INTRODUCTION

A plan or scheme conceived in the mind and intended for
subsequent execution . . .
Purpose, aim, intention . . .
Contrivance in accordance with a preconceived plan: adaptation of
    means to ends; pre-arranged purpose . . .
. . . *by* . . . *design*: on purpose, purposely, intentionally . . .
A plan in art . . . after which the actual structure or texture is to be
    completed; a delineation, a pattern.
. . . The artistic idea as executed . . .

"Design," *Oxford English Dictionary*

THIS BOOK IS A STUDY in the workings of conscious intention, for which the evidences are elements of design. Conscious intention is there in almost every definition of the term *design*.

The book intends to demonstrate, through a series of examples, how the ever-changing vitality of literary history, of poems acting within the constraints, pressures, and urgings of history, is demonstrated by particularly self-aware, critically adept activities of poets: in significant features of the design of poems in their books, in the design of the books themselves, and in the relations of the poets to, their designs on, their targeted audiences. The examples range from the sixteenth century to the twentieth. In every instance, as I hope will be shown, something startlingly and significantly new has taken place, new things happening in the detailed construction of new poems because of the high degree of conscious awareness and self-awareness of these artists at work in successive historical phases, reading one another, exploring

one another's vocabularies and ways of working, reinterpreting one another, and in some cases themselves, in order to carry out their own designs.

These chapters attempt the sharpness of focus that results from concentration, in each case, on single exemplary features of the work the designing artists in question are doing: changing practices of rhyming; the titling of poems; the changing uses of a key word, *thing*; the entrance into literary history of another key word, and concept, *anonymity*, and the ways it entered into the design of certain important poems of the modernist period; the occurrence of a new figure, "optical illusion," as it enters into poetry of the Romantic period, and after; the self-presentation of William Carlos Williams, in the design of his books, by the deliberate juxtaposition, often side by side, of different versions of the same poem; one poem, Frost's "Design," as a complex instance of his self-presentation, his attitude toward the design of his books, and of his career.

The first chapter, "*Love* Rhymes with *Of*," is appropriately first in the book, because it looks at a series of new events in rhyming practices across the periods, from the sixteenth century to the present. The chapter begins with the sixteenth-century ideal of harmony and decorum, rhyme pairings alike in grammar as in sound, and alike also in harmonizing meanings, words with like dignity, belonging to the same or similar lexical levels. These preferred forms characterize English rhyming practices, though in widely varying ways, from the mid-sixteenth century through the reign of Alexander Pope, when poets, otherwise different in their designs, began sometimes to experiment with surprisingly combined rhyme-sounds: Blake's *tomb–comb*, Keats's *patiently–sigh*, and Longfellow's *wood–solitude* are examples. Experimenting with new modes of rhyming culminated in the radical rhyming of Marianne Moore, whose iconoclastic rhymes bring into sharp focus the unbridgeable gap between words and the phenomena that they point to as if at random, her rhymes decidedly not echoing some universal harmony.

The second chapter, "The Sense of Rhyme: Sidney and Shakespeare," is a study of how Shakespeare's rhyming radically departs from Sir Philip Sidney's practice, where characteristically the most active function of the end rhymes is not their signifying capacity but the usefulness of their phonetic effects for the definitions of relations among rhythm, meter, and syntax. The relative freedom from connotation of most of Sidney's words at line ends allows their agreement in sound to be heard with special distinctness. Shakespeare, who learned so much from Sidney, nevertheless works very differently, where, in

sonnet after sonnet, the end words of rhymed lines are charged with the dramatic energy of semantic as well as phonic relationship. This is to be seen most plainly in those sonnets of Sidney and those of Shakespeare that are most closely comparable in other ways, and where it is most clear that Shakespeare was an intent and opportunistic reader of his mentoring poet. Finally, a consideration of likeness between Shakespeare's working with end words in his sonnets and his working with end words in a passage of blank verse from *Hamlet* reveals another astonishing dimension of his dramatic designs.

The third chapter, "Titles in George Herbert's 'Little Book,'" explores how George Herbert, almost (after Ben Jonson) the first author to be responsible for his own titling of poems, seized the opportunity to make a book, and how the deliberate associations of Herbert's poems with collections of religious commonplace books and the Psalms as a "harmony of holy passions" were suggested by his carefully designed and consistently followed principles of titling. By submitting his poems to that self-imposed discipline, he achieved for them a freedom to be at once anonymous and intensely personal, detached from self and yet autobiographical, representative but private, gathering particulars into simplicity. These paradoxes are something understood in the poems. The likening of his collection to a "harmony" for use in private spiritual exercises may also have granted him another kind of freedom. It may have made it possible for him to imagine arranging his poems in a "little Book" that might one day be "made publick," a plan that would otherwise most likely have been distasteful to a poet who struggled for a language untangled from self and from human invention. Such preparation of his own poems in a volume for publication would have been unacceptable unless, perhaps, he could think "it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor Soul" who would use it as a devotional commonplace book modeled on the Psalter.

