



Readers and Point-of-view in Contemporary Poems: a Question of Pronouns

Lesley Jeffries



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/esa/1526>
DOI: 10.4000/esa.1526
ISSN: 2650-2623

Publisher

Société de stylistique anglaise

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 March 2013
Number of pages: 175-190
ISSN: 2116-1747

Electronic reference

Lesley Jeffries, « Readers and Point-of-view in Contemporary Poems: a Question of Pronouns », *Études de stylistique anglaise* [Online], 4 | 2013, Online since 19 February 2019, connection on 20 April 2019.
URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/esa/1526> ; DOI : 10.4000/esa.1526

READERS AND POINT-OF-VIEW IN CONTEMPORARY POEMS: A QUESTION OF PRONOUNS

Lesley Jeffries
University of Huddersfield, U.K.

Résumé : Cet article étudie l'utilisation des pronoms dans une cinquantaine de poèmes en anglais et suggère une typologie partielle de l'utilisation et de la signification des pronoms en poésie du point de vue de la réception.

Mots-clés : style, poésie contemporaine, utilisation des pronoms, deixis.

Introduction

Point of view has long been of interest to literary critics and stylisticians, probably because, as Stockwell (2002:41) says of reading literature:

It is as if a threshold is crossed and readers can project their minds into the other world, find their way around there, and fill out the rich detail between the words of the text on the basis of real life experience and knowledge.

Much discussion of this phenomenon has been in relation to fictional texts, ignoring other genres and text types, as McIntyre (2006) points out, and focussing largely on the narrative role. McIntyre's aim is to consider point of view in dramatic texts and he notes that the usual absence of a narrator in plays and film scripts is not necessarily a stumbling block, though the usual approach to point of view "does not take into account the position from which readers of dramatic texts interpret events in the fictional world" (McIntyre 2006:14). It is

precisely the position of readers in relation to the worlds created by, in my case, poems, that this article wishes to address.

The aim of this article is to explore the position(s) readers may take up in relation to a poem's deictic centre(s) as a result of the poem using particular combinations of personal pronouns. Drawing on deictic shift theory (DST) and broader concepts of person deixis, I will demonstrate the range of reader positioning that appear to be favoured in a small corpus of contemporary poetry in English. These observations may have wider applications beyond the specific contemporary poetry used here and beyond poetry in English, but such applications await further investigation.

Person deixis

One of the three core types of deixis (person, place and time), person deixis is primarily communicated through the personal pronoun system in English. Unlike the other two deictic systems of space and time, person deixis does not exhibit clearly the distinction between proximal and distal deixis whereby the linguistic items concerned indicate that the speaker is near to (proximal) or far from (distal) the referent concerned. The place and time referred to by the adverbs *here* and *now* identify the speaker's current position and time of speaking whereas *there* and *then* indicate a time and place distant from the speaker at the time of speaking.

It is tempting to continue this pattern when considering the normal (conversational) use of personal pronouns, labelling *I/me/we/us* as proximal and *you* as distal. In face-to-face interaction, they seem to behave like the adverbs of place and time in indicating the most proximal referent to the speaker (*I*) and the distal (*you*) in the form of the addressee¹. The problem with this is that personal pronouns form a three-part system which has another member, the third person pronoun (*she/he/her/him/they/them*). The proximity of their referents to the speaker seems to be at another remove – somehow 'super-distal'. The alternative is to see the *I-you* dyad as deictic, but the third person pronouns as non-deictic because a change of speaker does not necessarily lead to a change in the referent of third person pronouns. But this ignores the fact that third person pronouns themselves do still shift in reference, depending on who is being discussed. In addition, it is not clear that it is always

¹ There is, in addition, the complication of inclusive versus exclusive *we/us* which can (or needn't) include the addressee as a referent. This just makes the proximal/distal distinction even more complex in relation to person deixis.

the change of speaker itself that lends deictic items the referential power of other deictic forms. Though *here* is linked in some way to the personal consciousness of the speaker, for example, other accepted deictic items, such as *last week* or *opposite* (the house) owe more to their temporal context or surroundings than to the identity of the speaker.

