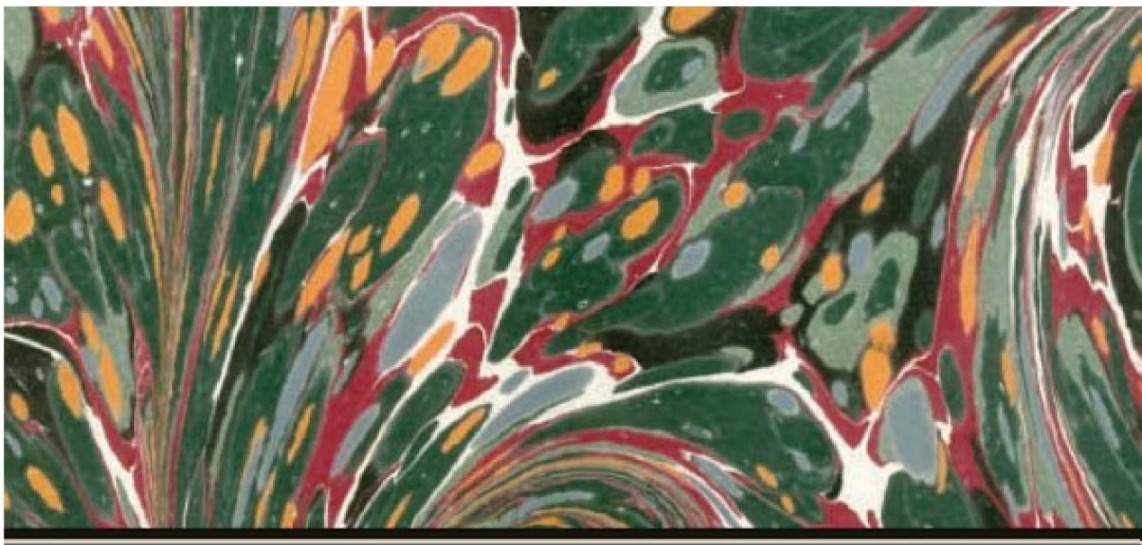
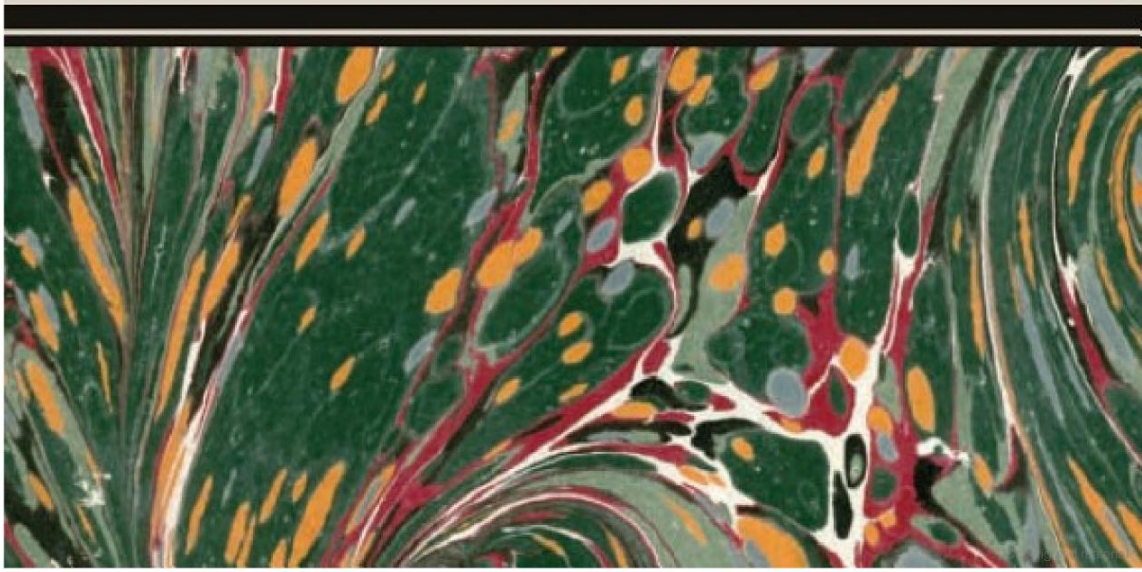


Seven Types of Ambiguity

William Empson



Contents

In the sixth type what is said is contradictory or irrelevant and the reader is forced to invent interpretations. Examples from Shakespeare, Fitzgerald, Tennyson, Herbert (p. 183), Pope, Yeats. Discussion of the criterion for this type and its bearing on nineteenth-century technique.

CHAPTER VII

The seventh type is that of full contradiction, marking a division in the author's mind. Freud invoked. Examples (pp. 198-211) of minor confusions in negation and opposition. Seventh-type ambiguities from Shakespeare, Keats, Crashaw, Hopkins, and Herbert.

CHAPTER VIII

General discussion of the conditions under which ambiguity is valuable and the means of apprehending it. Argument that theoretical understanding of it is needed now more than previously. Not all ambiguities are relevant to criticism; example from Jonson (p. 242). Discussion of how verbal analysis should be carried out and what it can hope to achieve.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

THE first and only previous edition of this book was published sixteen years ago. Till it went out of print, at about the beginning of the war, it had a steady sale though a small one; and in preparing a second edition the wishes of the buyers ought to be considered. Many of them will be ordering a group of books on this kind of topic, for a library, compiled from bibliographies; some of them maybe only put the book on their list as an awful warning against taking verbal analysis too far. Anyway, such a buyer wants the old book, not a new one, even if I could make it better. On the other hand, there was obviously room to tidy up the old one, and I would not want to reprint silently anything I now think false.

It seemed the best plan to work the old footnotes into the text, and make clear that all the footnotes in this edition are second thoughts written recently. Sometimes the footnotes disagree with the text above them; this may seem a fussy process, but I did not want to cut too much. Sir Max Beerbohm has a fine reflection on revising one of his early works; he said he tried to remember how angry he would have been when he wrote it if an elderly pedant had made corrections, and how certain he would have felt that the man was wrong. However, I have cut out a few bits of analysis (hardly ever without a footnote to say so) because they seemed trivial and likely to distract the reader's attention from the main point of the passage; I have tried to make some of the analyses clearer, and occasionally written in connecting links; the sources of the quotations needed putting in; there were a lot of small proof corrections to make; and some of the jokes which now seem to me tedious have gone. I do not think I have suppressed quietly any bit of analysis which would be worth disagreeing over. There is now an index and a summary of chapters.

I was surprised there was so little of the book I should prefer to change. My attitude in writing it was that an honest man erected the ignoring of 'tact' into a point of honour. Apart from trailing my coat about minor controversies, I claimed at the start that I would use the term 'ambiguity' to mean anything I liked, and repeatedly told the reader that the distinctions between the Seven Types which he was asked to study would not be worth the attention of a profounder thinker. As for the truth of the theory which was to be stated in an irritating manner, I remember saying to Professor I. A. Richards in a 'supervision' (he was then my teacher and gave me crucial help and encouragement) that all the possible mistakes along this line ought to be heaped up and published, so that one could sit back and wait to see which were the real mistakes later on. Sixteen years later I find myself prepared to stand by nearly the whole heap. I have tried to clear the text of the gratuitous puzzles of definition and draw attention to the real ones.

The method of verbal analysis is of course the main point of the book,

but there were two cross-currents in my mind leading me away from it. At that time Mr. T. S. Eliot's criticism in particular, and the Zeitgeist in general, were calling for a reconsideration of the claims of the nineteenth-century poets so as to get them into perspective with the newly discovered merits of Donne, Marvell, and Dryden. It seemed that one could only enjoy both groups by approaching them with different and incompatible presuppositions, and that this was one of the great problems which a critic ought to tackle. My feeling now is not so much that what I wrote about the nineteenth century was wrong as that I was wrong in tackling it with so much effort and preparation. There is no need to be so puzzled about Shelley. But I believe that this looking for a puzzle made me discover something about Swinburne, and I did not treat the Keats *Ode to Melancholy* as a dated object.

The second cross-current was the impact of Freud. Some literary critics at the time were prepared to 'collaborate' with the invading psycho-analysts, whereas the honest majority who were prepared to fight in the streets either learned fire-watching technique or drilled with the Home Guard. This problem, too, I think, has largely settled itself in the intervening years, and I can claim that my last example of the last type of ambiguity was not concerned with neurotic disunion but with a fully public theological poem. However, I want now to express my regret that the topical interest of Freud distracted me from giving adequate representation in the seventh chapter to the poetry of straightforward mental conflict, perhaps not the best kind of poetry, but one in which our own age has been very rich. I had not read Hart Crane when I published the book, and I had had the chance to. Mr. T. S. Eliot, some while ago (speaking as a publisher), remarked that poetry is a mug's game, and this is an important fact about modern poets. When Tennyson retired to his study after breakfast to get on with the *Idylls* there had to be a hush in the house because every middle-class household would expect to buy his next publication. I believe that rather little good poetry has been written in recent years, and that, because it is no longer a profession in which ability can feel safe, the effort of writing a good bit of verse has in almost every case been carried through almost as a clinical thing; it was done only to save the man's own sanity. Exceedingly good verse has been written under these conditions in earlier centuries as well as our own, but only to externalise the conflict of an individual. It would not have been sensible to do such hard work unless the man himself needed it. However, if I tried to rewrite the seventh chapter to take in contemporary poetry I should only be writing another book.

I want here to consider some theoretical points which have been raised in criticisms of the book; and I am sorry if I have missed or failed to keep some powerful attack which ought to be answered. I have remembered a number of minor complaints which I have tried to handle in the textual corrections or the footnotes. The fundamental arguments against my approach, I think, were all put briefly and clearly by Mr. James Smith in a review in the *Criterion* for July 1931; so it is convenient to concentrate on that article, though many other critics expressed similar views. To some extent I think these objections were answered in the text, but obviously they were not answered clearly or strongly enough, and if I

have anything fresh to say I ought to say it now.

He made objections to my uses of the term ‘ambiguity’ which I have tried to handle in re-editing; but I have also to answer this sentence: ‘We do not ordinarily accuse a pun, or the better type of conceit, of being ambiguous because it manages to say two things at once; its essence would seem to be conciseness rather than ambiguity.’ We call it ambiguous, I think, when we recognise that there could be a puzzle as to what the author meant, in that alternative views might be taken without sheer misreading. If a pun is quite obvious it would not ordinarily be calledambiguous, because there is no room for puzzling. But if an irony is calculated to deceive a section of its readers I think it would ordinarily be called ambiguous, even by a critic who has never doubted its meaning. No doubt one could say that even the most obvious irony is a sort of playing at deception, but it may imply that only a comic butt could be deceived, and this makes a different sort of irony. Cardinal Newman found Gibbon ambiguous, we must suppose, because some remarks by the Cardinal imply that he did not know that Gibbon meant to be ironical. But most readers would consider the ironies of Gibbon unambiguous, though possessed of a ‘double meaning,’ because they would feel that no one could be deceived by them. Thus the criterion for the ordinary use of the word is that somebody might be puzzled, even if not yourself. Now I was frequently puzzled in considering my examples, though not quite in this way. I felt sure that the example was beautiful and that I had, broadly speaking, reacted to it correctly. But I did not at all know what had happened in this ‘reaction’; I did not know why the example was beautiful. And it seemed to me that I was able in some cases partly to explain my feelings to myself by teasing out the meanings of the text. Yet these meanings when teased out (in a major example) were too complicated to be remembered together as if in one glance of the eye; they had to be followed each in turn, as possible alternative reactions to the passage; and indeed there is no doubt that some readers sometimes do only get part of the full intention. In this way such a passage has to be treated as if it were ambiguous, even though it may be said that for a good reader it is only ambiguous (in the ordinary sense of the term) while he is going through an unnecessary critical exercise. Some critics do not like to recognise this process because they connect it with Depth Psychology, which they regard with fear. But it is ordinary experience that our minds work like this; that we can often see our way through a situation, as it were practically, when it would be extremely hard to separate out all the elements of the judgment. Most children can play catch, and few children are good at dynamics. Or the way some people can do anagrams at one shot, and feel sure the letters all fit, is a better illustration; because there the analytic process is not intellectually difficult but only very tedious. And it is clear that this process of seeing the thing as a whole is particularly usual and important in language; most people learn to talk, and they were talking grammar before grammarians existed.

This is not to argue that some elemental and unscholarly process is what is in question, nor that what has to be explained always happens in a rapid glance of the eye. Indeed, what often happens when a piece of

writing is felt to offer hidden riches is that one phrase after another lights up and appears as the heart of it; one part after another catches fire, so that you walk about with the thing for several days. To go through the experience in question is then slower, not quicker, than the less inspiriting process of reading an analysis of it; and the fact that we can sometimes grasp a complex meaning quickly as a whole does not prove that a radically different mode of thought (an intrusion of the lower depths) is there to be feared.

This is meant as a sketch of the point of view which made 'ambiguity' seem a necessary key word; of course, I do not deny that the term had better be used as clearly as possible, and that there is a use for a separate term 'double meaning,' for example when a pun is not felt to be ambiguous in effect. But it could be argued that, until you have done your analysis of the ambiguities, you cannot be sure whether the total effect is ambiguous or not; and that this forces you in some degree to extend the meaning of the term. I wanted in any case to put such a sketch before giving a longer quotation from Mr. James Smith's review, in which his objections are more fundamental. As the book went on, he said,' there was an increasing proportion of examples from plays:

> The effect of the dramatic upon the poetic scale is almost sure to be unfortunate. The first business of the student of drama, so far as he is concerned with ambiguity, is historical; he records that situations are treacherous, that men are consciously or unconsciously hypocritical, to such or such a degree. The student of poetry, on the other hand, has as his first business the passing of a judgement of value. It is not his main, or even his immediate, concern that a word can be interpreted, that a sentence can be construed, in a large number of ways; if he make it his concern, there is a danger that, in the enumeration of these ways, judgements of value will be forgotten. And unless they are put in at the beginning of an analysis they do not of their own account emerge at the end. Quite a number of Mr. Empson's analyses do not seem to have any properly critical conclusion; they are interesting only as revelations of the poet's, or of Mr. Empson's, ingenious mind. Further, some of Mr. Empson's analyses deal, not with words and sentences, but with conflicts supposed to have raged within the author when he wrote. Here, it seems to me, he has very probably left poetry completely behind. . . .
>
> There are a number of irrelevancies in Mr. Empson's book, and as in a measure they derive from, so probably in a measure they increase, his vagueness as to the nature and scope of ambiguity. Finding this everywhere in the drama, in our social experience, in the fabric of our minds, he is led to assume it must be discoverable everywhere in great poetry. I doubt whether the reader who remembers his Sappho, his Dante, or the Lucy poems of Wordsworth is even prepared to be convinced of this; but even if he were he could not be so until Mr. Empson had made his position much clearer. Is the ambiguity referred to that of life—is it a bundle of diverse forces, bound together only by their co-existence? Or is it that of a literary device—of the allusion, conceit, or pun, in one of their more or less conscious forms? If the

first, Mr. Empson's thesis is wholly mistaken; for a poem is not a mere fragment of life; it is a fragment that has been detached, considered, and judged by a mind. A poem is a noumenon rather than a phenomenon. If the second, then at least we can say that Mr. Empson's thesis is exaggerated.

