THE ROLE OF THE TITLE IN POETIC DISCOURSE

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The extensive literature on discourse analysis which has sprung up in recent years has tended to focus very largely on spoken discourse; and this may partly explain why titles and headings, which are of course very much a feature of written texts, have failed to attract attention. However, they do constitute an important component of structure in many kinds of written material; newspaper headlines, headings in notices, names of books, chapter and section titles are just a few examples. The functions of such headings night seem too obvious to be of much interest; they serve to inform the reader of the subject matter of what follows, summarise the larger units they head, classify one unit in relation to others, and sometimes, as in the case of news headlines, to attract attention and arouse curiosity. In fact, to fulfil their purpose, they are expected to conform very closely to Grice's maxims of conversation (see Grice 1975): to be informative, accurate, relevant, brief and, usually, clear. They may well only arouse comment when they are judged to have failed in one of these respects.

I would like to look here at one particular category of heading, the titles of poems, since I feel that they often merit a little more consideration than they receive in critical and stylistic analyses of individual poems, where they are very often not mentioned at all. The lack of interest in titles shown by both students and professionals may reflect their possibly unconscious impression that the title is, in some sense, not really part of the poem at all, but merely something attached to it. I will return to this question later.

It is certainly true that a title is not an essential part of every poem. While we could hardly conceive of a novel without a title, poems can be untitled. This contrast between novels and poems of course reflects the fact

that poems often appear in collections, grouped under a single general title, and accordingly may have a less urgent need for individual labelling. For perhaps the most basic function of poem titles is that of labelling; like the proper name of an individual, the title of a poem provides a convenient means of identifying and referring to the work. The actual semantic content of the title is of little significance for the accomplishment of this function, and indeed poems can equally well be labelled by means of numbers or letters of the alphabet. The need for such labels is reflected in the tendency to resort to numbering or first lines as labels where the poet has not provided any. There is something more than mere convenience behind the labelling of poems, however; for the very fact of providing a title serves to identify the poem as an independent entity, to acknowledge it as a unified whole rather than a fragment or an accidental juxtaposition of fragments. In fact, then, a poet's choice not to title a poem may arise from a desire to avoid the suggestion of completeness and premeditated organisation which the title brings with it (think, for instance, of works by e. e. cummings); the very absence of a title may affect the reader's view of the poem.

Generally, however, the reader is likely to expect the title of a poem to be something more than a purely arbitrary label. Like the headings in more mundane types of literature, from science textbooks to classified directories, the titles of poems are probably typically expected to "sum up" the material they introduce — to present, in a concise form, what the poem is concerned with, some indication of its theme or subject matter. The assumption that, unless otherwise indicated, the title will sum up the theme seems to be so strong that a title may be judged to be misleading if it fails to do just this; witness one student's protest at the choice of title in Philip Larkin's poem *Toads*, which she felt turned out to be concerned with only one, metaphorical, toad, namely work.

Sometimes a title may merely sum up a theme which is, in any case, immediately obvious from a reading of the poem; in such cases our reading may not be much affected by whether or not we see its title first. Such titles may, like labels, be felt to have only a trivial role which is not worth noting. Nevertheless, they deserve recognition as possible indications of what the writer feels is important in the poem, or what he wishes us to have in our minds as we begin to read it. Moreover, such a title may sometimes function in the same way as a news headline, in arousing the reader's interest sufficiently to lead him to read the poem in the first place. Pratt (1977 : 60) observes that "titles and subtitles in literary works are there to invite people to commit themselves to the audience role". This role of titles is perhaps more obvious in novels, but should not be overlooked as a factor influencing poem titles as well. Finally, a title which sounds as if it sums up the main theme of the poem may sometimes lead to surprise when the poem is read; one example

is Louis MacNeice's *August*, which, though inspired by the month of August, is not so much about it as about the feeling of the passage of time which the month arouses in him. After reading a poem such as this one, it may well be worth returning to the title and considering why it might have been chosen in preference to something more directly linked to the theme; in this case, evidently, the source of his inspiration is important to MacNeice.