Below, I will consider the question of how readers identify with the referents of pronouns in texts and specifically in poems, but first it will be helpful to address the question of how textual deixis works when the text is not part of face-to-face interaction.

Deictic Shift Theory

If deixis is, as it appears to be, a function that evolved from the conversational context of face-to-face interaction, then one of the questions that stylistics needs to address is how this works in contexts where the speaker (or author/narrator etc in written texts) is not present in the same time and space as the hearer (or reader). In face-to-face interaction, the deictic centre is clear, as the speaker is the producer of the text and her/his positioning in time and space defines the deictic centre. When the turn changes to another speaker, the deictic centre also changes. This basic process can also be used when the speakers are at a distance in time (e.g. in exchanging of letters or emails) and/or space (e.g. speaking on the phone) because one of the linguistically-based abilities that human beings have developed is the ability to project into their addressee's deictic centre. They are able, for example, to imagine the place where the addressee is, even from the other end of a telephone, and give directions as if they were seeing the scene from the point of view of the hearer. This is the first shift of deixis from a direct situational ability to a virtual ability to envisage a time/space envelope different from that of the speaker him/herself.

Deictic Shift Theory (Duchan et al 1995) is the next step; allowing for the ability of readers or hearers to mentally place themselves at the deictic centre of texts where they have no direct experience of the situation being referred to. This is the ability which enables us to enjoy reading fiction, listen to personal anecdotes, imagine non-existent worlds or places and times we have no opportunity to experience. McIntyre (2006:104) describes it as:

an attempt to explain how it is that readers often come to feel deeply involved in narratives, to the extent that they interpret events in a narrative as if they were experiencing them from a position within the story world.

The theory of deictic shifting suggests that what readers do when they navigate such a text is to imagine the situation, the time and the people involved and mentally place themselves within that situation – possibly as one of the protagonists or as the omniscient narrator if there is one. As the narrative focus of the text changes, the reader is encouraged by the deictic elements to ‘shift’ to different vantage points, either by changing the persona they are identifying with or by mentally moving from one place or time to another as suggested by the text.

What has not been clearly examined in this attractive account of reader positioning in texts is the question of whether the reader always and only identifies with the proximal end of the deictic range, which seems to be the implication of deictic shift theory. In Jeffries (2000) I first worried about the problem in relation to poetry when confronted by the line:

Downstairs they will think I have lost my mind

In this poem (‘Small Female Skull’) by Carol Ann Duffy, the narrator is apparently locked in the bathroom cradling her head in her hands (with a hangover? a headache?) whilst the assembled company (downstairs) wonders what is going on. As a reader, I am conscious of being split between identifying with the first person of the narrator (*I*) and with the others who are *downstairs*, even though the latter are referred to by the third person, super-distal, *they*. This experience raises the questions of how deictic centring impinges on reader positioning and whether the point of view of a reader can be multiple (e.g. both in the bathroom with the narrator and downstairs with the others, wondering whether she has lost her mind) or switching (e.g. from the bathroom to the downstairs) even against the tendency to stay with proximal deictic features.

At this point, I would like to address the specific generic expectations that we might postulate for the reader of poems. Whilst there remains much to say about reader positioning in general, this article is concerned with poems in particular and I would argue that there are some generic expectations which impinge on the reader position in poetic text worlds and might not work in the same way for other texts.

The first of these generic expectations is that in the absence of other evidence (such as a clear indication that the poem is the voice of a particular person apart from the poet), the reader will make the assumption that a first person voice is that of the poet, rather than another author. This means that unlike fiction, where (unless it is specifically stated to the contrary) we do not usually assume that it is ‘true’, poetry has the illusion of being potentially a

truthful narrative of real people and events, albeit through the prism of rather elaborated and often obscure language.

Another generic assumption, culturally evidenced in the use of poetry for the inside of greetings cards and for recitation at weddings and funerals, is that poetry produces – or perhaps requires – high levels of reader involvement on the emotional plane which have social functions in expressing strong emotions on behalf of the reader at culturally and personally significant points in the reader's life. Thus, the stereotypical love poem is not just a message from the original poet to the original addressee, but performs a function for us all in (we hope) expressing those feelings we are less able than the poet to put into words. Similarly, of course, with bereavement poems, poems of joy at the birth of a child and so on. Other forms of literature, short fiction, novels and plays, do not have anything like the same range of potential social functions as poetry, despite the fact that they also may express human truths in aesthetically pleasing and emotionally satisfying ways.