I thought this ought to be reprinted with the book, if only because it puts clearly what many readers will feel. Other reviewers made an illustrative point along the same line of objection: that in learning a foreign language the great thing is to learn to cut out the alternative meanings which are logically possible; you are always liable to bring them up till you have 'grasped the spirit' of the language, and then you know they aren't meant. Of course, I don't deny that the method could lead to a shocking amount of nonsense; in fact, as a teacher of English literature in foreign countries I have always tried to warn my students off the book. It is clear that we have to exercise a good deal of skill in cutting out implications that aren't wanted in reading poems, and the proof of our success is that we are actually surprised when they are brought out by a parody. However, I recognised in the book that one does not want merely irrelevant ambiguities, and I should claim to have had some success in keeping them out. To be sure, the question how far unintended or even unwanted extra meanings do in fact impose themselves, and thereby drag our minds out of their path in spite of our efforts to prevent it, is obviously a legitimate one; and some of the answers may be important. But it is not one I was much concerned with in this book.

In the same way, when Mr. James Smith said that I often left out the judgment of value he was of course correct. Many of the examples are only intended to show that certain techniques have been widely used. Even in the fuller examples, where I hope I have made clear what I feel about the poem as a whole, I don't try to 'make out a case' for my opinion of its value. The judgment indeed comes either earlier or later than the process which I was trying to examine. You think the poem is worth the trouble before you choose to go into it carefully, and you know more about what it is worth when you have done so. It might be argued that a study of the process itself is not really 'criticism'; but this change of name would not prove that there is any fundamental fallacy in trying to study it. No doubt the study would be done badly if there were wrong judgments behind it, but that is another thing.

The distinction made by Mr. James Smith between the dramatic situation and the judgment of the poet is, therefore, a more fundamental objection. It seems to me one of those necessary simplifications, without which indeed life could not go forward, but which are always breaking down. Good poetry is usually written from a background of conflict, though no doubt more so in some periods than in others. The poet, of course, has to judge what he has written and get it right, and his readers and critics have to make what they can of it too. When Mr. James Smith objected to my dealing with 'conflicts supposed to have raged within the author' I think he was overplaying his hand very seriously; he was striking at the roots of criticism, not at me. If critics are not to put up

some pretence of understanding the feelings of the author in hand they must condemn themselves to contempt. And besides, the judgment of the author may be wrong. Mr. Robert Graves (I ought to say in passing that he is, so far as I know, the inventor of the method of analysis I was using here) has remarked that a poem might happen to survive which later critics called 'the best poem the age produced,' and yet there had been no question of publishing it in that age, and the author had supposed himself to have destroyed the manuscript. As I remember, one of the best-known short poems by Blake is actually crossed out by the author in the notebook which is the only source of it. This has no bearing on any 'conflict' theory; it is only part of the difficulty as to whether a poem is a noumenon or a phenomenon. Critics have long been allowed to say that a poem may be something inspired which meant more than the poet knew.

The topic seems to me important, and I hope I may be allowed to digress to illustrate it from painting. As I write there is a grand semi-government exhibition of the painter Constable in London, very ample, but starring only two big canvases, both described as 'studies.' Constable painted them only as the second of three stages in making an Academy picture, and neither could nor would ever have exhibited them. I do not know how they survived. They are being called by some critics (quite wrongly, I understand) the roots of the whole nineteenth-century development of painting. It seems obvious to many people now that they are much better than Constable's finished works, including the two that they are 'studies' for. However, of course, nobody pretends that they were an uprush of the primitive or in some psychological way 'not judged' by Constable. When he got an idea he would make a preliminary sketch on the spot, then follow his own bent in the studio (obviously very fast), and then settle down on another canvas to make a presentable picture out of the same theme. 'My picture is going well,' he remarks in a letter, 'I have got rid of most of my spottiness and kept in most of my freshness.' You could defend the judgment of Constable by saying that he betrayed his art to make a living, but this would oe absurdly unjust to him; at least Constable would have resented it, and he does not seem to have had any gnawing conviction that the spottiest version was the best one. Of course, the present fashion for preferring it may be wrong too; the point I am trying to make is that this final 'judgment' is a thing which must be indefinitely postponed. Would Mr. James Smith say that the 'study', which is now more admired than the finished work, was a noumenon or a phenomenon? I do not see any way out of the dilemma which would leave the profound truths he was expressing much importance for a practical decision.

The strongest point of Mr. James Smith's criticism, I felt, was the accusation that, owing to my vagueness about ambiguity, I supposed it to exist everywhere in great poetry, whereas this would obviously be false about Sappho, Dante, and Wordsworth on Lucy. Oddly enough among the other reviewers at the time, one chose a passage from Dante and another from Wordsworth on Lucy to make a rather different point. They used the lines they quoted as examples of the real ambiguity of great poetry, a thing, they said, which underlay the superficial and finicking ambiguities I had considered, and gave them whatever value they had.

These views are perhaps not really very unlike, though I would feel more at home with the second. But it seems clear that I ought to try to answer a question: What claim do I make for the sort of ambiguity I consider here, and is all good poetry supposed to be ambiguous?

I think that it is; but I am ready to believe that the methods I was developing would often be irrelevant to the demonstration. As I understand it, there is always in great poetry a feeling of generalisation from a case which has been presented definitely; there is always an appeal to a background of human experience which is all the more present when it cannot be named. I do not have to deny that the narrower chisel may cut more deeply into the heart. What I would suppose is that, whenever a receiver of poetry is seriously moved by an apparently simple line, what are moving in him are the traces of a great part of his past experience and of the structure of his past judgments. Considering what it feels like to take real pleasure in verse, I should think it surprising, and on the whole rather disagreeable, if even the most searching criticism of such lines of verse could find nothing whatever in their implications to be the cause of so straddling a commotion and so broad a calm.

I

AN ambiguity, in ordinary speech, means something very pronounced, and as a rule witty or deceitful. I propose to use the word in an extended sense, and shall think relevant to my subject any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language.[1] Sometimes, especially in this first chapter, the word may be stretched absurdly far, but it is descriptive because it suggests the analytical mode of approach, and with that I am concerned.

In a sufficiently extended sense any prose statement could be called ambiguous. In the first place it can be analysed. Thus, 'The brown cat sat on the red mat' may be split up into a series: 'This is a statement about a cat. The cat the statement is about is brown,' and so forth. Each such simple statement may be translated into a complicated statement which employs other terms; thus you are now faced with the task of explaining what a 'cat' is; and each such complexity may again be analysed into a simple series; thus each of the things that go to make up a 'cat' will stand in some spatial relation to the 'mat.' 'Explanation,' by choice of terms, may be carried in any direction the explainer wishes; thus to translate and analyse the notion of 'sat' might involve a course of anatomy; the notion of 'on' a theory of gravitation. Such a course, however, would be irrelevant not only to my object in this essay but to the context implied by the statement, the person to whom it seems to be addressed, and the purpose for which it seems to be addressed to him; nor would you be finding out anything very fundamental about the sentence by analysing it in this way; you would merely be making another sentence, stating the same fact, but designed for a different purpose, context, and person. Evidently, the literary critic is much concerned with implications of this last sort, and must regard them as a main part of the meaning. There is a difference (you may say that between thought and feeling) between the fact stated and the circumstance of the statement, but very often you cannot know one without knowing the other, and an apprehension of the sentence involves both without distinguishing between them. Thus I should consider as on the same footing the two facts about this sentence, that it is about a cat and that it is suited to a child. And I should only isolate two of its 'meanings,' to form an ambiguity worth notice; it has contradictory associations, which might cause some conflict in the child who heard it, in that it might come out of a fairy story and might come out of *Reading without Tears*.

In analysing the statement made by a sentence (having, no doubt, fixed on the statement by an apprehension of the implications of the sentence), one would continually be dealing with a sort of ambiguity due to metaphors, made clear by Mr. Herbert Read in *English Prose Style*; because metaphor, more or less far-fetched, more or less complicated, more or less taken for granted (so as to be unconscious), is the normal

mode of development of a language. ‘Words used as epithets are words used to *analyse* a direct statement,’ whereas ‘metaphor is the synthesis of several units of observation into one commanding image; it is the expression of a complex idea, not by analysis, nor by direct statement, but by a sudden perception of an objective relation.’ One thing is said to be like another, and they have several different properties in virtue of which they are alike. Evidently this, as a verbal matter, yields more readily to analysis than the social ambiguities I have just considered; and I shall take it as normal to the simplest type of ambiguity, which I am considering in this chapter. The fundamental situation, whether it deserves to be called ambiguous or not, is that a word or, a grammatical structure is effective in several ways at once. To take a famous example, there is no pun, double syntax, or dubiety of feeling, in

> Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang,

but the comparison holds for many reasons; because ruined monastery choirs are places in which to sing, because they involve sitting in a row, because they are made of wood are carved into knots and so forth, because they used to be surrounded by a sheltering building crystallised out of the likeness of a forest, and coloured with stained glass and painting like howers and leaves, because they are now abandoned by all but the grey walls coloured like the skies of winter, because the cold and Narcissistic charm suggested by choir-boys suits well with Shakespeare’s feeling for the object of the Sonnets, and for various’sociological and historical reasons (the protestant destruction of monasteries; fear of puritanism), which it would be hard now to trace out in their proportions; these reasons, and many more relating the simile to its place in the Sonnet, must all combine to give the line its beauty, and there is a sort of ambiguity in not knowing which of them to hold most clearly in mind. Clearly this is involved in all such richness and heightening of effect, and the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry.

Such a definition of the first type of ambiguity covers almost everything of literary importance, and this chapter ought to be my longest and most illuminating, but it is the most difficult. The important meanings of this sort, as may be seen from the example about the cat, are hard to isolate, or to be sure of when you have done so; and there is a sort of meaning, the sort that people are thinking of when they say ‘this poet will mean more to you when you have had more experience of life,’ which is hardly in reach of the analyst at all. They mean by this not so much that you will have more information (which could be given at once) as that the information will have been digested; that you will be more experienced in the apprehension of verbal subtleties or of the poet’s social tone; that you will have become the sort of person that can feel at home in, or imagine, or extract experience from, what is described by the poetry; that you will have included it among the things you are prepared to apprehend. There is a distinction here of the implied meanings of a sentence into what is to be assimilated at the moment and what must already be part of your habits; in arriving at the second of these the educator (that mysterious figure) rather than the analyst would be

helpful. In a sense it cannot be explained in language, because to a person who does not understand it any statement of it is as difficult as the original one, while to a person who does understand it a statement of it has no meaning because no purpose.

Meanings of this kind, indeed, are conveyed, but they are conveyed much more by poets than by analysts; that is what poets are for, and why they are important. For poetry has powerful means of imposing its own assumptions, and is very independent of the mental habits of the reader; one might trace its independence to the ease with which it can pass from the one to the other of these two sorts of meaning. A single word, dropped where it comes most easily, without being stressed, and as if to fill out the sentence, may signal to the reader what he is meant to be taking for granted; if it is already in his mind the word will seem natural enough and will not act as an unnecessary signal. Once it has gained its point, on further readings, it will take for granted that you always took it for granted; only very delicate people are as tactful in this matter as the printed page. Nearly all statements assume in this way that you know something but not everything about the matter in hand, and would tell you something different if you knew more; but printed commonly differ from spoken ones in being intended for a greater variety of people, and poetical from prosaic ones in imposing the system of habits they imply more firmly or more quickly.

As examples of the things that are taken for granted in this way, and assume a habit, rather than a piece of information, in the reader, one might give the fact that a particular section of the English language is being used; the fact that English is being used, which you can be conscious of if you can use French; the fact that a European language is used, which you can be conscious of if you can use Chinese. The first of these ‘facts’ is more definite than it sounds; a word in a speech which falls outside the expected vocabulary will cause an uneasy stir in all but the soundest sleepers; many sermons use this with painful frankness. Evidently such a section is defined by its properties rather than by enumeration, and so alters the character of the words it includes; for instance, one would bear it in mind when considering whether the use of a word demands that one should consider its derivation. Regional or dialect poets are likely to use words flatly from that point of view. No single example of so delicate and continuous a matter can be striking; I shall take one at random out of the Synge *Deirdre*, to make clear that a word need not be unpoetical merely because its meaning has been limited:

> DEIRDRE. . . . It should be a sweet thing to have what is best and richest, if it’s for a short space only.
>
> NAISI. And we’ve a short space only to be triumphant and brave.

The language here seems rich in implications; it certainly carries much feeling and conveys a delicate sense of style. But if one thinks of the Roman or medieval associations of *triumphant*, even of its normal use in English, one feels a sort of unexplained warning that these are irrelevant; the word here is a thin counter standing for a notion not fully translated

out of Irish; it is used to eke out that alien and sliding speech-rhythm, which puts no. weight upon its single words.[1]

The process of becoming accustomed to a new author is very much that of learning what to exclude in this way, and this first of the three 'facts,' hard as it may be to explain in detail, is one with which appreciative critics are accustomed to deal very effectively. But the other two are more baffling; one can say little about the quality of a language, if only because the process of describing it in its own language is so top-heavy, and the words of another language will not describe it. The English prepositions, for example, from being used in so many ways and in combination with so many verbs, have acquired not so much a number of meanings as a body of meaning continuous in several dimensions; a tool-like quality, at once thin, easy to the hand, and weighty, which a mere statement of their variety does not convey. In a sense all words have a body of this sort; none can be reduced to a finite number of points, and if they could the points could not be conveyed by words.