The fourth and fifth chapters are explorations of poetry associated most directly with Wordsworth and his inheritors. "*Thing* and *Things*: Wordsworth, Stevens, Ashbery" considers the way, for some poets, the chameleon nature of the word *thing* has served their peculiar conceptual and imaginative needs, especially those of Wordsworth, followed by those of Wallace Stevens and John Ashbery. To begin with, there is the simple, elemental immediacy the words share with, say, *bird* and *stone*. The word's immediacy gives *thing* the suggestion of an embodied presence like *bird* and *stone*: it can stand for either. But in its long linguistic history, *thing* has also been commonly understood to signify what we can only conceptually imagine, believe in; what is not confirmable by

the senses; not utterable in the logic of grammar: invisible *things*. The noun *thing* and its plural form *things* are dominant in the personal idioms of these poets when they have tried to distance their language, in radically different degrees and ways, from the vocabulary of transcendence used most grandly by Milton. *Thing* is a key word in Wordsworth's visionary vocabulary. He discovered in this noun a simultaneity of meanings suggesting mysterious power that might make it a space for the meeting if not the deep interfusion of external nature with the eternal, but his use of it expressed his sense of the baffling tenuousness of that meeting. The chapter studies the virtuosic skepticism of Wallace Stevens in his obsessive play with the word *thing*, and beyond that, how John Ashbery used this paradox of a simultaneously overloaded and empty linguistic figure as a device for expressing the mysterious coexistence and disconnection of transcendent things and everyday things.

In "Optical Illusions: Wordsworth and His Inheritors" the cultural situation that pertains directly to the comparatively microscopic focus of the discussion can be summarized in this combination of circumstances: that some implicit uneasiness about supernatural visions as matter for poems of dominant kinds, particularly lyric and descriptive, coincided not coincidentally with the spread of scientific and philosophical theories about the nature of bodily vision; that these theories by the early eighteenth century began to interest a wide audience, including poets who made very specific use of them in their poems; that those poems, in turn, directly prepared the ground for the work of later poets where questioning, undermining, denying, or ignoring the possibility of supernatural visions, or compensating for them, is the explicit focus of the poem. A consequence of this cultural situation is the figure or described circumstance where an entirely natural event occurs, as if in a supernatural vision, completely explicable but not immediately perceived as being so. Such figures or situations, under Wordsworth's potent influence, have become a convention that has informed, entered into the design of, much of the best work of such later poets as Stevens, Eliot, Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, James Merrill, and Seamus Heaney.

Four closing chapters are concerned with what is usually called modernist poetry. Three of them concentrate on single poets; one is, through the study of a single word, *anonymity*, and the concepts associated with it, a more expansive history of modernism, which reached its climax in the early poems of Eliot.

"William Carlos Williams's Redesigning" is a study of what was his simplest and most immediate way of making his intentions discernible, by show-

ing his poems in juxtaposed alternate states. He does this to make readers perceive his activities as a writer as cases of process rather than fixity and to present himself as simultaneously a hyperrealist poet and a linguistic experimenter. In a number of significant instances he published alternative versions of the same poem, or the same material, side by side, following, perhaps, the example of painters with whom he was associated, abstracting the concrete descriptive terms from a realist poem in order to produce a new, made, independent object, concrete in an utterly different sense. Many of the revisions in this and other ways constitute radical assaults on the poems they are revising, designing "new forms" (new associations of the elemental particles), "breaking down everything" "to get at the essential," "escaping" "forms of the poem."

"Frost's 'Obvious' Titles" is a further inquiry into the titling of poems as elements of the poems' designs. It is the seeming straightforwardness of his titles that most immediately divides them from a quintessentially modernist poem, which assaults the reader with a title that predicts the poem's obscurity by its own. But the chapter demonstrates how the appearance his poems have of being accessible is itself a form of ulteriority: "A poem would be no good that hadn't doors. I wouldn't leave them open though."[1]

"Frost's Design" is a study of revision and self-presentation that explores the poet's extraordinary treatment of the sonnet first called "In White," which he promptly but radically revised yet did not allow in any of his volumes of poetry for twenty-four years. The chapter is a consideration, first, of reasons for the detailed revisions that produced the great dark poem "Design." Second, it is a consideration of reasons for the delay in including it in a book, Frost's own cautious sense of how to present himself to his audience, and his own acknowledged anxieties about the attitudes expressed in such a poem. Third, it considers the manner and effect of its placement in the book in which it finally appeared, as an instance of Frost's bookmaking. And fourth, it examines the relation of such a poem as this to the difficult dark works of the modernists around him, and Frost's response to the redefining of his reputation, at a late stage of his career, by such critics as Randall Jarrell and Lionel Trilling.

The chapter "*Anonymity*: The Literary History of a Word" considers the origin and history of the noun *anonymity* as a model of the sorts of energetic transactions that task place over time among words, poems, other writings, and the pressures in the culture that produces and is produced by them. The line of argument in the chapter traces the literary history of a noun—together

with its parent adjective—that has by now become so packed with presuppositions and preoccupations that we can often sense the structure of feelings associated with it to be present even in contexts where the word is not explicitly used. Poems are the spaces where this model can best be demonstrated, because in them the accumulated force of its concentration of meanings can be felt most powerfully. The chapter brings the story of this word, first occurring in English in the late sixteenth century, up to the 1920s, when it attached itself to the aesthetic of impersonality that sought to distance the personality of the author from the work; simultaneously *anonymity* became the name for the misery of mass urban living. Eliot's modernist poems amalgamated these two distinct meanings as an aesthetic ideal and as a cultural condition.

In this chapter, and in the others in this book, I have been studying the sense of themselves and of their work, of poets who knew, or were engaged in finding out, who they were and how they were situated in their own locations in history and in relation to other poets as well as to themselves; and I have been studying how their self-knowledge or their self-discovery enters into their designs on their audience, the designing of their books, and of the poems within their books.