Two further generic expectations are probably less deeply embedded in the historical function or form of poetry in English at least, but I think they have become part of the contemporary poetry reader's expectation of the reading experience. The first of these is the expectation that contemporary poetry will involve some relatively sudden deictic shifts which may well cause the reader to have to work quite hard to piece together anything approaching a 'narrative' in the poem. The second expectation is that there may well be a high level of what we can call referential vagueness in contemporary poems.

Taken together, these generic expectations lead the reader to the default assumptions that follow:

- The first person narrator is the poet
- Any second person narrator is probably a real person addressed by the poet
- As a reader, I am expecting/expected to become emotionally involved in the poem
- There may well be some surprising and/or superficially incomprehensible cracks in the smooth narration of the poem. As a reader, I will have to work out what is missing from the text which will make sense of the narrative.

Pronoun reference in English

Before presenting the research underlying this article, let us consider Wales' (1996) view of the various pronominal forms of English. Wales' study of pronouns, though primarily describing the range of form and meaning of pronominal forms in English decontextually, nevertheless refers to the contextual function of pronouns:

While we can take the canonical speech situation as our starting-point, it is more illuminating for the analysis of pronominal behaviour, roles and changes to think, for example, of speaker-orientation and addressee-orientation... Viewed in this way, the traditional distinctions of first, second and third person become blurred, since, for example, the first person 'slot' can be filled with we, you, and one as well as I (Wales 1996: 7)

Wales (1996: 69) rightly points out that the actual discursual uses of the traditionally-labelled first, second and third person forms vary to the extent that reference in relation to pronouns is very slippery indeed, even if you know who the speaker is. For example:

apart from *they* and *it*, all the personal pronouns (including *one*) can be used egocentrically... Conversely, the 1PP I appears to be fixed in its reference to the 'ego' who speaks, and so is essentially reflexive. One interesting exception, however, has implications for this common view that the basic 'deictic anchorage' is speaker-oriented... *I* meaning *you* occurs in utterances such as

I should ring them up

Thus, although any of the pronouns can be used to refer to the speaker, *I* normally has only the speaker as referent, though she provides one exception to that rule.

Finally, and most relevantly for my discussion here, Wales points out that:

In view of the wide range of potential references for *you*, it is not surprising, as Fludernik (1993) illustrates, that readers of so-called 'second person' fiction may have initial difficulties in deciding whether the *you* refers to themselves as readers, people in general including the reader and/or narrator, a specific narratee or the actual narrator."

(Wales 1996: 79)

These observations, whilst relevant and insightful, do not quite capture the whole picture of pronoun use, reference and reader involvement as seen in contemporary poems. The remainder of this article will attempt to bring some light to bear upon these issues.

The present study

The study reported here follows from Jeffries (2008) in which I analysed two poems to try and establish how the text appears to ‘invite the reader in’ and what it might mean when they *don’t* do so. In this study, I expanded the sample to fifty contemporary poems; categorised them according to their pronoun usage and other person deixis features and made an assessment of the *potential* for reader involvement in the poems as a result of the person deixis. The real test of these findings will be to find a way to use reader responses to assess whether there is anything generalisable about the impact of personal deixis on reader involvement. This will have to wait for another project.

Here, I first of all categorized each poem according to the combination of pronoun forms which were used in them. The categories that emerged from the fifty poems were the result of considering the pronoun forms with little regard initially for their reference. I then considered each poem individually to ascertain whether some of the pronouns appeared to have referents apart from their ‘textbook’ ones, as pointed out by Wales and Fludernik. The resulting categories of pronoun combination are discussed below.

First person narration with no addressee

Whilst not the largest group, there is nevertheless a recognisable group of poems in my data with a first person narrator, no other pronoun use and few (if any) other foregrounded participants. This makes it likely that the reader will identify with the only available personal deictic centre. Where there is a clear persona other than the poet being referenced by the first person – and particularly perhaps where it is plural (e.g. the *we* of Armitage’s ‘The Tyre’?) – there may be less inclination to identify with that persona on the part of the reader, though the reader may well have their own personal memories of similar events triggered.