Thus a word may have several distinct meanings; several meanings connected with one another; several meanings which need one another to complete their meaning; or several meanings which unite together so that the word means one relation or one process. This is a scale which might be followed continuously. 'Ambiguity' itself can mean an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings.[1] It is useful to be able to separate these if you wish, but it is not obvious that in separating them at any particular point you will not be raising more problems than you solve. Thus I shall often use the ambiguity of 'ambiguity,' and pronouns like 'one,' to make statements covering both reader and author of a poem, when I want to avoid raising irrelevant problems as to communication. To be less ambiguous would be like analysing the sentence about the cat into a course of anatomy. In the same way the words of the poet will, as a rule, be more justly words, what they represent will be more effectively a unit in the mind, than the more numerous words with which I shall imitate their meaning so as to show how it is conveyed.

And behind this notion of the word itself, as a solid tool rather than as a collection of meanings, must be placed a notion of the way such a word is regarded as a member of the language; this seems still darker and less communicable in any terms but its own. For one may know what has been put into the pot, and recognise the objects in the stew, but the juice in which they are sustained must be regarded with a peculiar respect because they are all in there too, somehow, and one does not know how they are combined or held in suspension. One must feel the respect due to a profound lack of understanding for the notion of a potential, and for the poet's sense of the nature of a language.

These examples of the 'meanings' of an English sentence should make clear that no explanation, certainly no explanation written in English, can be conceived to list them completely; and that there may be implications (such as I should call meanings) of which a statement would be no use. Neither of these are objections to my purpose, because I can assume that

my readers already understand and enjoy the examples I shall consider, and I am concerned only to conduct a sufficient analysis of their enjoyment to make it seem more understandable.

It is possible that there are some writers who write very largely with this sense of a language as such, so that their effects would be almost out of reach of analysis. Racine always seems to me to write with the whole weight of the French language, to remind one always of the latent assumptions of French in a way that I am not competent to analyse in any case, but that very possibly could not be explained in intelligible terms. Dryden is a corresponding English figure in this matter; Miss Gertrude Stein, too, at this point, implores the passing tribute of a sigh. To understand their methods one might have to learn a great deal about the mode of action of language which is not yet known, and it might always be quicker to use habit than analysis, to learn the language than to follow the explanation.

I propose, then, to consider a series of definite and detachable ambiguities, in which several large and crude meanings can be separated out, and to arrange them in order of increasing distance from simple statement and logical exposition. There is much danger of triviality in this, because it requires a display of ingenuity such as can easily be used to escape from the consciousness of one's ignorance; because it ignores the fact that the selection of meanings is more important to the poet than their multitude, and harder to understand; and because it gives no means of telling how much has been done by meanings latent in the mode of action of the language, which may be far more elaborate and fundamental than those that can be written up. My methods can only be applied at intervals; I shall frequently pounce on the least interesting aspect of a poem, as being large enough for my forceps; and the atoms which build up the compounds I analyse will always be more complex than they. But in so far as anything can be said about this mysterious and important matter, to say it ought not to require apology.

I shall almost always take poems that I admire, and write with pleasure about their merits; you might say that, from the scientific point of view, this is a self-indulgence, and that as much is to be learnt from saying why bad poems are bad. This would be true if the field were of a known size; if you knew the ways in which a poem *might* be good, there would be a chance of seeing why it had failed. But, in fact, you must rely on each particular poem to show you the way in which it is trying to be good; if it fails you cannot know its object; and it would be trivial to explain why it had tailed at something it was not trying to achieve. Of course, it may succeed in doing something that you understand and hate, and you may then explain your hatred; but all you can explain about the poem is its success. And even then, you can only have understood the poem by a stirring of the imagination, by something like an enjoyment of it from which you afterwards revolt in your own mind. It is more self-centred, therefore, and so less reliable, to write about the poems you have thought bad than about the poems you have thought good.

But, before I start to do this, I must consider two fundamental objections to my purpose, which many critics would raise; the objection that the meaning of poetry does not matter, because it is apprehended as

Pure Sound, and the objection that what really matters about poetry is the Atmosphere. These two opinions are very similar, but are best answered in different ways.

The main argument for Pure Sound is the extreme oddity of the way poetry acts; the way lines seem beautiful without reason; the way you can decide (or at any rate people in practice do decide) whether a poem deserves further attention by a mere glance at the way it uses its words. This certainly is an important piece of evidence, and makes one feel that very strange things may be true about the mode of action of poetry, but it shows very little as to what these things may be. I shall myself try to bully my readers into a belief in the importance of ambiguity, for just this same reason.

There was a period of the cult of Pure Sound when infants were read passages from Homer, and then questioned as to their impressions, not unlike Darwin playing the trombone to his French beans. And, indeed, conclusive evidence was collected in this way that a vague impression as to the subject of a poem may be derived from a study of its reciter; one can only question how far this is relevant to the question at issue. There is a crux here (to revive a rather stale controversy) which makes experiment difficult; on the one hand, it is no use telling a person who does not know Greek to read Homer for himself, because he does not know how to pronounce it (even if he knows how to pronounce the words, he will not pronounce them as a sentence); on the other hand, if you tell him how to pronounce the sentence, it is impossible to be sure you have not told him how to feel about it by the tone of your voice. Certainly it is no use denying that feelings can be conveyed, even between animals of different species, by grunts and screams; and there are those who say that language itself was at first a self-explanatory symbolism, based on these expressions of feeling, on onomatopoeia, and on that use of the tongue to point at matters of interest, or to imitate and so define a difficult action, which may be seen in a child learning to write. Certainly, too, one would expect language in poetry to retain its primitive uses more than elsewhere. But this sort of thing is no use to the admirers of Pure Sound in poetry, because a grunt is at once too crude and too subtle to be conveyed by the alphabet at all. Any word can be either screamed or grunted, so if you have merely a word written on paper you have to know not only its meaning but something about its context before it can tell you whether to grunt or to scream. Most admirers of Pure Sound, indeed, will admit that you have to be experienced in the words used by a poet before their sound can be appreciated, and evidently this admission makes all the difference.

They are the more willing to admit this because they are usually appreciative critics, persons of an extreme delicacy of sensibility who have to guard this delicacy in unusual ways. A first-rate wine-taster may only taste small amounts of wine, for fear of disturbing his palate, and I dare say it would really be unwise for an appreciative critic to use his intelligence too freely; but there is no reason why these specialised habits should be imposed on the ordinary drinker or reader. Specialists usually have a strong Trades Union sense, and critics have been perhaps too willing to insist that the operation of poetry is something magical, to

which only their own method of incantation can be applied, or like the growth of a flower, which it would be folly to allow analysis to destroy by digging the roots up and crushing out the juices into the light of day. Critics, as 'barking dogs,' on this view, are of two sorts: those who merely relieve themselves against the flower of beauty, and those, less continent, who afterwards scratch it up. I myself, I must confess, aspire to the second of these classes; unexplained beauty arouses an irritation in me, a sense that this would be a good place to scratch; the reasons that make a line of verse likely to give pleasure, I believe, are like the reasons for anything else; one can reason about them; and while it may be true that the roots of beauty ought not to be violated, it seems to me very arrogant of the appreciative critic to think that he could do this, if he chose, by a little scratching.

One reason, by the way, that the belief in Pure Sound is plausible seems interesting; it is that people often test it by experiments within their own family of languages. They know, say, a novel-reading amount of French, a public-school amount of Latin, half-forgotten, and a smattering of Italian; they try reading the *Oxford Book of Spanish Verse*, and are impressed by the discovery that they can get a great deal of pleasure out of individual lines without understanding the 'meaning' at all. Now such poetry is in a tradition to which they are accustomed; they know roughly what to look for in the poetry of a Latin language; they know what the syntax connecting one or two large words is likely to be; and they are almost sure to know the root meaning (though not the precise meaning) of the one or two large word. It seems to be true that with this equipment one has a very fair chance of seeing what I may call the 'lyrical point' of one or two lines. This may be an important piece of evidence about the mode of action of poetry, but as far as it concerns Pure Sound one must remember that such people will be pronouncing the lines entirely wrong. (And Vergil remains the most melodious of poets through all the vagaries of official pronunciation.)

Such points would be admitted by most reasonable people, and it may seem an evasion on my part to attack Pure Sound as a defence of the opposite fallacy of Pure Meaning. But the situation about Pure Sound is like that about crude materialism; both beliefs lead a sort of underground existence, and at a low level of organisation have much vitality. Crude materialism is the first rough idea that people tumble into when they are interested in the sciences. In the same way, if you ask people in general about the interpretation of poetry, they are likely to say that it is no use talking because what they like is the sheer beauty of the sound.

The official, and correct, view, I take it, is that 'the sound must be an echo to the sense,' that we do not know what this condition may be, but that if we knew a great deal it could be analysed in detail. Thus

> Tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore.
>
> (*Aeneid*, VI.)

(the stock line to try on the dog) is beautiful because *ulterioris*, the word of their banishment, is long, and so shows that they have been waiting a long time; and because the repeated vowel-sound (itself the moan of hopeless sorrow) in *oris amore* connects the two words as if of their own

natures, and makes desire belong necessarily to the unattainable. This I think quite true, but it is no use deducing from it Tennyson's simple and laborious cult of onomatopoeia. Once you abandon the idea that sounds are valuable in themselves you are thrown far towards the other extreme; you must say that the sounds are valuable because they suggest incidental connections of meaning. If this be true, one can do a great deal to make poetry intelligible by discussing the variety of resultant meanings, without committing oneself very deeply as to how they have been suggested by the sounds.

In claiming so much for analysis I shall seem to be aligning myself with the 'scientific' mode of literary criticism, with 'psychological' explanations of everything, and columns of a reader's sensitivity-coefficients. There is coming into existence a sort of party-system among critics; those critics will soon be considered mere shufflers who are not either only interested in Truth or only interested in Beauty; and Goodness, the third member of that indissoluble trinity, has somehow got attached only to Truth, so that aesthetes are expected to profess a playful indifference to the principles on which they in fact (one is to assume) order their own lives. It is odd, and I think harmful, that this *fin-de-siècle* squabble is still going on. Somewhere in the eighties of the last century the idea got about that Physics, and those sciences that might be conceived as derivatives of Physics, held a monopoly of Reason; aesthetes had therefore to eschew Reason. Now there are serious difficulties about applying the scientific view of truth to the arts; I shall attempt to restate them in my last chapter. But the belief that Reason can be applied to the arts is as old as criticism, and fundamental to it; there is no more materialism about it than there is about Aristotle. And if one is to be forced to take sides, as a matter of mere personal venom, I must confess I find the crudity and latent fallacy of a psychologist discussing verses that he does not enjoy less disagreeable than the blurred and tasteless refusal to make statements of an aesthete who conceives himself to be only interested in Taste.

Johnson's remarks about the correspondence theory are not to be despised, particularly in the 92nd *Rambler*:

> There is nothing in the art of versifying so much exposed to the power of imagination as the accommodation of the sound to the sense. It is scarcely to be doubted that on many occasions we make the music that we imagine ourselves to hear, that we modulate the poem by our own disposition, and ascribe to the numbers the effects of the sense.

But on the other hand:

> The measure of time in pronouncing may be varied so as very strongly to represent, not only the modes of external motion, but the quick or slow succession of ideas, and consequently the passions of the mind.

His examples certainly show very clearly that there is no *single* mode of correspondence; that very similar devices of sound may correspond effectively to very different meanings. And often enough in Milton, for

instance, it is the opposite of onomatopoeia which is employed; thus in the lines about Vulcan—

> thrown by angry Jove
> Sheer o'er the crystal battlements; from morn
> To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,
> A summer's day; and with the setting sun
> Dropped from the zenith—

Milton is extremely cool about the matter; one is made to sit with him pleasantly in the shade, all day long, needing no further satisfaction; it is delightfully soothing to feel that the devil is all the time falling faster and faster. But this is only to say that a sound effect must be interpreted. I think myself its most important mode of action is to connect two words by similarity of sound so that you are made to think of their possible connections.

Another of Johnson's remarks brings up some questions which deserve mention:

> Dionysius himself tells us, that the sound of Homer's verses sometimes exhibits the idea of corporal bulk: is not this a discovery nearly approaching to that of the blind man, who, after long enquiry into the nature of the scarlet colour, found that it represented nothing so much as the clangour of a trumpet?

The blind man seems to have anticipated Miss Sitwell, who has actually used this comparison, I think very justly. She also writes

> The light is braying like an ass,

which of course depends for its effect on the whole scene described. In such cases, apprehension in terms of 6ne of the senses is described in terms of, or compared with, one of the others; this has been called synaesthesia, and is clearly sometimes effective. It throws back the reader upon the undifferentiated affective states which are all that such sensations have in common; perhaps recalls him to an infantile state before they had been distinguished from one another; and may actually induce a sort of rudimentary disorder into his modes of sensation (so that the 'images' of the visualiser are transformed sounds) like those due to migraine or epilepsy or drugs like mescal. Mescal-eaters have just that impression common among readers of 'pure' poetry, that they are seeing very delightful but quite new colours, or knowing something which would be very important and interesting if they could make out just what it was. But how such a disturbance can be of serious importance to a reader of poetry it is not easy to see; or how one is to be sure when it is occurring. Often it is no more than a device for insisting on ambiguities of the first type; the main comparison is neither true nor false, and one is thrown back on a series of possible associations, as to the social setting in which these sensations would be expected, or the mood in which they would be sought out. Miss Sitwell seemed often to use the device rather as a flag of defiance, to insist that the main meaning is not what she valued, and the reader must put himself into a poetic or receptive frame

of mind. (‘These two things are alike in that, for quite different reasons, they harmonise with my mood.’) But in a way this is only to push the notion of correspondence further back; how do these sensations come to seem proper to their social setting or their mood? Poe often seems excited about colours in a way that reminds one of people’s reports from mescal, but then it is a Mexican drug and he had probably tried it; one cannot deduce anything very profound about poetry from that. And Swinburne often uses devices that seem to demand synaesthesia;

Thy voice is an odour that fades in a flame,

and suchlike; but that is only part of his diffused use of grammar, by which several precise conceits can be dissolved into a vagueness; it would probably be a misreading here to confuse the modes of sensation. Nor, so far as I can see, is his use of the device at all similar to that made of it by Miss Sitwell.

Of course, when a poet is describing paintings, as Spenser does so often, the colours mentioned are supposed to act on one as they would do in a painting. Now, it is naturally harder to analyse the visual arts than poetry, because their modes of satisfaction are further removed from the verbal system on which the discursive intelligence usually supports itself. In any case, I am not competent to do such a thing and shall not attempt it here; I mention this mysterious matter as a way in which poetry might be taking effect, but which I shall assume I can ignore. And it seems worth uttering the pious hope that such effects do not really depend on an obscure physiological perversion, which could be exploited separately, so as to ‘deceive’; but that there is a field for analysis in the way the paintings admired by a particular school of poets are assumed as elements of sensibility, and referred to covertly, in their poetry.

