective. Berry and Griffiths treat the question of voice and writing in poetry, as does Schmitz-Emans (*Schrift*). On contemporary poetry, see Bernstein. A good book on the literary meaning of "physical aspects of texts" is Levenston's *Stuff of Literature*.

15. It will be evident that for my part I have chosen not to restrain metaphors of voice in the way I describe poetry. Certain critics contend that it is imperative to distinguish categorically between writing and orality in lyric. As I have just suggested, though, the overlap is so pervasive in how we talk and write about poetry that such strenuous distinctions force critical language into labored circumlocutions. For a contrasting treatment of the "nostalgia" of lyrical voice as "deluded," see de Man's essay "Anthropomorphism" (262).

16. I mean "integral" seriously, which is why I cannot go along with scholars in stylistics who maintain, for example, that "to understand a poem is to construct for it an appropriate context of utterance" or that "an interpretation of a poem is a completion of a speech act" (Kasher and Kasher 79). The context always remains half-constructed, the speech act incomplete.

17. Other historical junctures have been nominated as bringing about the lyric's detachment from context. Some say the early twentieth or late nineteenth century marked the turn-