Vicki Feaver’s ‘Ironing’ is a poem about a woman who goes through phases of domestic servitude (characterised by the unnecessary ironing of towels), isolation and depression (indicated by a complete lack of ironing) and finally freedom (signified by ironing of only personal items of clothing). Though clearly a poem about being abandoned, the strength of this poem partly lies in the lack of addressee or referent. She might have indicated her resentment of the absent lover, either in addressing him/her (*you*) or in referring to him (*s/he*) – and this is what does happen in other poems as we will see below. But Feaver decides instead to indicate her (her narrator’s?) changing emotions

through the variation in activity of a familiar domestic chore. This leaves us in no doubt about her frustration and anger in the first phase (*I stood like a horse/with a smoking hoof*), her indifference in the second phase (*I converted to crumpledness*) and her contentedness in the third phase (*breathing the sweet heated smell*) but she never addresses, nor refers to, the absent lover directly.

First person narration with one specific third person referent

Poems which combine the first person with a specific third person seem to congregate around three themes in my data. First, there are the poems in which the narrator expresses anger, usually in relation to (but not directly at) a lover/partner or ex-lover/partner. These include, for example, Duffy's poem 'Havisham' about the jilted bride from Dickens' *Great Expectations*:

Not a day since then
I haven't wished him dead.
'Havisham' (Duffy)

Secondly, there are poems whose topic is the memory of a dead person/people or sometimes of a historical/mythical or fictional character. In my data, these include 'Elegy for the Bee God' (Hill), 'Requiem for the Croppies' (Heaney), 'Captain Marsh' (Sweeney). It is worth noting that none of these refers to a dead lover or partner, though some of them, such as 'Mid-term break' (Heaney), 'Mittens' (Sansom) seem to refer to dead family members:

Cutting bread brings her hands back to me
'Doorsteps' (Gililan)

Finally, there are a small number of exceptions to the topics of anger and memory (with/about a person/people) and what is striking about these is that they have a tendency to have *plural* third person referents as in 'Litany' (Duffy) or in the case of 'The Thought Fox' (Hughes), an animal referent. This group are also 'memory' poems in that they tend to refer to particular incidents in the memory of the narrator, who is the first person referent of the poem and likely to be interpreted as the poet, given the generic expectations I discussed above. Unlike the second category, where the memory is about a specific person/people, these third person referents appear to be present in the backgrounded deictic field of the incident rather than being the main focus of the memory itself:

My eyes search their faces for
the son I don't yet have.
'Pond Dipping' (Wardle)

The options for readers identifying with the deictic centre of people in these poems are relatively restricted. The most likely deictic centre for the reader to opt into is the first person narrator's, though one could question (or explore through reader-response questionnaires) whether this depends on gender, where gender is known, in the case of the poems about anger in relation to a partner/lover. It seems very unlikely that readers will identify with the dead person in the second group, partly because they are referred to in the third person, but mostly because they are dead. In the third group, the nature of the narration (an incident in memory) will predispose readers to identify with the first person narrator and not the other characters in the poem, partly because they are mentioned in the plural or are not human (the fox) and partly because they are part of the scene rather than the focus of the poem itself.

First person narration with addressee

In the case of the classic *I/you* combination of pronouns, we might expect these poems to be largely love poems of a relatively traditional kind. There are such poems in my data, including 'The Kaleidoscope' (Dunn) and 'Valentine' (Duffy) where the addressee is clearly the lover. In 'The Kaleidoscope', Dunn is addressing his dead wife, which on the evidence of the last category, would indicate using the third person to refer to her. However, this poem's theme is the (unfulfilled) expectation he has of seeing her still in her bed and so the immediacy of addressing her directly (using *you*) is one that feeds into the emotional centre of the poem.