So the *discovery of the blind man* may have its importance, but we must now turn to what *Dionysius himself said*, which may be very important indeed. I mentioned a moment ago the theory that language is fundamentally a system of gestures with the tongue; there is no doubt that, once the advocate of Pure Sound has admitted that sound has *some* connection with meaning, Sir Richard Paget’s method of interpretation gives him a great deal of rational support. Every one feels that, quite apart from words like ‘pop,’ which are like their meaning, there are words like ‘wee,’ which are fitted to their meaning; the Paget theory would explain this (taking only the vowel, for this brief example) by saying that while ‘huge’ moves the tongue back from the teeth so as to make as large a space as it can, ‘wee’ moves the tongue near to the teeth so as to leave as small a space as it can. In this way, not the sound itself, but our experience of the way it is produced, does, in fact, continually *exhibit the idea of corporal bulk*, which is just what Johnson thought impossible. All the sounds may be reduced to gestures in this way, more or less fancifully; they all, then, carry some suggestion of size, or shape, or movement, or pressure, up, down, forward, or backward, and, in themselves, that is all they can convey. This theory would have a peculiar charm for the materialists who wanted to explain everything in terms of Euclid and Newton; it offers a sort of guarantee that the explanation will be a picture on the blackboard. It is rather bad luck that

it should be developed so late, when the faith even of physicists in pictures on the blackboard is not what it was, but that it explains *some* part of the effect of language it would be hard to deny.

Evidently there is here another field for the future analysis of poetry; when it becomes possible to list the root notions that the words must by their own nature be suggesting, it will be possible and profitable to discuss in some detail how far their sound is an echo to their sense. But such a process will always be subject to curious limitations;

> . . . owing to the comparative paucity of different mouth-gestures, each mouth-gesture—which produces its own particular sound or root word—has to stand for a considerable number of hand- (or other bodily) gestures; to put it in another way, each root word is naturally liable to bear many different meanings. . . . One other point may be noted; the same mouth-gesture may be naturally construed in several different ways. Thus, the movement of tongue or lips may represent a pantomimic movement, symbolising a real movement, or a spatial relation of some kind, *e.g.* above, below, around, *or* it may represent a shape of some kind drawn in outline. Finally, any of these meanings may be used figuratively instead of concretely.
>
> (Sir RICHARD PAGET, *Human Speech.*)

Apart, then, from the ambiguities in the fully-developed language, such as I propose to consider, one would have also to consider the ambiguities (of the same sort, but entirely different in their details) which are always latent in the fundamental symbolism of the sound.

This suggests that the process of analysing the effect of a poem, not indeed completely, but sufficiently to be any use, must be one of altogether impossible complexity; that one must instead give up all hope of doing such a thing, and fall back on a doctrinaire irrationalism. It is true that no explanation can be adequate, but, on the other hand, any one valid reason that can be found is worth giving; the more one understands one's own reactions the less one is at their mercy.

Thus it seems to be fairly true, as a matter of introspection, that one judges the quality of a poem by something felt as 'sound' and something felt as 'rhythm,' but there are no necessary deductions from this fact, and it is liable to be misleading. One might use a spatial metaphor and a tautology to make it seem less important; 'the sound of words' does not enter that part of the mind where it is effective, except in so far as the words take effect as words.' What this 'taking effect' may be like I shall try to discuss in my last chapter.

It has been deduced from the belief in Pure Sound that the resultant meaning of the words need not be known, that it is enough to know the meaning of the words in isolation and enough of their syntax to read them aloud rightly. In a degree this is often true, but it is better to regard this state of limited knowledge as a complicated state of indecision which involves much estimating of probabilities, and is less ignorance than an ordered suspension of judgment. Secondly, and more seriously, it has been deduced from this belief that you are liable to destroy the poem if its meaning is discovered, that it is important to preserve one's

innocence about the meaning of verses, that one must use sensibility, and as little intelligence as possible. This, also, is often true, but I take a moral line here, and say it is true only of bad poetry. People suspect analysis, often rightly, as the refuge of the emotionally sterile, but that is only to say that analysis is often done badly. In so far as such a destruction occurs because you have used your intelligence it must be accepted, and you may reasonably expect to become interested in another poem, so that the loss is not permanent, because that is the normal process of learning to appreciate poetry.

As for the belief in Atmosphere, about which I shall now make some inadequate remarks, it may be viewed as a third deduction from the belief in Pure Sound. Critics often say or imply casually that some poetic effect conveys a direct 'physical' quality, something mysteriously intimate, something which it is strange a poet could convey, something like a sensation which is not attached to any one of the senses. This may only be a statement of how they themselves applied their conscious attention when reading the poem; thus a musical chord is a direct sensation, but not therefore unanalysable into its separate notes even at the moment of sensing. It can be either felt or thought; the two things are similar but different; and it requires practice to do both at once. Or the statement might, one cannot deny, mean that there has been some confusion of the senses. But it may mean something more important, involving a distinction between 'sensation' and 'feeling'; that what the poet has conveyed is no assembly of grammatical meanings, capable of analysis, but a 'mood,' an 'atmosphere,' a 'personality,' an attitude to life, an undifferentiated mode of being.

Probably it is in this way, as a sort of taste in the head, that one remembers one's own past experiences, including the experience of reading a particular poet. Probably, again, this mode of apprehension is connected with the condition of the whole body, and is as near as one can get to an immediate self-knowledge. You may say, then, that any grammatical analysis of poetry, since it must ignore atmosphere, is trivial; that atmosphere is conveyed in some unknown and fundamental way as a by-product of meaning; that analysis cannot hope to do anything but ignore it; and that criticism can only state that it is there.

This belief may in part explain the badness of much nineteenth-century poetry, and how it came to be written by critically sensitive people. They admired the poetry of previous generations, very rightly, for the taste it left in the head, and, failing to realise that the process of putting such a taste into a reader's head involves a great deal of work which does not feel like a taste in the head while it is being done, attempting, therefore, to conceive a taste in the head and put it straight on to their paper, they produced tastes in the head which were in fact blurred, complacent, and unpleasing. But to say that the consequences of a critical formula have been unfortunate is not to say that it is untrue or even unusable; it is very necessary for a critic to remember about the atmosphere, chiefly because he must concentrate on the whole of the poem he is talking about rather than on the particular things that he can find to say.

In wishing to apply verbal analysis to poetry the position of the critic

is like that of the scientist wishing to apply determinism to the world. It may not be valid everywhere; though it be valid everywhere it may not explain everything; but in so far as he is to do any work he must assume it is valid where he is working, and will explain what he is trying to explain. I assume, therefore, that the 'atmosphere' is the consciousness of what is implied by the meaning, and I believe that this assumption is profitable in many more cases than one would suppose.

I shall try to recommend this opinion by giving what seems to me a striking example; a case, that is, where an affective state is conveyed particularly vividly by devices of particular irrelevance. Macbeth, in these famous lines, may easily seem to be doing something physiological and odd, something outside the normal use of words. It is when he is spurring on his jaded hatred to the murder of Banquo and Fleance.

> Come, seeling Night,
> Skarfe up the tender Eye of pitiful Day
> And with thy bloddie and invisible Hand
> Cancel and teare to pieces that great Bond
> That keepes me pale.
> *Light thickens, and the Crow*
> *Makes Wing to th' Rookie Wood.*
> Good things of Day begin to droope, and drowse,
> While Night's black Agents to their Prey's doe rowse.
> Thou marvell'st at my words, but hold thee still;
> Things bad begun, make strong themselves by ill:
> So prythee go with me.
>
> (III. ii. 50.)

The condition of his skin (By the pricking of my thumbs Something wicked this way comes), the sense of being withdrawn far within his own flesh (like an old lecher, a small fire at his heart, all the rest on's body cold), the sense that the affair is prosaic, it need not be mentioned, and yet an occasional squawking of the nerves (Hobbididance croaks in Tom's belly), in short the whole frame of body, as I read the lines, is lit up and imposed upon the reader, from which Macbeth lashes his exhausted energies into a new, into the accustomed, readiness for murder.

I have tried by these almost irrelevant quotations to show much work the reader of Shakespeare is prepared to do for him, how one is helped by the rest of his work to put a great deal into any part of it, but this seems to explain very little. Various similar sound effects or associations may be noted; there is a suggestion of witches' broth, or curdling blood, about *thickens*, which the vowel sound of *light*, coming next to it, with the movement of stirring treacle, and the cluck of the k-sounds, intensify; a suggestion, too, of harsh, limpid echo, and, under careful feet of poachers, an abrupt crackling of sticks. The vowel sounds at the end make an increasing darkness as the *crow* goes forward. But, after all, one would be very surprised if two people got the same result from putting a sound-effect into words in this way.

It is safer to point out that *rooks* were, in any case, creatures of foreboding:

Augurs, and understood Relations, have
By Magot-Pyes, and Choughes, and Rookes, brought forth
The secret'st man of Blood;

(III. iv. 125.)

that Macbeth looked out of the window because Banquo was to be killed soon after dusk, so he wanted to know how the time was going; and that a dramatic situation is always heightened by breaking off the dialogue to look out of the window, especially if some kind of Pathetic Fallacy is to be observed outside. But to notice this particular pathetic fallacy you must withdraw yourself from the apprehension of its effect, and be ready to notice irrelevant points which may act as a clue. I believe it is that the peaceful solitary crow, moving towards bed and the other crows, is made unnaturally like Macbeth and a murderer who is coming against them; this is suggested by the next lines, which do not say whether the *crow* is one of the *good things of day* or one of *night's black agents* (it is, at any rate, *black*), by the eerie way that *light* itself is *thickening*, as a man turns against men, a *crow* against *crows*, perhaps by the portentous way a *crow's* voice will carry at such a time, and by the sharpness of its wings against the even glow of a sky after sundown; but mainly, I think, by the use of the two words *rook* and *crow*.

Rooks live in a crowd and are mainly vegetarian; *crow* may be either another name for a *rook*, especially when seen alone, or it may mean the solitary Carrion crow. This subdued pun is made to imply here that Macbeth, looking out of the window, is trying to see himself as a murderer, and can only see himself as in the position of the *crow*; that his *day* of power, now, is closing; that he has to distinguish himself from the other *rooks* by a difference of name, *rook-crow*, like the kingly title, only; that he is anxious, at bottom, to be at one with the other *rooks*, not to murder them; that he can no longer, or that he may yet, be united with the rookery; and that he is murdering Banquo in a forlorn attempt to obtain peace of mind.[1]

Interest in 'atmospheres' is a critical attitude designed for, and particularly suited to, the poets of the nineteenth century; this may tell us something about them, and in part explain why they are so little ambiguous in the sense with which I am concerned. For a variety of reasons, they found themselves living in an intellectual framework with which it was very difficult to write poetry, in which poetry was rather improper, or was irrelevant to business, especially the business of becoming Fit to Survive, or was an indulgence of one's lower nature in beliefs the scientists knew were untrue. On the other hand, they had a large public which was as anxious to escape from this intellectual framework, on holiday, as they were themselves. Almost all of them, therefore, exploited a sort of tap-root into the world of their childhood, where they were able to conceive things poetically, and whatever they might be writing about they would suck up from this limited and perverted world an unvarying sap which was their poetical inspiration. Mr. Harold Nicolson has written excellently about Swinburne's fixation on to the excitements of his early reading and experience, and about the unique position in the life of Tennyson occupied by the moaning of cold

wind round a child frightened for its identity upon the fens. Wordsworth frankly had no inspiration other than his use, when a boy, of the mountains as a totem or father-substitute, and Byron only at the end of his life, in the first cantos of *Don Juan* in particular, escaped from the infantile incest-fixation upon his sister which was till then all that he had got to say. As for Keats's desire for death and his mother, it has become a byword among the learned. Shelley, perhaps, does not strike one as keeping so sharp a distinction between the world he considered real and the world from which he wrote poetry, but this did not in his case improve either of them; while Browning and Meredith, who did write from the world they lived in, affect me as novel-writers of merit with no lyrical inspiration at all. Coleridge, it is true, relied on opium rather than the nursery. But of all these men an imposed excitement, a sense of uncaused warmth, achievement, gratification, a sense of hugging to oneself a private dream-world, is the main interest and material.[1]

In that age, too, began the doubt as to whether this man or that was 'grown-up,' which has ever since occupied so deeply the minds of those interested in their friends. Macaulay complains somewhere that in his day a man was sure to be accused of a child-mind if no doubt could be cast 'either on the ability of his intelligence or the innocence of his character'; now nobody seems to have said this in the eighteenth century. Before the Romantic Revival the possibilities of not growing up had never been exploited so far as to become a subject for popular anxiety.

Of course, these pat little theories are ridiculously simple; fantasy gratifications and a protective attitude towards one's inner life are in some degree essential for the production of poetry, and I have no wish to pretend the Romantics were not great poets. But I think this will be admitted, that they were making a use of language very different from that of their predecessors; imagine Shakespeare or Pope keeping a tap-root in this way. One might expect, then, that they would not need to use ambiguities of the kind I shall consider to give vivacity to their language, or even ambiguities with which the student of language, as such, is concerned; that the mode of approach to them should be psychological rather than grammatical, and that their distortions of meaning will belong to darker regions of the mind.

This introduction has grown too long and too portentous; it is time I settled down to the little I can do in this chapter, which is to list a few examples of ambiguity of the first type. Many of the preceding paragraphs are designed merely for defence; if it is said that the verbal analyst is a crude irrelevant fellow who should be thinking about the atmosphere, the reply is that though there may be an atmosphere to which analysis is irrelevant, it is not necessarily anything very respectable.

I have already considered the comparison of two things which does not say in virtue of what they are to be compared. Of the same sort, though less common, is the ornamental use of false antithesis, which places words as if in opposition to one another without saying in virtue of what they are to be opposed. Cases in which several ways of opposing them are implied will be found in my later chapters as examples of more

advanced ambiguity; but the device may be used to deny such an antithesis altogether. There is a rather trivial example of this in Peacock's *War Song*:

> We there, in strife bewildring,
> Spilt blood enough to swim in;
> We orphaned many children
> And widowed many women.
> The eagles and the ravens
> We glutted with our foemen;
> The heroes and the cravens,
> The spearmen and the bowmen.