Titles identifying a theme may sum up the feeling of which the poem is an expression (as in Wilfred Owen's *Futility* or Robert Frost's *Loneliness*) or the event or individual portrayed in it (as in W. H. Auden's *The Quarry* or R. S. Thomas's *The Musician*). In all these examples, the title uses words which do not appear in the text of the poem at all. Another strategy, however, is to fill the title slot with some words from the poem itself — to use it, as it were, as a showcase providing a sample of the language of the poem, while at the same time usually providing some information about its subject matter. We have already mentioned the tendency for untitled poems to be labelled by their first name, but in some cases the poet himself uses the opening words of the poem as a title (as in Frost's *Tree at my window*, Christina Rosestti's *Remember*, or John Clare's *I am*). In other cases, a phrase from elsewhere in the poem is used, which may well suggest something about the importance the author attaches to this phrase (consider, for instance, Robert Graves' *In Broken Images*, William Empson's *Missing Dates*, or Walter de la Mare's *Estranged*). This strategy could perhaps be compared to that which is commonly used in the presentation of light fiction in magazines, where at regular intervals a phrase extracted from the text (usually with some dramatic or startling content) is placed as a subheading, the idea being to give the reader a hint of the thrills in store and thereby encourage him to read on. The title of a poem can likewise be used to give a flavour of the poet's expression. A second purpose fulfilled by such titles is that of planting the words selected in the reader's mind, even before he reads the poem; this may affect his reaction when he actually comes across the phrase in the text, and help to fix it in his mind so that it will be retained afterwards even if the rest of the poem is not.

There is another, more interesting function often fulfilled by the title of a poem. A point sometimes made in discussing the contrast between literary texts and other uses of language is that literary discourse is not bound to the particular context where it was written in the same way as other kinds of discourse. Thus Widdowson (1975: 51) observes that

> a piece of literary discourse is in suspense from the usual process of social interaction whereby senders address messages directly to receivers. The literary message does not arise in the normal course of social activity as do other messages, it arises from no previous situation and requires no response.

In other uses of language, the interpretation of certain elements, such as

personal pronouns and other deictics, is dependent on our knowledge of the context of situation where the piece of language originated. In literary works, the same constraints on interpretation do not hold; for instance, the pronouns *I* and *you* in a poem need not be understood to refer to the poet and his reader respectively, but may designate other individuals, either real or imaginary, or indeed not people at all but animals, inanimate objects or even abstractions, (plentiful examples are provided by Leech 1969, Oomen 1975 and Widdowson 1975). Similarly, *here* and *now* in a poem may make no reference to the place or moment of either the poet's writing or the audience's reading; and Widdowson (1975) well illustrates the way in which the opening of a literary work may refer to things as if they are already familiar to the reader, leaving him to reconstruct the context of such references for himself from what comes later.

To understand a poem or other literary work, then, the reader often has to start with no contextual information at all and work out for himself the context in which what he reads should be placed. Leech (1969 : 191), discussing this problem, claims that "the first few lines of a poem are naturally the most important for establishing an inferred situation", and goes on to provide many examples of how the opening lines can provide essential clues. Surprisingly, however, he does not point out that by the time we read the opening lines of a poem, we already have one element of context to help us, namely the title of the poem, which we have presumably already noted; indeed, the fact that he presents his examples of opening lines according to the accepted formula for quotations, indicating the title of the poem only at the end of the extract, of course serves only to obscure the fact that the reader, coming across the poem in a book, would be presented with the title before anything else. In fact, then, the reader who embarks on a poem is generally already familiar with its title, and this will in many cases have already specified some part of the contextual assumptions which he needs to make in interpreting the poem. The title of a poem is often not merely a label, or a summary, or a sample of what is to follow, but has a significant role to play in clarifying what might otherwise have been a less than obvious aspect of the poem's meaning, or even in determining the way in which we interpret either part or whole.

There are, for instance, the many cases where the title identifies the referent of the poem's first person singular pronouns, designating the imagined speaker. Readers of poetry are likely to be familiar with this quite general convention, although they may not consciously note it, so that faced with a poem such as Tennyson's *Ulysses*, G. K. Chesterton's *The Donkey*, Ted Hughes' *Hawk Roosting* or Lawrence Binyon's *Hunger*, they realise early on in the poem that the *I* and *me* pronouns refer to the person, animal or thing mentioned in the title. In some cases, the reader might have been able to deduce the

identity of the speaker even without the help of the title (as in *Ulysses*, if he were able to recognise other references in the poem), but in others, such as Sylvia Plath's *Mirror*, this would be quite difficult; indeed such a poem without its title would have almost the quality of a riddle. In such cases, of course, the fact that the poet does provide a key to the poem's interpretation in its title is significant, for it shows that he does not intend to puzzle the reader or provide him with a mystery to work out, but wants to ensure that the intended interpretation is easily arrived at.