We might ask how the reader is likely to place him/herself into the deictic field of such a poem. Normal conversational experience would incline the reader to take up the position of addressee, identifying with the beloved. Perhaps the immediacy of Dunn's wife being addressed directly could overcome the reader's otherwise likely avoidance of identification with a dead person. It also feeds into the universal habit of day dreaming about how people will react to our death. Individual readers may be more inclined to identify with the narrative voice if they are male (heterosexual) and/or have lost a (female) partner, though readers are probably able to mentally 'translate' the genders/sexuality of protagonists and often do so in response not just to poems, but to song lyrics. Duffy's lover in 'Valentine' is perhaps even more likely to be the focus of the reader's deictic positioning as it is a clear cut *I/you* love poem, albeit sung with onions, rather than flowers (*I give you an onion*).

Another possibility with these poems is that the reader will identify with the first person rather than the addressee. This goes against norms of conversational interaction, but fits the generic expectations of poetry, particularly love poetry, where the dyad of the lover and beloved opens up the possibility of identification with either role. There is a tradition of the lover being male and the beloved female, but I would anticipate that this tradition no longer predisposes readers in quite the same way. What we can conclude about this kind of pronoun usage is that it is no predictor on its own of which persona the reader will identify with and that the other content as well as the background of the reader can influence this deictic relationship either way.

A third possibility is that the *I/you* dyad leaves no room for the reader, who is therefore obliged to mentally 'hover' above the scene like a cupid in flight, observing but not participating in the scene deictically. This is perhaps even more likely to be the case in poems with specific referents such as 'St Brendan explains to the Angel' where there is less scope for reader identification with either saints or angels than with the lover and beloved of other poems. However, it should be added that the generic expectation in prose fiction would be that it is more likely for readers to identify with omniscient narrator deictic centres when the narrative is in the third person. The assumption in relation to prose is that first person narration draws the reader into the narrator's deictic centre. The difference, of course, with much prose fiction is that there is rarely an explicit addressee who is referred to in the second person.

In addition to the classic *I/you* dyad poems, there are others in the data that bring in additional possible deictic centres for the reader to identify with. These include poems like 'A small slaughter' (Lorde) where there is some evidence that the second person pronoun form (*you*) is at times a specific addressee and at other times might be the reader. A similar deictic shift in reference happens in the holocaust poem 'Shooting Stars' (Duffy) where the *I/you* referents are both dead (*You waited for the bullet*) but the reader is also addressed, presumably from beyond the grave, by the narrator:

How would you prepare to die, on a perfect April evening
with young men gossiping and smoking by the graves?

There are also poems where the direct addressees are multiple, as in Harrison's 'Long Distance'. Here, there is the complicating factor of speech presentation (in italics) where the deictic centre of the first person shifts from the narrator (poet) to the father. The addressees are both of his parents and this probably precludes the reader identifying with them.

Another variation on the *I/you* poem is where the first person narrator includes someone else in the reference by using the plural *we*. Deakin's 'Prescription', for example, includes a main referent (the dead mother) as *you* and has a backgrounded narrator who is hardly mentioned, but occurs in an exclusive *we* which does not include the addressee but possibly includes other siblings or family members. Most readers would easily identify with this unspecified family in contemplating a dead mother or relative. A different effect is achieved by Hughes in 'Robbing Myself' where the narrator is captured in the singular pronoun *I* but the plural first person *we* seems to be the addressee (his wife, Sylvia Plath) and the specificity of the storytelling in the poem does not really invite the reader to take up either of the available deictic centres of Hughes or Plath. This produces the desirable effect of making the protagonists seem unreachable by those of us not included in their very tight-knit (and as we know from this distance, dysfunctional) relationship.

Third person narration

Though not providing such a great challenge to the reader in some ways, poems which are written as 3rd person narratives do produce a puzzle for the reader who has the generic expectation that s/he will be able to take up one of the deictic centres of the poem's characters. It is interesting, therefore, to see that the poems which are purely 3rd person narratives in my data do seem to find ways of providing a viewpoint for the reader to take up.

In 'Strange Fruit' for example, Heaney allows us only the position of the narrator/viewer of the ancient corpse of a girl by the use of the proximal 'here' to demonstrate that we are not seeing through the girl's eyes:

Here is the girl's head like an exhumed gourd.