In the last two lines he is not concerned to be thinking, to decide something or convince somebody; he makes a cradle and rocks himself in it; it is the tone of a man imagining himself in a mood wholly alien to him, and looking round with an amused complacent absence of reflection. The lines also give finality in that the impulse is shown to be dying away; some reflection has been implied on the difference between *heroes* and *cravens*, on their equal deaths, and on the relations between *eagles* and *heroes*, *ravens* and *cravens*, but the irrelevant calm of the last line says 'these distinctions may be made at other times, but they are irrelevant to our slaughter and the reaction to it of Nature,' he proceeds to another merely technical way of separating the dead into classes, and by the failure of the antithesis shows he is merely thinking of them as a huge pile.

> How loved, how honoured once, avails thee not,
> To whom related, or by whom begot;
> A heap of dust is all remains of thee;
> 'Tis all thou art, and all the proud shall be.
> (POPE, *Unfortunate Lady*.)

The two parts of the second line make a claim to be alternatives which is not obviously justified, and this I think implies a good deal. If the antithesis is to be serious, *or* must mean 'one of her relations was grand but her father was humble,' or the other way about; thus one would take *how* to mean 'whether much or little' (it could mean 'though you were so greatly'), and the last line to contrast her with the *proud*, so as to imply that she is humble (it could unite her with the *proud*, and deduce the death of all of them from the death of one). This obscurity is part of the 'Gothic' atmosphere that Pope wanted: 'her birth was high, but there was a mysterious stain on it'; or 'though you might not think it, her birth was high'; or 'her birth was high, but not higher than births to which I am accustomed.' Here, however, the false antithesis is finding another use, to convey the attitude of Pope to the subject. 'How simple, how irrelevant to the merits of the unfortunate lady, are such relationships; everybody has had both a relation and a father; how little I can admire the arrogance of great families on this point; how little, too, the snobbery of my reader, who is unlikely to belong to a great family; to how many people this subject would be extremely fruitful of antitheses; how little fruitful of antitheses it seems to an independent soul like mine.' What is

important about such devices is that they leave it to the reader vaguely to invent something, and make him leave it at the back of his mind.

Not unlike the use of a comparison which does not say in virtue of what the two things are to be compared is the use of a comparative adjective which does not say what its noun is to be compared with; since all adjectives are in a sense comparative, this source of ambiguity is a sufficiently general one. In particular, it is the chief source of euphuistic conceits and the paradoxes cultivated in the 'nineties, which give a noun two contradictory adjectives and leave it to the reader to see how the adjectives are used.[1] Examples of this sort are too well known, and are generally thought too trivial, to be worth quoting. I shall give an example from one of Mr. Waley's Chinese translations, to insist upon the profundity of feeling which such a device may enshrine.

> Swiftly the years, beyond recall.
> Solemn the stillness of this spring morning.

The human mind has two main scales on which to measure time. The large one takes the length of a human life as its unit, so that there is nothing to be done about life, it is of an animal dignity and simplicity, and must be regarded from a peaceable and fatalistic point of view. The small one takes as its unit the conscious moment, and it is from this that you consider the neighbouring space, an activity of the will, delicacies of social tone, and your personality. The scales are so far apart as almost to give the effect of defining two dimensions; they do not come into contact because what is too large to be conceived by the one is still too small to be conceived by the other. Thus, taking the units as a century and the quarter of a second, their ratio is ten to the tenth and their mean is the standard working day; or taking the smaller one as five minutes, their mean is the whole of summer. The repose and self-command given by the use of the first are contrasted with the speed at which it shows the years to be passing from you, and therefore with the fear of death; the fever and multiplicity of life, as known by the use of the second, are contrasted with the calm of the external space of which it gives consciousness, with the absolute or extra-temporal value attached to the brief moments of self-knowledge with which it is concerned, and with a sense of security in that it makes death so far off.

Both these time-scales and their contrasts are included by these two lines in a single act of apprehension, because of the words *swift* and *still*. Being contradictory as they stand, they demand to be conceived in different ways; we are enabled, therefore, to meet the open skies with an answering stability of self-knowledge; to meet the brevity of human life with an ironical sense that it is morning and springtime, that there is a whole summer before winter, a whole day before night.

I call *swift* and *still* here ambiguous, though each is meant to be referred to one particular time-scale, because between them they put two time-scales into the reader's mind in a single act of apprehension. But these scales, being both present, are in some degree used for each adjective, so that the words are ambiguous in a more direct sense; the *years* of a man's life seem *swift* even on the small scale, like the mist

from the mountains which ‘gathers a moment, then scatters’; the *morning* seems *still* even on the large scale, so that this moment is apocalyptic and a type of heaven.

Lacking rhyme, metre, and any overt device such as comparison, these lines are what we should normally call poetry only by virtue of their compactness; two statements are made as if they were connected, and the reader is forced to consider their relations for himself. The reason why these facts should have been selected for a poem is left for him to invent; he will invent a variety of reasons and order them in his own mind. This, I think, is the essential fact about the poetical use of language.

Among metaphors effective from several points of view one may include, by no great extension, those metaphors which are partly recognised as such and partly received simply as words in their acquired sense. All languages are composed of dead metaphors as the soil of corpses, but English is perhaps uniquely full of metaphors of this sort, which are not dead but sleeping, and, while making a direct statement, colour it with an implied comparison. The school rule against mixed metaphor, which in itself is so powerful a weapon, is largely necessary because of the presence of these sleepers, who must be treated with respect; they are harder to use than either plain word or metaphor because if you mix them you must show you are conscious of their meaning, and are not merely being insensitive to the possibilities of the language.

> Beauty is but a flower
> Which wrinkles will devour.
> Brightness falls from the air.
> Queens have died young and fair.
> Dust hath closed Helen’s eye.
> I am sick, I must die.
> Lord, have mercy upon us.
> (NASH, *Summer’s Last Will and Testament.*)

I call it a subdued metaphor here that *devour* should mean ‘remove’ or ‘replace,’ with no more than an overtone of cruelty and the unnatural. This may seem very different from the less evident subdued metaphor in the derivation of a word like ‘apprehension,’ say, but a reader may ignore the consequences even of so evident a metaphor as *devour*. If you go into the metaphor it may make Time the *edax rerum*, and wrinkles only time’s touch-marks; more probably it compares long curving wrinkles on the face to rodent ulcers, caterpillars on petals, and the worms that are to gnaw it in the grave. Of these, the caterpillar (from *flower*) are what the comparison insists upon, but the Elizabethan imagination would let slip no chance of airing its miraculous corpse-worm.

On the other hand

> Brightness falls from the air

is an example of ambiguity by v\agueness, such as was used to excess by the Pre-Raphaelites. Evidently there are a variety of things the line may be about. The sun and moon pass under the earth after their period of

shining, and there are stars falling at odd times; Icarus and the prey of hawks, having soared upwards towards heaven, *fall* exhausted or dead; the glittering turning things the sixteenth century put on the top of a building may have *fallen* too often. In another sense, hawks, lightning, and meteorites *fall* flashing from heaven upon their prey. Taking *brightness* as abstract, not as meaning something bright, it is as a benefit that light *falls*, diffusely reflected, from the sky. In so far as the sky is brighter than the earth (especially at twilight), brightness is natural to it; in so far as the earth may be bright when the clouds are dark, *brightness falls* from the sky to the earth when there is a threat of thunder. 'All is unsafe, even the heavens are not sure of their brightness,' or 'the qualities in man that deserve respect are not natural to him but brief gifts from God; they fall like manna, and melt as soon.' One may extract, too, from the oppression in the notion of thunder the idea that now, 'in time of pestilence,' the generosity of Nature is mysteriously interrupted; even at the scene of brilliant ecclesiastical festivity for which the poem was written there is a taint of darkness in the very *air*.

It is proper to mention a rather cynical theory that Nash wrote or meant 'hair'; still, though less imaginative, this is very adequate; oddly enough (it is electricity and the mysterious vitality of youth which have *fallen* from the *hair*) carries much the same suggestion as the other version; and gives the relief of a single direct meaning. Elizabethan pronunciation was very little troubled by snobbery, and it is conceivable that Nash meant both words to take effect in some way. Now that all this fuss has been made about aitches it is impossible to imagine what such a line would sound like.

For a final meaning of this line one must consider the line which follows it; there is another case of poetry by juxtaposition. In

> Dust hath closed Helen's eye

one must think of Helen in part as an undecaying corpse or a statue; it is *dust* from outside which settles on her eyelids, and shows that it is long since they have been opened; only in the background, as a truth which could not otherwise be faced, is it suggested that the *dust* is generated from her own corruption. As a result of this ambiguity, the line imposes on *brightness* a further and more terrible comparison; on the one hand, it is the *bright* motes dancing in sunbeams, which *fall* and become dust which is dirty and infectious; on the other, the lightness, gaiety, and activity of humanity, which shall come to *dust* in the grave.

When a word is selected as a 'vivid detail,' as particular for general, a reader may suspect alternative reasons why it has been selected; indeed the author might find it hard to say. When there are several such words there may be alternative ways of viewing them in order of importance.

> Pan is our All, by him we breathe, we live,
> We move, we are; . . .
> But when he frowns, the sheep, alas,
> The shepherds wither, and the grass.
> (BEN JONSON, *Pan's Anniversary*.)

Alas, the word explaining which of the items in this list we are to take

most seriously, belongs to the *sheep* by proximity and the break in the line, to the *grass* by rhyming with it, and to the *shepherds*, humble though they may be, by the processes of human judgment; so that all three are given due attention, and the balance of the verse is maintained. The Biblical suggestions of *grass* as symbolic of the life of man ('in the mornings it is green and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, dried up, and withered') add to the solemnity; or from another point of view make the passage absurdly blasphemous, because Pan here is James I. The grace, the pathos, the 'sheer song' of the couplet is given by an enforced subtlety of intonation, from the difficulty of saying it so as to bring out all the implications.

This last consideration is important, because it gives some hint as to why these devices belong to poetry rather than to prose, or indeed why poetry seems different from prose. A metrical scheme imposes a sort of intensity of interpretation upon the grammar, which makes it fruitful even when there is no 'song.'

> I want to know a butcher paints,
> A baker rhymes for his pursuit,
> Candlestick-maker, much acquaints
> His soul with song, or, haply mute,
> Blows out his brains upon the flute.
>
> (BROWNING.)

'I want to know that the whole class of butchers paints,' or 'I want to know that some one butcher paints,' or 'I want to know personally a butcher who paints'; any of these may be taken as the meaning, and their resultant is something like, 'I want to know that a member of the class of butchers is moderately likely to be a man who paints, or at any rate that he can do so if he wishes.' The demands of metre allow the poet to say something which is not normal colloquial English, so that the reader thinks of the various colloquial forms which are near to it, and puts them together; weighting their probabilities in proportion to their nearness. It is for such reasons as this that poetry can be more compact, while seeming to be less precise, than prose.

It is for these reasons, too, among others, that an insensitivity in a poet to the contemporary style of speaking, into which he has been trained to concentrate his powers of apprehension, is so disastrous, can be noticed so quickly, and produces that curious thinness or blurring of texture one finds in William Morris. And that is why the practice of putting single words into italics for emphasis (again the Victorians are guilty) is so vulgar; a well-constructed sentence should be able to carry a stress on any of its words and should show in itself how these stresses are to be compounded. Both in prose and poetry, it is the impression that implications of this sort have been handled with more judgment than you yourself realise, that with this language as text innumerable further meanings, which you do not know, could be deduced, that forces you to feel respect for a style.

Also I have considered the 'implications' of sentences so far mainly as what they take for granted, as what must already be in mind if they are to be suitable. The stock example of this is, 'Have you stopped beating your

wife?', which claims to know already that it has been your habit to do so. A complementary sort of implication may be defined: what must *not* be in mind if the sentence is to be suitable, what it leaves vague, or is not thinking about, or does not feel. The negative here assumes you might expect this particular thing to be in mind, because otherwise you would not have thought of it as an implication. You might think it lessened the importance of a negative implication that one is only conscious of it if its assumption is unjustified; but the mind is a destroyer; any assumption may chance to be questioned; and most people are conscious that they, therefore, can to some extent impose what they assume. In speaking of 'implications' one thinks as much of negative as of positive ones, indeed it would often be difficult to make the distinction. One would notice, to discover a negative implication, the degree to which stock phrases were used which did not fit the situation very closely, as if it did not need to be, or could not safely be, defined further, or the degree to which a form of words had been selected which only said so much and no more. For such reasons as these, private letters often seem most exquisitely adapted to their setting when written most casually; it is exactly the extent to which their language is careless, the proportion of carelessness they give to the different matters in hand, which is so precise. Similarly in conversation this more refined sort of implication is very highly developed. It is comparable to the use of facial muscles, intended for different or immensely cruder uses (such as the muscles round the eyes designed to prevent them from being gorged with blood when you scream), to convey fine shades of 'expression.' They are comparable, again, in that there are fewer verbal devices, as there are fewer ways of moving facial muscles, than there are sorts of feeling to convey by them; this gives an inherent opportunity for ambiguity which is regularly exploited. The cult of careless ease in literature, where one is less sure of the audience, is more treacherous, but its advantages and dangers are of the same kind.

It is because of the wealth of implication which must be carried by sentences in poetry, because they must start from scratch and put the reader in possession of the entire attitude they assume, that the notion of 'sincerity' is important, and that it is so hard to imitate a style. A poem can be cross-questioned, and one must know, to feel sure that it will survive the process with undiminished reputation, that for a wide variety of possible assumptions in the reader the assumptions of the writer will seem reasonable enough to be adopted; and further that, for a hierarchy of degrees of care in the reader, the assumptions discovered in the writer will not show themselves to be self-conflicting in a way which to such a reader will seem absurd.

The reason, then, that ambiguity is more elaborate in poetry than in prose, other than the fact that the reader is trained to expect it, seems to be that the presence of metre and rhyme, admittedly irrelevant to the straightforward process of conveying a statement, makes it seem sensible to diverge from the colloquial order of statement, and so imply several colloquial orders from which the statement has diverged. But rhythm is a powerful weapon in itself, which needs to be considered separately; I have discussed negative implications here by way of a sidelong approach

to it.