In other cases, the title is used to specify, not the *I*, but the *you* of the poem. While the speaker is usually designated by a title composed of a noun phrase alone, the fact that a title identifies the addressee is conventionally signalled by the use of *to*. Again, the addressee identified may be an individual (Lovelace's *To Lucasta going to the Warres*), an animal (Marianne Moore's *To a Snail*), an institution (Dryden's *To the University of Oxford, 1674*) or an abstraction (Keats' *To Autumn*).[1] There are also cases where the title serves to identify the referent of third person pronouns in the poem, which are not provided with an antecedent elsewhere, as is the case with W. C. Williams' *A Negro Woman*, Wilfred Owen's *Mental Cases*, or J. Heath-Stubbs' *The Sphinx*; here, too, the title provides an important key without which it might be very difficult or even impossible to know exactly who or what is being described.

There are many other examples where a title, while not summing up the theme of the poem, provides some essential contextual information which is not readily recoverable from the poem itself. An interesting example is W. H. Auden's poem *Embassy*. Beginning the poem with this title in mind, we are provided with the key hint as to the identity of the luxurious and sophisticated surroundings in the two quatrains, and this in turn prepares us for the message of the last part, which reveals the dramatic significance of this peaceful scene — the fact that here the fates of armies and nations are being decided. If we read the poem without first seeing the title, however, its effect on us would be quite different; the second part would come as far more of a shock, and fall into place less easily. The role of the title in this example seems comparable to that of the titles which are sometimes inserted into a film to provide key details of the backcloth against which events unfold (e.g. *Berlin 1939*). Other examples where the background information provided by the title has a dramatic effect on our perception of the poem include Yeats' *Leda and the Swan* and Auden's *Musée des Beaux Arts*.

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[1] Of course, titles of the form *To*+Noun Phrase are also used in poems where no one is explicitly addressed in the text at all, and there is no *you* to identify. In such cases the title may be understood more as a dedication than as an identification of addressee (as in, for instance, Matthew Arnold's *To Marguerite*).

In the examples above, the title serves to present something of the universe of discourse within which the reader is to place the poem. Yet another case where the title specifies something which the reader would otherwise have to deduce for himself is that where it identifies the illocutionary or perlocutionary act intended to be performed by the poem. Hencher (1980) makes the point that analyses of poems often neglect this aspect, and that readers may sometimes fail to recognise the intended illocutionary force of part or all of a poem; so a title which makes explicit the poet's communicative intent may sometimes significantly affect our understanding of the poem. Striking examples include W. C. Williams' *To Waken an Old Lady*, Dylan Thomas' *A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London* and Louis MacNiece's *Prayer before Birth* — the latter suggesting not merely the kind of act constituted by the poem but also something about who is addressing whom. In other cases, the poet chooses a title which indicates what kind of poem he intends his work to be viewed as, using terms like ode, song, lullaby, epithalamion, elegy and so on, with or without further information about the theme or source of inspiration. Wilfred Owen in his title *Anthem for Doomed Youth* exploits the contrast between the connotations of *anthem*, which suggests a hymn of joy and praise, and the tragedy of *doomed youth* which he portrays, introducing a sense of incongruity which continues throughout the poem. Another interesting title from Owen is *From my Diary, July 1914* which, by using the word *diary*, invites us to look at the poem as an intimate personal record of an individual's experience.

This example brings us to another function of titles, where the title is used to give some information about the context which inspired the poet to write — the time, the place or the incident which provoked his creation. Widdowson (1975 : 54) claims that

> it is of the nature of literary communication to be dissociated from the immediate social context... Its interpretation does not depend on its being placed in a context of situation or on our recognition of the role of the sender or our own role as receiver.

However, the fact that titles are used to give such background information suggests that in some cases at least the poet does not wish his work to be isolated from the context in which it was written. In some poems, such as Yeats' *Easter 1916*, the title does not provide merely supplementary background information, but is essential to an understanding of the poem. In other cases the details given may not be essential, but are certainly very helpful; for instance, in D. H. Lawrence's *End of Another Home Holiday*, the title tells us what the poet's outpourings are a response to, and so puts us in tune with his feelings even as we begin the poem. In yet other poems, the contextualisation provided by the title may seem of much less importance. The title of Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*, for instance, identifies the place which

inspired the poet's meditations; and while Levenston (1976) would seem to suggest that such information is always relevant to our understanding of a poem, it is perhaps arguable that we could still appreciate these meditations without knowing such exact specifications. For me, however, whatever the relevance of the information given, the fact that it is given at all is of some significance; for such titles, by making clear that a poem arises from some particular specific experience of the poet, could be said to make the poem's tone more personal and individual. Indeed, the fact that the poet has chosen to confide in the reader something of the circumstances which led to the poem's creation has its own significance, in that it introduces a note of intimacy, a sharing of background information by both writer and reader. Levenston (1976 : 63) claims that "in providing a title the poet declares his interest in helping the reader — listener to contextualize the poem accurately, and this help must not be denied". I would tend to agree with him; for whatever the poet has included in the title should, I feel, lead us to consider the question of why this has been included.