By contrast, in 'Up on the moors with Keeper', despite all the participants being referred to in the third person, Dooley manages to make the viewpoint of the poem that of the three Bronte sisters, not their brother or father, by their prominence in the poem. The sisters are mostly the actors in material action processes, whereas their brother and father appear only as bit-part players in optional prepositional phrases, and usually referred to by a full noun phrase where the head noun indicates a relationship with the women, whereas the women themselves are more intimately referred to by the collective *they*:

They've kicked up their heels at a dull brother

So, as far as this data shows, 3rd person narratives despite their lack of obvious positions for the reader nevertheless guide the reader either to a participant's or to an omniscient narrator's point of view by means of other deictic or semantico-syntactic features.

Poems with a range of pronoun use

A very large number of the poems in my data, though short in length, combine a range of pronoun usage which gives the reader a much more unsettled experience and less chance of settling into a singular or unambiguous position in relation to the poem's deictic centre(s). There are, for example, poems written largely in first person, but with the occasional deictic 'pointing' to the universal use of *you*. Here it is in 'Blackberry-picking' (Heaney):

You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet

This poem is almost entirely narrated in the first person plural (*we*) but here, the reference to what *you* (= one) did becomes foregrounded internally by its departure from the *we* of the narration. Suddenly, the specific story of Heaney and his contemporaries as children invites the reader to take up the parallel position that any child out blackberry picking might occupy and even readers with no experience of this late summer activity will thereby be enabled to create, as it were, a false memory of such an experience.

Other poems seem to move between different possible pronoun combinations, meaning that the generic expectations of the reader that poetry will be 'difficult' to read are fulfilled as the reader repeatedly has to re-orient to the person deixis of the poem. 'Against Coupling' (Adcock) begins in the first person, but this is generalised by the use of *one* (*not feeling a trespassing tongue / forced into one's mouth*) so that although there is a lot of detail which seems to relate to the narrator's own experience of sex, the appeal to the reader is to position him/herself in this universal deictic centre. However, in stanza two, Adcock switches to third person (*as his gaze / stirs polypal fronds in the obscure / sea-bed of her body*) which the reader might conclude is a memory of young love seen as though from afar. The final stanza brings the reader to his/her own deictic centre again as the poem uses *you* to address the reader directly:

I advise you, then, to embrace it without
encumbrance.

The earlier use of *one* for universal reference makes the reader more inclined to view this later use of *you* as second person reference and the explicit nature of the speech act (*advise*) also places the reader directly in the position of addressee. I haven't addressed the question, here, of how male or lesbian readers would react to what is fairly obviously a heterosexual female narrative, but would be interested to conduct some kind of reader experiment to establish how the possible tensions between potential reader position and reader identity might manifest themselves in the reading process.

Second person narration

Perhaps the most common and certainly one of the most interesting uses of pronouns in the data considered for this project was the second person narrative. In these cases, there is no first person usage and the *you* becomes the default deictic centre of the poem. The result is that it is often possible to read a whole poem with *you* referring to the universal 'one' (which of course includes the reader) and also, by dint of the detail in the poem, clearly referring also to the narrator of the poem itself (i.e. equal to *I*). In 'Pain tells you what to wear', for example, McGuckian appeals first of all to some kind of existential experience of nature (*Once you have seen a crocus in the act / of giving way to the night*) which encourages the universal interpretation of the pronoun, but the increasingly specific detail in the rest of the poem belies this interpretation and implies that the narrator is telling her own story:

Of all silences, the hardest to bear
is the strange vegetation of your clothes,

Of course, there remains only one potential reader position here, so the merging of the universal with the particular does not cause a rift in the deictic position of the reader who moves smoothly from thinking in terms of universal human experiences to imagining the specific experience of the narrator from the inside. The additional effect of this smooth transition is that the narrator is experienced by the reader as being estranged even from her own experience, unable to use *I* of herself and seeing the world as suddenly alien and antagonistic:

a brand-new sleeve becoming haggard
with a garden's thousand adjoining moods.