Rhythm allows one, by playing off the possible prose rhythms against the super-imposed verse rhythms, to combine a variety of statements in one order. Its direct effect seems a matter for physiology; in particular, a rhythmic beat taken faster than the pulse seems controllable, exhilarating, and not to demand intimate sympathy; a rhythmic beat almost synchronous with the pulse seems sincere and to demand intimate sympathy; while a rhythmic beat slower than the pulse, like a funeral bell, seems portentous and uncontrollable. But even if it is a simple rhythm which is apprehended, rather than something much more complex which involves the meaning, still it is the meaning which must show at what pace the verse is to be read. And, of course, it is not one rhythmical beat, like a bell tolling, which is apprehended; or if it is (since the ear insists on imposing rhythms, and cocaine can make one stroke into a series), then the word should be used in the plural; the foot, the grammatical clause, the line, the sentence, the stanza or paragraph, and the whole canto or subject-heading, are all rhythmical units; the total rhythmical line which results from them must be regarded as of an immense complexity entirely defined by the meaning; and even then it is the meaning which must imply how it is to be interpreted. So that rhythm is chiefly useful as a means of insisting upon, and then limiting, the possible implications; and though I may seem to be ignoring the rhythm through most of this book, I shall always be using it, so to speak, among the calculations on the margin, as a means of understanding the grammar.

However, one can oppose the use of rhythm to the use of ambiguity, because an interest in rhythm makes a poet longwinded, and ambiguity is a phenomenon of compression. Thus it is seldom that one finds relevant ambiguities in Spenser or Marlowe, because their method is by a variety of means to sustain a poetic effect for so long that the poetic knot can be spread out at length, and one does not see that the separate uses of a word would be a pun if they were drawn together. When Marlowe brings off his triumphs of simplicity and the delight in rhythm it is often a matter of separating the implications of a sentence and using them at different times.

> MEANDER. Your majesty shall shortly have your wish
> And ride in triumph through Persepolis.
> (*Exeunt all except* TAMBURLANE *and his followers*.)
> TAMBURLANE. And ride in triumph through Persepolis.
> Is it not brave to be a king, Techelles,
> Usumcasane and Theridamas,
> Is it not passing brave to be a king,
> And ride in triumph through Persepolis?

Tamburlane can only use the same words again and again, because his mind is glutted with astonishment at them; Marlowe's idea of the heroic soul has extreme simplicity and unbounded appetite, so that after however great an expression of his desire for glory, after one subordinate clause has opened out of another, with unalterable energy, it can still roar at the close with the same directness as in its opening line. Thus the lack

of variety in his rhythm is in itself a device of some rhythmical subtlety. It is for this sort of reason that the same line is repeated here in three tones, of obsequiousness, of astonishment, and of triumph, which Shakespeare could have included in a single line.

> Faustus, these books, thy wit, and our experience,
> Shall make all nations to canonise us.
> As Indian Moors obey their Spanish lords
> So shall the spirits of every element
> Be always serviceable to us three;
> Like lions shall they guard us when we please,
> Like Almain rutters, with their horsemen's staves,
> Or Lapland giants, trotting by our sides;
> Sometimes like women, or unwedded maids,
> Shadowing more beauty in their airy brows
> Than have the white breasts of the Queen of Love:
> From Venice shall they drag huge argosies,
> And from America the golden fleece
> That yearly stuffs old Philip's treasury;
> If learned Faustus will be resolute.

At first sight the last line is an afterthought expressing anxiety, but when immersed in the style one accepts it as a part of the sentence always intended, that might have been put in between the second line and the third. That a conditional clause should have been held back through all these successive lightnings pf poetry, that after their achievement it should still be present with the same conviction and *resolution*, is itself a statement of heroic character. One's total impression of the character of Valdes is obtained by combining these two interpretations. Where so much can be said by the mere order of single mighty lines there is no need for much subtlety of implication within them.

I am considering here such ambiguities of rhythm as act without implying an ambiguity of grammar, or noticeable ambiguity in the use of words. This last example in result belongs to a later chapter, because it implies two different opinions of Valdes and leaves them to be reconciled; so does the following example, because it implies two different sentiments in the author. I put them here for the slightness of the machinery; it is a machinery continually used for ambiguities of the first type, and these examples may be prominent enough to show that it is powerful.

> Aye, look, high heaven and earth ail from their prime foundation.
> All thoughts to rive the heart are there, and all are vain;
> Horror and scorn and hate and fear and indignation;
> Oh why did I awake, when shall I sleep again?
>
> (A. E. HOUSMAN, *Last Poems*.)

The main rhythm of the third line (the crest of the wave) takes *hate* as its chief stress, and the first three nouns as a group together. *Fear* gives the second emphasis, allowed by the extra foot, *fear and indignation* act as a unit balancing the first three, and by attraction the *fear* meant is seen

to be of a dignified kind. But behind the energy and determination of this treatment of the line as a unit, there is a rocking, broken, agitated, and impotent grouping, which takes the first four nouns as two pairs, associates *fear* with *hate* so as to make it weak and snarling, and throws in *indignation* as an isolated and squeaking disapproval.

I have mentioned Spenser, whom no discussion of rhythm can ignore. To show the scale of his rhythm, it may be enough to list some of the ways in which he gave movement to the stanza of the *Faerie Queene*; it is by the delicacy of this movement that he shows his attitude towards his sentences, rather than by devices of implication in the sentences themselves. At the same time, once such an attitude has been fixed, it is more easily described in terms of the meaning of the words than in terms of the meaning of the rhythm; in the next example, from Sidney, I shall use this other mode of approach.

Spenser concentrates the reader's attention on to the movement of his stanza: by the use of archaic words and constructions, so that one is at a safe distance from the exercise of an immediate judgment, by the steady untroubled flow of similar lines, by making no rapid change of sense or feeling, by sustained alliteration, parallel adjectives, and full statement of the accessories pf a thought, and by the dreamy repetition of the great stanza perpetually pausing at its close. *Ababbcbcc* is a unit which may be broken up into a variety of metrical forms, and the ways in which it is successively broken up are fitted into enormous patterns. The first quatrain usually gratifies the ear directly and without surprise, and the stanzas may then be classified by the grammatical connections of the crucial fifth line, which must give a soft bump to the dying fall of the first quatrain, keep it in the air, and prevent it from falling apart from the rest of the stanza.

It may complete the sense of the quatrain, for instance, with a couplet, and the stanza will then begin with a larger, more narrative unit, *ababb*, and wander garrulously down a perspective to the alexandrine. Or it may add to the quatrain as by an afterthought, as if with a childish earnestness it made sure of its point without regard to the metre, and one is relieved to find that the metre recovers itself after all. For more energetic or serious statements it will start a new quatrain at the fifth line, with a new sentence; there are then two smaller and tighter, repeatedly didactic, or logically opposed, historically or advancing, units, whose common rhyme serves to insist upon their contrast, which are summed up and reconciled in the final solemnity of the alexandrine. In times of excitement the fifth line will be connected both ways, so as to ignore the two quatrains, and, by flowing straight on down the stanza with an insistence on its unity, show the accumulated energy of some enormous climax; and again, by being connected with neither, it will make the stanza into an unstressed conversational device without overtones of rhythm, picking up stray threads of the story with almost the relief of prose. It would be interesting to take one of the vast famous passages of the work and show how these devices are fitted together into larger units of rhythm, but having said that every use of the stanza includes all these uses in the reader's apprehension of it I may have said enough to show the sort of methods Spenser had under his control; why it was not

necessary for him to concentrate on the lightning flashes of ambiguity.

The size, the possible variety, and the fixity of this unit give something of the blankness that comes from fixing your eyes on a bright spot; you have to yield yourself to it very completely to take in the variety of its movement, and, at the same time, there is no need to concentrate the elements of the situation into a judgment as if for action. As a result of this, when there are ambiguities of idea, it is whole civilisations rather than details of the moment which are their elements; he can pour into the even dreamwork of his fairyland Christian, classical, and chivalrous materials with an air, not of ignoring their differences, but of holding all their systems of values floating as if at a distance, so as not to interfere with one another, in the prolonged and diffused energies of his mind.

Nowhere in English literature can this use of diffuseness as an alternative to, or peculiar branch of, ambiguity be seen more clearly than in those lovely sestines of Sidney, which are so curiously foreign to the normal modes or later developments of the language. This time I must do some serious quotation.

STREPHON. KLAIUS.

STREPHON. You Gote-heard Gods, that love the grassie mountaines,
You nimphes that haunt the springs in pleasant vallies,
You Satyrs joyd with free and quiet forrests,
Vouchsafe your silent eares to playning musique,
Which to my woes gives still an early morning:
And draws the dolor on till wery evening.

KLAIUS. O Mercurie, foregoer to the evening,
O heavenlie huntresse of the savage mountaines,
O lovelie starre, entitled of the morning,
While that my voice doth fill the woeful vallies
Vouchsafe your silent eares to playning musique,
Which oft hath *Echo* tir'd in secrete forrests.

STREPHON. I that was once free-burgess of the forrests
Where shade from Sunne, and sports I sought at evening,
I that was once esteemed for pleasant musique,
Am banisht now amongst the monstrous mountaines
Of huge despaire, and foul afflictions vallies,
Am growne a skrich-owle to myself each morning.

KLAIUS. I that was once delighted every morning,
Hunting the wild inhabiters of forrests,
I that was once the musique of these vallies,
So darkened am, that all my day is evening,
Hart-broken so, that mole-hills seem high mountaines,
And fill the vales with cries in stead of musique.

STREPHON. Long since alas, my deadly Swannish musique
Hath made itself a crier of the morning,
And hath with wailing strength climbed highest mountaines:

Long since my thoughts more desert be than forrests:
Long since I see my joyes come to their evening,
And state throwen down to over-troden vallies.

KLAIUS. Long since the happie dwellers of these vallies,
Have praide me leave my strange exclaiming musique,
Which troubles their dayes worke, and joyes of evening:
Long since I hate the night, more hate the morning:
Long since my thoughts chase me like beasts in forrests,
And make me wish myself laid under mountaines.

STREPHON. Me seemes I see the high and stately mountaines,
Transforme themselves to lowe dejected vallies:
Me seemes I heare in these ill-changed forrests,
The nightingales doo learne of Owles their musique:
Me seemes I feele the comfort of the morning
Turnde to the mortal serene of an evening.

KLAIUS. Me seemes I see a filthie cloudie evening,
As soone as Sunne begins to climbe the mountaines:
Me seemes I feel a noisome scent, the morning
When I do smell the flowers of these vallies:
Me seemes I heare, when I doo heare sweet musique,
The dreadful cries of murdered men in forrests.

STREPHON. I wish to fire the trees of all these forrests;
I give the Sunne a last farewell each evening;
I curse the fiddling finders out of musique:
With envy doo I hate the lofty mountaines;
And with despite despise the humble vallies:
I doo detest night evening, day, and morning.

KLAIUS. Curse to myself my prayer is, the morning:
My fire is more, than can be made with forrests;
My state more base, than are the basest vallies:
I wish no evenings more to see, each evening;
Shamed I have myself in sight of mountaines,
And stoppe mine eares, lest I go mad with musique.

STREPHON. For she, whose parts maintained a perfect musique,
Whose beauty shin'de more than the blushing morning,
Who much did pass in state the stately mountaines,
In straightness past the Cedars of the forrests,
Hath cast me wretch into eternal evening,
By taking her two Sunnes from these dark vallies.

KLAIUS. For she, to whom compared, the Alps are vallies,
She, whose lest word brings from the spheares their musique
At whose approach the Sunne rose in the evening,
Who, where she went, bare in her forehead morning,
Is gone, is gone from these our spoiled forrests,
Turning to deserts our best pastur'de mountaines.

STREPHON. These mountaines witness shall, so shall these vallies,
KLAIUS. These forrests eke, made wretched by our musique,
STREPHON. Our morning hymn is this,
KLAIUS. and song at evening.
(SIDNEY, *Arcadia*.)

The poem beats, however rich its orchestration, with a wailing and immovable monotony, for ever upon the same doors in vain. *Mountaines, vallies, forrests; musique, evening, morning;* it is at these words only that Klaius and Strephon pause in their cries; these words circumscribe their world; these are the bones of their situation; and in tracing their lovelorn pastoral tedium through thirteen repetitions, with something of the aimless multitudinousness of the sea on a rock, we seem to extract all the meaning possible from these notions; we are at last, therefore, in possession of all that might have been implied by them (if we had understood them) in a single sentence; of all, in fact, that is implied by them, in the last sentence of the poem. I must glance, to show this, at the twelve other occasions on which each word is used.

Mountaines are haunts of Pan for lust and Diana for chastity, to both of these the lovers appeal; they suggest being shut in, or banishment; impossibility and impotence, or difficulty and achievement; greatness that may be envied or may be felt as your own (so as to make you feel helpless, or feel powerful); they give you the peace, or the despair, of the grave; they are the distant things behind which the sun rises and sets, the too near things which shut in your valley; deserted wastes, and the ample pastures to which you drive up the cattle for the summer.

Vallies hold nymphs to which you may appeal, and yet are the normal places where you live; are your whole world, and yet limited so that your voice can affect the whole of them; are opposed to *mountaines*, either as places of shelter and comfort, or as places of humility and affliction; are rich with flowers and warmth, or are dark hollows between the hills.

Forests, though valuable and accustomed, are desolate and hold danger; there are both nightingales and owls in them; their beasts, though savage, give the strong pleasures of hunting; their burning is either useful or destructive; though wild and sterile they give freedom for contemplation, and their trunks are symbols of pride.

Music may express joy or sorrow; is at once more and less direct than talking, and so is connected with one's permanent feeling about the characters of pastoral that they are at once very rustic and rather over-civilised; it may please or distress the bystanders; and while belonging to despair and to the deaths of swans, it may share the living beauty of the lady, and be an inmate of the celestial spheres.

Morning brings hope, light and labour, *evening* rest, play and despair; they are the variety of Nature, or the tedious repetition of a day; their patrons Venus, whom one dare not name, and Mercury, who will bring no news of her. *Morning*, too, has often attached to it a meaning which, by an intelligent and illuminating misprint, is insisted upon in the eleventh (and subsequent) editions:

At whose approach the sun rose in the evening,

Who where she went bore in her forehead *mourning*,
Is gone, is gone, from these our spoiled forrests,
Turning to deserts our best *pastor'd* mountaines.

The form takes its effect by concentrating on these words and slowly building up our interest in them; all their latent implications are brought out by the repetitions; and each in turn is used to build up some simple conceit. So that when the static conception of the complaint has been finally brought into light (I do not mean by this to depreciate the sustained magnificence of its crescendo, but to praise the singleness of its idea), a whole succession of feelings about the local scenery, the whole way in which it is taken for granted, has been enlisted into sorrow and beats as a single passion of the mind.

I have put this poem at the end of a discussion ostensibly about rhythm, and shall mention its rhythm only to remark that it is magnificent; my point is that one can best illustrate its rhythm by showing the cumulative way it uses its words. It is seldom that the meaning of a poet's words is built up so flatly and steadily in the course of using them. And limited as this form may be, the capacity to accept a limitation so unflinchingly, the capacity even to conceive so large a form as a unit of sustained feeling, is one that has been lost since that age.