We might now return to consider the status of the title within the unity of a poem. As was mentioned earlier, it is striking that commentators of poems often omit any discussion of the title, and significant, too, that when a poem is quoted, the title can be moved to the end, or even omitted altogether. This would seem to reflect a feeling that the title is not a fixed or inherent part of the poem's structure; the poem is still felt to constitute a poem even if its title has been omitted. It is this ambivalent status of the title, perhaps, which makes it so often used by the poet who feels that some information should be given, but does not wish to spell this out in the lines of the poem. This is perhaps why the title is so often exploited to provide an identification of the speaker or the addressee, leaving open the possibility of using only first or second person pronouns, in all their inexplicitness, in the body of the poem.

The somewhat independent status of the title is sometimes reflected in an interesting way in the internal structure of the title. For instance, it is worth noting that a poet often designates as definite in his title something which he then introduces as indefinite in the opening lines of the poem. To take just one example, we could mention Edwin Muir's poem *The Road*, which opens with the lines:

> There is a road that turning always
> Cuts off the country of Again

In the opening line, the poet introduces the road as something new, which the reader has not previously heard of, and whose existence needs to be pointed out to him — despite the fact that he has already referred to the road, in the title, as something whose identity is already established. Thus the title seems

to be treated as something external, not as part of the discourse beginning in line 1, but instead like something added after the poem was written and the identity of the road had been established. Another interesting example of how the title may be apparently constructed from a different point of view from the rest of a poem is provided by Andrew Marvell's *To his Coy Mistress*. The poem is written in the first person, with the speaker (who may or may not be identified with Marvell himself) addressing his mistress directly (...I would/Love you ten years before the Flood...). Accordingly, we might have expected as a title *To my Coy Mistress*, but we find instead the third person form, giving the impression that the title is a description from the outside, provided by someone other than the speaker in the poem. The same kind of contrast is of course found in many other poems, and illustrates the point that the perspective of the title may not always correspond to that adopted inside the poem.

It would seem, then, that the title of a poem is structurally quite distinct from the body of the poem, and that its semantic content often reflects this separateness. There are, however, some rather interesting exceptions, where the title is incorporated into the rest of the poem. This is fairly obvious in the poem by William Carlos Williams which opens thus:

This is Just to Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

Here the incomplete syntactic structure of the title line leads us to read on quite smoothly into the first line of the poem proper; we see immediately that the title is an integral part of the first sentence. In the poem by Ted Hughes whose opening is given below, however, the special status of the title is not so immediately obvious.

The Howling of Wolves

Is without world.

What are they dragging up and out on their long leashes of sound

That dissolves in the mid-air silence?

Here we find what looks like a perfectly conventional noun phrase title, and taking it as such, we are somewhat puzzled when we go on to the opening line of the poem, *Is without world*. Only after this line do we perform a kind of double take, go back to the title and reinterpret it as in fact the subject of *Is*. Thus provoked to reread and reanalyse the title and opening, the reader is confronted with a clash between initial appearance and reality, and this jolting of expectations seems to me to contribute considerably to the effect

of the poem as a whole, which goes on to present an equally unexpected view of the wolf. Here, then, the unusual status of the title is deliberately exploited to surprise the reader. The special effect of such an example is of course dependent on its being one of the exceptions which prove the rule; it is precisely because the title of a poem is expected to be something apart that cases where it is not are so striking.

Typically, then, the title of a poem is an independent structure, quite separate from that of the body of the poem, and not necessarily written from the same discourse perspective. However, this does not mean that it can be regarded as merely an appendage, of little more significance to an analysis of the poem proper than the author's name which often appears alongside it. On the contrary, the title often has a very important part to play in influencing the way in which the reader approaches and interprets the poem. My purpose here has been simply to illustrate some of the variety of functions a poem's title can fulfil, and to suggest that this component of a poem often deserves closer attention than it is given.

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