A similar effect is created by the relatively delayed use of pronouns in 'Summer Evening' (Sansom) where the first stanza sets a very specific scene but includes only incidental participants, sometimes even deleted by the use of

the passive voice (*the garden centre's scented colours / are loaded in the backs of estates*) or by judicious personification (*that saw offices undress for lunch*) and there is no apparent internal point of view as a result. The second stanza, however, brings in a *you* pronoun which is repeated throughout a very detailed set of scenes as the persona walks by the river and emerges as having (possibly) been the narrator throughout the poem after all. The reader is therefore, gradually sucked into a specific deictic viewpoint of a character who, it seems, is not just having a pleasant walk on a summer evening, but is also having some relatively dark thoughts about oblivion:

you imagine
being out on that water, the drag
and viscous ripples as you pull,
then shipping oars and just letting it drift.

The chilling effect of the end of this poem which seems to begin very cheerfully is partly delivered by this careful use of narrative voice, starting very distant (or even impersonal) but ending as a very clear narrative viewpoint. By this stage the reader may be incapable of staying aloof from such a narrative viewpoint and the deictic effect of the poem on the reader thereby mimics the imagined effect of the river on the narrator.

Some poems make use of this potential of the pronoun form *you* to link the reader, the narrator and the universal (everyone) as a way of presenting emotions and experiences that can be interpreted personally though the reader's own experiences. 'Song of the Non-existent' (Rumens) for example, sets out a scene of unease at dusk where 'Anxiety walks across to the polished counter' and where first of the two occurrences of the pronoun *you* is interpretable as *I* (i.e. the poet/narrator):

This is the page on which you write the word 'angels'

and the second is more clearly potentially both the narrator and the reader:

**your sudden reluctance to remember
How hard it was, and how beautiful, to live.**

It would be premature to assume that all such uses of *you* as the sole deictic centre of poems were equally anxious or depressed, though my data does bear out this interpretation.

Conclusions

One of the clearest conclusions of this project is that there is some interesting scope for reader response research to be carried out in relation to reader positioning in poems. However, this is not at all easy to do and there are many obstacles in the way which would make such research perhaps less satisfactory than we would wish. In the meantime, I am of the opinion that there is a great deal that we can say about the way that texts use linguistic features to predispose readers towards taking up one or other (or more than one) point of view.

One amongst a number of the features of language which seems to be particularly powerful in this regard is personal deixis as realized largely through personal pronouns. This project, therefore, took fifty contemporary poems and traced their use of a range of personal pronouns to establish what options the reader had in relation to taking up a viewpoint within the narrative. The resulting partial typology is as follows:

- I – first person narration
- I /you – first person narration with addressee
- I / (s/he) – first person narration with specific ‘other’
- S/he – third person narration with implied omniscient narrator
- S/he - third person narration with one or more participants as focalizer
- you - second person narration where you refers to I, one or you (the reader)

These categories are not watertight, nor do they adequately represent those poems where there are repeated shifts of viewpoint. There is further work to be done on the complete range of potential ‘identity points’ in poems, which can be an entirely linguistic task. It could be followed by a reader response project, to see whether the hypotheses produced by the linguistic analysis is matched by the responses. Both of these may be variable.

A full theory of personal deixis and reader positioning in poetry is still some way off, but there seem to me to be patterns emerging from this limited set of data which indicate that the effort is worthwhile and the insights into poetic meaning which result are useful.

References

- DUCHAN, J. F., BRUDER, G. A. and HEWITT, L. E. (eds) (1995) *Deixis in Narrative: A Cognitive Science Perspective*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- FLUDERNIK, M. (1993) *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction: The Linguistic Representation of Speech and Consciousness*. London: Routledge.
- JEFFRIES, L. (2000) 'Point of view and orientation in Carol Ann Duffy's Poetry', in Jeffries, L. and Sansom, P. (eds) *Reading Contemporary Poetry*. Huddersfield: Smith Doorstop Books. 54-68.
- JEFFRIES, L. (2008) 'The role of style in reader-involvement: deictic shifting in contemporary poems', *Journal of Literary Semantics* 37(1): 69-85.
- MCINTYRE, D. (2006) *Point of View in Plays: A Cognitive Stylistic Approach to Viewpoint in Drama and Other Text-types*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- STOCKWELL, P. (2002) *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.
- WALES, K. (1996) *Personal Pronouns in Present-Day English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.