Annex on Dramatic Irony

'Effective in several ways' includes dramatic irony; I shall close this chapter with some remarks about that. An example from *Macbeth* has already been considered (p. 18), which imposed the pathetic fallacy on the reader by means of an ambiguity, and tricked him into an irrational or primitive mode of thought under colour of talking about the view. This is an important device, about which it is proper to elaborate the obvious; I shall consider an example from the Synge *Deirdre of the Sorrows*.

Deirdre, we have been told, is uniquely beautiful; she is being brought up alone in the woods to be old Conchubor's queen; troubles have been foretold; she is wilful; she has seen Naisi in the woods; she prefers him to Conchubor. Conchubor visits her, says he will marry her in three days, and leaves her to return to his capital. She asks her nurse, who could help her against him, would the nurse herself, no, would this great man or that, possibly, more possibly, would Naisi, and there is a storm of denial:

> LAVARCHAM. In the end of all there is none can go against Conchubor, and it's folly that we're talking, for if any went against Conchubor it's sorrows he'd earn and the shortening of his day of life.
>
> (*She turns away, and* DEIRDRE *stands up stiff with excitement and goes and looks out of the window*.)
>
> DEIRDRE. Are the stepping-stones flooding, Lavarcham? Will the night be stormy in the hills?
>
> LAVARCHAM. The stepping-stones are flooding, surely, and the night will be the worst, I'm thinking, we've seen these years gone by.

Upon these words Deirdre 'tears upon the press and pulls out clothes and

tapestries,' robes herself as a queen, and prepares for the coming of the young princes.

This storm is dramatically effective for various reasons. As part of the plot it makes Naisi and his brothers come for shelter when she is wanting them; on the classical tragic model it makes the day of the action an unusual one, a day on which it seems fitting that great things should happen, and gives a sort of unity to the place by making it difficult to get there. Further, we are in doubt as to the position of Conchubor, and this allows of several implications. If we are to conceive that he has got across the stepping-stones already, then their flooding means that Deirdre's way of safety, to Conchubor and his palace and the life which is expected of her, has been cut off; that it is high time she behaved like the stepping-stones and isolated herself with Naisi; that what in the story is done heroically by her own choice is, in dumb show, either as an encouragement or as an ironical statement of the impotence of heroic action, done by the weather; and that all these troubles which she is bringing on herself have been foretold and are beyond her control. If we are to conceive that Conchubor has not yet got across the stepping-stones, she is in danger of being condemned to his company if he turns back, as, in fact, she is in any case, since he will marry her in three days; it is against a fatal and frankly alien heaven that she exerts her courage and her royalty; the weather is now one of the inevitable forces against which she is revolting, and is that one of those forces which makes it urgent she should revolt now. If we are to conceive that Conchubor is just getting across the stepping-stones, the weather is her ally, and there is some encouragement for revolt in the thought that he may be drowned.

For the storm to mean so much it must receive particular attention, and it is assured of this by marking a change in the tone of the conversation. The preceding series of questions has received the wrong answer at its climax; Naisi is the man who can help her, and her nurse says he can not. Since energy has accumulated towards this question, and is now dammed by the negative, it bursts out of the window into a larger world, and since we find there, instead of the indifference of external Nature, instead of the calm of accepting the statement that there is no hope, a larger release of energy and the crescendo repeated in the heavens, we compare the storm with the plot and are surprised into a Pathetic Fallacy. It is not that Nature is with her or against her, is her fate or her servant; the Fallacy here claims more generally that Nature, like the spectators, is excited into a variety of sympathies, and is all these four together. The operation is thus a complicated one, but it is normal, of course, to the crudest forms of melodrama. My point is that, for a Pathetic Fallacy to cause much emotional reverberation, it must be imposed upon the reader by an ambiguity.

Since the storm has been fixed, by all these devices, firmly in the spectator's memory, a slight reference at the other end of the tragedy can call it back to give another dramatic irony. Naisi has been killed and Conchubor left in possession.

> DEIRDRE. Do not raise a hand to touch me.
> CONCHUBOR. There are other hands to touch you. My fighters are

set in among the trees.

DEIRDRE. Who'll fight the grave, Conchubor, and it opened on a dark night?

The *night* is *dark* enough now, and, of course, her main meaning is that she can't be fought after she has killed herself. But she herself could not *fight* against the impulses of the *night* at the beginning of the play, when she ran off with Naisi and *opened the graves* which are only now being filled; nor against the weariness which is the turning-point of the action, that sense that happiness could not last for ever which drove them back to Ireland and their enemy. This third *dark night* in a sense covers the other two; we are made, therefore, to feel that the unity of time, in spite of the lovers' seven years of happiness, has somehow been preserved. The *grave*, partly in consequence of this, is not that of Deirdre only, against which Conchubor cannot *fight*; she is hopeless because she herself cannot *fight* against the *grave* in which Naisi is lying; and there is thus a further dramatic irony of the heroic action that defeats itself, in that it is Conchubor, as well as Deirdre, who *opened* a *grave*, whether for her or for Naisi, by his actions on either *dark night*; that Conchubor, no more than Deirdre, can *fight* either of them; that after the way Conchubor has killed Naisi, Deirdre cannot live to endure Conchubor and Conchubor cannot hold Deirdre from her *grave*. Lastly, there is a threat from Deirdre against Conchubor, making the *grave* his as well as theirs; her choice of death, or the forces he has himself loosed against her, will kill him; as indeed he is led from the stage suddenly old and aimless and 'hard set to see the way before him.' The *grave* having been spread on to three persons now takes effect as a generalisation, and names the mortality of all the protagonists, incidental soldiers included; 'all life is strangely frustrated, all efforts incalculable and in vain; we are all feeble beside the forces given to us and in the face of death all parties are on the same side.'

This implication, by the way, that all the characters are people subject to the same situation, that they all understand, though they may not take, the same attitude, is important to some types of play and often gets called their 'meaning.' However, it is less insisted upon than dramatic irony by critics because (being a less conscious form of that device) it does not need to be noticed to be appreciated, and, therefore, is at once a less likely and a less useful thing for them to notice. For the rather limited and doctrinaire pessimism exploited by Synge it is a powerful weapon; consider this piece of dialogue, when the lovers are wondering whether to go back to Ireland, where they will find death and their proper social position:

NAISI. If our time in this place is ended, come away without Ainnle and Ardan to the woods of the east, for it's right to be away from all people when two lovers have their love only. Come away and we'll be safe always.

DEIRDRE. There's no safe place, Naisi, on the ridge of the world . . . . And it's in the quiet woods I've seen them digging our grave, and throwing out the clay on leaves are bright and withered.

NAISI. Come away, Deirdre, and it's little we'll think of safety or the grave beyond it, and we resting in a little corner between the daytime and the long

night.

DEIRDRE. It's this hour we're between the daytime and a night where there is sleep for ever, and isn't it a better thing to be following on to a near death, than to be bending the head down, and dragging with the feet, and seeing one day a blight showing on love where it is sweet and tender?

These may seem absurdly simple phrases for Deirdre to twist into her more gloomy meaning, but it was Naisi who first suggested the idea from which he is now trying to reassure her; it is because at the back of his mind he agrees with her that upon all phrases of comfort he can give her there lies the same shadow of the grave. You would not find this effect so naked, so much in command of the situation, in the Elizabethan playwrights, because there the forces that hold characters apart have got more kick in them; the device is always at work, I think, but the strongest example I know in Shakespeare comes from that one of his plays which has least variety of conception, which has most of this self-centred anxiety to maintain a single mood.

SIC. He's a Disease that must be cut away.
MEN. Oh, he's a limb, that has but a Disease.
Mortall, to cut it off; to cure it, easye . . . . [It would be shameful ingratitude, he goes on, if they were to kill such a hero.]
BRU . . . . when he did love his country,
It honour'd him.
MEN. The service of the foote
Being once gangren'd, is not then respected
For what before it was.
BRU. Wee'll hear no more:
Pursue him to his house, and pluck him thence,
Lest his infection, being of catching nature,
Spread further.
MEN. One word more, one word:
This Tiger-footed rage, when it shall find
The harme of unskann'd swiftnesse, will too (late)
Tye Leaden pounds too's heeles. Proceed by Processe,
Lest parties (as he is beloved) break out,
And sacke great Rome with Romanes.

(*Coriolanus*, III. i. 245.)

Warburton wanted to give Sicinius the speech about *gangrene*, and certainly it does Coriolanus no good and is a strange speech from one of his friends. It is no ingratitude not to 'respect a foot for its service' in a case of gangrene where it may be mortal *not* to cut it off. Of course, you may call it an irony to state the other side's case more strongly than they have done so far for themselves, but it springs from a clear understanding of their feelings; both sides are using the same metaphor, even if they are sure they want to draw different conclusions from it. Menenius seems hardly less conscious of his irony in his next speech, when the *tiger-footed rage*, the *swiftness*, and the act of *scanning* it *too late* may belong to the tribunes or to Coriolanus himself; and it was precisely because they *proceeded by process*, instead of killing him out of hand, that *Rome*

came so near to being *sacked by a Roman* before the play was done.

We are concerned here with a sort of dramatic ambiguity of judgment which does not consider the character so much as the audience; thus Menenius seems to have been a very direct partisan of Coriolanus, but he had to agree with the tribunes to a great extent to bring out the point of the situation they were arguing about. Evidently this is an important means of handling the plot, and may be used to juggle with motivation; it is these methods which make Iago so effective a villain, and such a puzzling figure if you take his character seriously. There is a simpler example in the casket scene of *The Merchant of Venice*. Portia is far too virtuous to attempt to evade her father's devastating scheme; she fully approves of it ('If you do love me, you will find me out'); and yet, while Bassanio is choosing, she arranges that there should be a song continually rhyming with 'lead,' and ending in a conceit about coffins. The audience is not really meant to think she is telling him the answer, but it is not posed as a moral problem, and seems a natural enough thing to do; she might quite well do it in the belief that he would not hear; the song is explaining to *them* the point about the lead casket, may be taken to represent the fact that Bassanio understands it, heightens the tension by repeating the problem in another form, and adds to their sense of fitness in the third man being the lucky one.

Corresponding to this doubt as to Portia's honesty is a stronger one as to Bassanio's affection; he seems superior to the other suitors only in the most incidental qualities, and is more frankly marrying for money than any of them. But Shakespeare loved his arrivistes for their success, their shamelessness and their self-deception, and Bassanio is justified by the song which leads him to choose rightly. Fancy is nothing, fancy is fleeting, and yet it is all that the dignity of poetry is based upon, and we must ring its knell as for the life of man. Lead, a fundamental mere humanity, eventual death, must be accepted, must be chosen, before one can get what one wants, and can go on with the poetry of the play; fancy can only hide lead, and lead must be enough for the maintenance of fancy.

Irony in this subdued sense, as a generous scepticism which can believe at once that people are and are not guilty, is a very normal and essential method; Portia's song is not more inconsistent than the sorrow of Helen that she has brought death to so many brave men, and the pride with which she is first found making tapestries of them; than the courage of Achilles, which none will question, 'in his impregnable armour with his invulnerable skin underneath it'; than the sleepers in Gethsemane, who, St. Luke says, were sleeping for sorrow; than the way Thesée (in Racine), by the use of a deity, at once kills and does not kill Hippolyte. This sort of contradiction is at once understood in literature, because the process of understanding one's friends must always be riddled with such indecisions and the machinery of such hypocrisy; people, often, cannot have done both of two things, but they must have been in some way prepared to have done either; whichever they did, they will have still lingering in their minds the way they would have preserved their self-respect if they had acted differently; they are only to be understood by bearing both possibilities in mind.

Dramatic irony is an interesting device for my purpose, because it gives an intelligible way in which the reader can be reminded of the rest of a play while he is reading a single part of it. Thus it gives one some means of understanding the view of a work of genius as a sort of miracle whose style carries its personality into every part of it, whose matter consists of microcosms of its form, and whose flesh has the character of the flesh of an organism. For example the messengers in hailing Macbeth Thane of Cawdor tell him that Duncan

> findes thee in the stout Norweyan Rankes,
> Nothing affeard of what thyselfe didst make,
> Strange images of death.

This remark does not seem to belong very straightforwardly to the speech of a state messenger; it is not obvious why he expects a soldier to be frightened of his enemies only when he had made them harmless; but it is just what Macbeth was to feel about Duncan; if the king said this he must have known a great deal about Macbeth's habits of mind. One feels the conceit must have arisen, in a mood of moral casuistry, from a sense of the oddity in that reliance on convention which gives such different reactions to killing at different times; murder as well as soldiering, therefore, were in the mind of the speaker, and are suggested to the audience. Or the negative, more simply, works backwards; there is some question of Macbeth's being *affeard* of corpses; and this impression of him, given so early in the play, as a powerful and horrified figure, yielding nothing to the horror of his situation, striking out endlessly at the *images of death* that bank round him and shut him in, is as it were a piece of dramatic irony on its own account, gives in brief a total impression of the play, and puts no stress on the complementary part of the irony, which it assumes:

> I am afraid, to think what I have done:
> Looke on 't againe I dare not.

In this case, the two parts of the irony convey almost all their point separately, without your having to remember one when hearing the other. But, in many cases, Shakespeare does not help one in this way, and gives ironies for the pleasure rather of commentators than of first-night audiences. I shall close this desultory discussion with such an example. Cordelia will say *nothing* to show her love or gain her portion.

> LEAR. Nothing will come of nothing, speak againe.

Six hundred lines later, the Fool sings some nonsense verses.

> LEAR. This is nothing, foole.
> FOOL. Then 'tis like the breath of an unfee'd Lawyer, you gave me nothing for 't. Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?
> LEAR. Why no, Boy.
> Nothing can be made out of nothing.
> FOOL (*to Kent*). Prithee tell him, so much the rent of his land comes to, he will not beleeve a Fool.

If you fail to connect the second of these with the first, the pain of loss, and the nagging of the Fool, are almost all that the second can be taken to imply. Only if this quite distant connection is consciously achieved can you realise Lear's meaning; that he, rather than Cordelia, was the beggar for love on that occasion; that she might well say *nothing*, if she had known how he would act to her; that, perhaps, it was no fault of his that had spoiled Regan and Goneril, since no upbringing could have *made* anything of them; that these words anyway are the ripe fruit of his experience; and that there is indeed *nothing* that can be made out of him, now that he has become *nothing* by the loss of everything in his world. (He is speaking with a curiously intimate affection and disregard for dignity, as if the Fool's talk was probably his own hallucination, since it gives a love that need not be paid for; and it is true that the Fool acts as a sort of divided personality externalised from the King.) Most people are so used to the text that they do not realise how much the effect depends on a verbal irony, which, it would be a feat of memory to notice at the first hearing.

Possibly the richness of the deposit of cross-reference and incidental detail upon these plays may be due in some degree to the circumstances under which they were written; to the fact that Shakespeare wrote up plays already owned by his company, and in use, so that he and the actors already knew a great deal about them; to the way his version might always receive additions and alterations for a revival or a special occasion at Court; to the probability that a particular member of the company would keep to a particular part; and to the shortness of individual runs. The last reason would keep the actors from being bored with the text; the other reasons would give them a casual but detailed knowledge (of the sort that leads to flippant quotation in the greenroom), a desire for continual additions, a capacity to see distant verbal connections, and a well-informed interest in the minor characters of the story. Shakespeare seems to assume all this in his public, and can scarcely have obtained it from any one outside. There are some odd and pathetic relics of the state of feeling I mean in the mistakes of the folio stage directions, where *Lord E* and *Lord G*, for minor characters in *All's Well*, are presumably the initials of actors; *French E*; *Capt. G*; faint traces of the geniality of long-past rehearsals, when they were scribbled into the prompt copy. *French E* and *Lord G*, at any rate, knew what the words were three hundred lines back; for *French E* and *Lord G* (they would be pleased to know more about their own characters), one could drop in such details as allowed Professor Bradley to treat the plays as documents from which to draw full-length biographies; if for no other, still for an audience upon the stage, one could make those delicate cross-references that are now the discoveries of the learned.

[1] In the first edition I made it 'adds some nuance to the direct statement of prose.' This, as was pointed out, begs a philosophical question and stretches the term 'ambiguity' so far that it becomes almost meaningless. The new phrase is not meant to be decisive but to avoid confusing the reader; naturally the question of what would be the best definition of 'ambiguity' (whether the example in hand should be called ambiguous) crops up all

through the book.

[1] Not a clear example, and I am not sure that what I said is true; but a borderline example was needed here to show that fine shades can be concerned.

[1] It would seem pedantic to alter the phrase ‘has several meanings,’ but it is treacherous. If the simplest statement has a subject and a predicate it may be said to include two meanings. There would be no point in calling it ambiguous unless it gave room for alternative reactions.

[1] It was stupid of me to present this example as a sort of test case, with a tidy solution drawn from the names of birds. Obviously the passage is still impressive if you have no opinions at all about the difference between crows and rooks. But it is at least a good example of a heavy Atmosphere, and I don’t think my treatment of it was wrong as far as it went.

[1] Byron I understand did not meet his half-sister at all till he was grown up. It seems no good trying to improve this paragraph, and I still think that the last sentence summing it up is sufficiently true.

[1] Such a trick has usually one meaning which is the answer of the puzzle, but while you are puzzling the words have possible alternative meanings, and even to those who see the answers at once the alternatives are in a way present as being denied. They may appear as the views of commonplace people, who are thereby snubbed; but they can also make a real ambiguity when the denial is not felt to be complete.

II

THERE are three possible scales or dimensions, that seem of reliable importance, along which ambiguities may be spread out: the degree of logical or grammatical disorder, the degree to which the apprehension of the ambiguity must be conscious, and the degree of psychological complexity concerned. Of these, the first seems the one about which there is least danger of talking nonsense, the one it is most important to be clear about, and the one to which least critical attention has so far been paid. My seven types, so far as they are not merely a convenient framework, are intended as stages of advancing logical disorder. However, I shall continually have to be using and discussing the other two criteria, and the three are not wholly independent of one another, so that my later examples will, as a rule, appear to the casual eye 'really' more ambiguous than the earlier ones.

An example of the second type of ambiguity, in word or syntax, occurs when two or more meanings are resolved into one, There are alternatives, even in the mind of the author, not only different emphases as in the first type; but an ordinary good reading can extract one resultant from them. This is more common than any of the later types, and I shall giveit most space.

The following example shows, I think, the difference between logical and psychological degrees of ambiguity; because the thought is complicated or at least doubtful, whereas the feeling is very direct.

> Cupid is winged and doth range;
> Her country so my love doth change.
> But change she earth, or change she sky,
> Yet I will love her till I die.
>
> (ANON., *Oxford Book*.)

'I will love her though she moves from this part of the earth to one out of my reach; I will love her though she goes to live under different skies; I will love her though she moves from this earth and sky to another planet; I will love her though she moves into a social or intellectual sphere where I cannot follow; I will love her though she alters the earth and sky I have got now, though she destroys the bubble of worship in which I am now living by showing herself unworthy to be its object; I will love her though, being yet worthy of it, by going away she changes my earth into desire and unrest, and my heaven into despair; I will love her even if she has both power and will to upset both the orderly ideals of men in general (heaven) and the system of society in general (earth); she may alter the earth and sky *she* has now by abandoning her faith or in just punishment becoming outcast, and still I will love her; she may change *my* earth by killing me, but till it comes I will go on loving.'

This may look as if I was merely listing different sorts of change,

which would not, of course, show direct ambiguity; but *change* may mean ‘move to another’ or ‘alter the one you have got,’ and *earth* may be the lady’s private world, or the poet’s, or that of mankind at large. All meanings to be extracted from these are the immediate meaning insisted upon by the words, and yet the whole charm of the poem is its extravagant, its unreasonable simplicity.

But, in general, complexity of logical meaning ought to be based on complexity of thought, even where, as is proper to the second type of ambiguity, there is only one main meaning as a resultant. For instance, if it is an example of the first type to use a metaphor which is valid in several ways, it is an example of the second to use several different metaphors at once, as Shakespeare is doing in the following example. It is impossible to avoid Shakespeare in these matters; partly because his use of language is of unparalleled richness and partly because it has received so much attention already; so that the inquiring student has less to do, is more likely to find what he is looking for, and has evidence that he is not spinning fancies out of his own mind.

As a resounding example, then, there is Macbeth’s

> If it were done, when ’tis done, then ’twere well
> It were done quickly;

(double syntax since you may stop at the end of the line)

> If th’ Assassination
> Could trammell up the Consequence, and catch
> With his surcease, Success; that but . . .

words hissed in the passage where servants were passing, which must be swaddled with darkness, loaded as it were in themselves with fearful powers, and not made too naked even to his own mind. *Consequence* means causal result, and the things to follow, though not causally connected, and, as in ‘a person of consequence,’ the divinity that doth hedge a king. *Trammel* was a technical term used about netting birds, hobbling horses in some particular way, hooking up pots, levering, and running trolleys on rails. *Surcease* means completion, stopping proceedings in the middle of a lawsuit, or the overruling of a judgment; the word reminds you of ‘surfeit’ and ‘decease,’ as does *assassination* of hissing and ‘assess’ and, as in ‘supersession,’ through *sedere*, of knocking down the mighty from their seat. His may apply to Duncan, *assassination* or *consequence*. *Success* means fortunate result, result whether fortunate or not, and succession to the throne. And *catch*, the single little flat word among these monsters, names an action; it is a mark of human inadequacy to deal with these matters of statecraft, a child snatching at the moon as she rides thunder-clouds. The meanings cannot all be remembered at once, however often you read it; it remains the incantation of a murderer, dishevelled and fumbling among the powers of darkness.

It is clear that ambiguity, not of word, but of grammar, though common enough in poetry, cannot be brought to this pitch without chaos, and must in general be used to produce a different effect. Where there is a single main meaning (the case we are now considering) the device is

used, as in the following examples from Shakespeare Sonnets, to give an interpenetrating and, as it were, fluid unity, in which phrases will go either with the sentence before or after and there is no break in the movement of the thought.

> But heaven in thy creation did decree
> That in thy face sweet love should ever dwell,
> Whate'er thy thoughts or thy heart's workings be,
> Thy looks should nothing thence, but sweetness tell.
>
> (xciii.)

You may put a full stop either before or after the third line.

> That tongue that tells the story of thy days
> (Making lascivious comments on thy sport)
> Cannot dispraise, but in a kind of praise,
> Naming thy name, blesses an ill report.
>
> (xcv.)

The subject of *blesses* is either *tongue* or *naming*, and *but in a kind of praise* qualifies either *blesses* or *dispraise*. These devices are particularly useful in managing the sonnet form because they help it to combine variety of argumentation and the close-knit rhythmical unity of a single thought.

There is in the following Sonnet one of those important and frequent subtleties of punctuation, which in general only convey rhythm, but here it amounts to a point of grammar.

> If thou survive my well contented daye
> When that churle death my bones with dust shall cover
> And shalt by fortune once more re-survey:
> These poor rude lines of thy deceased Lover:
> Compare them with the bettering of the time.
>
> (xxxii.)

Line 4 is isolated between colons, carries the whole weight of the pathos, and is a pivot round which the rest of the Sonnet turns. *Re-survey* might conceivably be thought of as intransitive, so that line 4 could go with line 5 in apposition to *them*, but the point is not that either line 3 or line 5 could stand without line 4, it is in fact next to both of them, and yet it stands out from either, as if the Sonnet had become more conscious of itself, or was making a quotation from a tombstone.

> Thou doost love her, because thou knowest I love her,
> And for my sake even so doth she abuse me,
> Suffering my friend for my sake to approve her,
> If I loose thee, my loss is my love's gaine,
> And loosing her, my friend hath found that losse
>
> (xlii.)

According as line 3 goes backwards or forwards, the subject of *suffering* is either *she* or *I*. The device is not here merely a rhythmic one, but it carries no great depth of meaning; the Elizabethans were trained to use lines that went both ways, for example in those chains of Sonnets, such

as the *Corona* of Donne, in which each began with the last line of the one before.

Donne, indeed, uses these methods with vehemence; I shall break this series from the Sonnets for a moment to quote an example from the *Epithalamion for Valentine's Day*.

> Thou mak'st a Taper see
> What the sunne never saw, and what the Arke
> (Which was of Soules, and beasts, the cage, and park)
> Did not containe, one bed containes, through thee,
> Two Phoenixes, whose joyned breasts . . .

'You make a taper see what the ark did not contain. Through you one bed contains two phoenixes.' 'You make a taper see what the sun never saw. Through you one bed contains what the ark did not contain, that is, two phoenixes.' The renewal of energy gained from starting a new sentence is continually obtained here without the effect of repose given by letting a sentence stop.

> Who lets so fair a house fall to decay,
> Which husbandry in honour might uphold
> Against the stormy gusts of winter's day
> And barren rage of death's eternal cold?
> O none but unthrifts, *dear my love you know*,
> You had a Father, let your Son say so.
>
> (xiii.)

The phrase in italics is equally suited to the sentences before and after it; taking it as the former, a third meaning shows itself faintly, that *you know unthrifts*; 'the company you keep may be riotous or ascetic, but is not matrimonial.' Having quoted this for a comparatively trivial point of grammar, it seems worth pointing out that its beauty depends first on the puns, *house* and *husbandry*, and secondly on the shift of feeling from *winter's day*, winter is short, like its days; 'your child will grow up after you and your house will survive to see another summer,' to *death's eternal cold*; 'if the house does not survive this winter it falls for ever'; there is a contrast between these two opposite ideas and the two open, similarly vowelled, Marlowan lines that contain them, which claim by their structure to be merely repeating the same thought, so that the two notions are dissolved into both of them, and form a regress of echoes.

Sometimes the ambiguous phrase is a relative clause, with 'that' omitted, which is able to appear for a moment as an independent sentence on its own, before it is fitted into the grammar.

> Their images I lov'd, I view in thee,
> And thou (all they) hast all the all of
> me. (xxxi.)

There is some suggestion that the first clause may be wholly independent, and that *I view in thee* means 'I look for them in you'; but on the whole the device merely puts 'which I loved' into special prominence.

My life hath in this line some interest,
Which for memorial still with thee shall stay.
When thou reviewest this, thou dost review,
The very part was consecrate to
thee, (lxxiv.)

Passing over the comma at the end of the third line, the object of *review* is *part*; stressing the comma, it says tautologically, with the emphasis on the second *thou*, 'it is enough immortality for me to be remembered by you,' and the fourth line becomes a separate sentence.[1]

This fluidity of grammar is partly given by rhetorical balance, because since the lines are opposed to one another in regular pairs you still get some sort of opposition by opposing the wrong pair. Sonnet lxxxi. runs this principle to death:

Or shall I live your Epitaph to make,
Or you survive when I in earth am rotten,
From hence your memory death cannot take,
Although in me each part will be forgotten.
Your name from hence immortall life shall have,
Though I (once gone) to all the world must dye,
The earth can yeeld me but a common grave,
When you entombed in men's eyes shall lye,
Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
Which eyes not yet created shall ore-read,
And toungs to be, your beeing shall rehearse,
When all the breathers of this world are dead,
You still shall live (such vertue hath my Pen)
Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of men.

Any two consecutive lines in this, except 2-3 and 10-11 for accidental reasons, make a complete sentence when separated from their context; I do not say that this makes it a good sonnet, or that I know it ought to be read aloud.

Tongues can *over-read* as well as *eyes*, and this would leave either *being* the subject of *rehearse*, or both *tongues* and *eyes*. However, *tongues* is particularly connected with *rehearse*, because the contrast of *your being* with *to be* ('in order to be') shows the transient tongues *rehearsing* your ideal *being* lapping up your blood as it were, and thus implies a sort of timeless Platonic existence for Mr. W. H., informing the examples of his type, but in no way dependent on them. These shadows of his perfection were once to have been his children, but Shakespeare's partly scoptophile desire to see him settled in love has by now been with a painful irony thwarted or over-satisfied, and they are now no more than those who read his praise.

The following Sonnet is more two-faced in idea ('a complaint in the form of an assertion that he has no right to complain'), but can be put in the second type so far as concerns the ambiguity of syntax, as it reduces to a single meaning:

O let me suffer (being at your beck)

The imprisoned absence of your liberty,
And patience tame, to sufferance bide each check,
Without accusing you of injury.
Be where you list, your charter is so strong
That you yourself may privilege your time
To what you will, to you it doth belong,
Yourself to pardon of self-doing
crime. (lviii.)

And patience tame expresses petulance by its contraction of meaning ('suffer tame patience'; 'be patience-tame,' as in iron-hard; and 'tame patience,' as in *bide each check*) followed by a rush of equivocal words, clinched with *belong*, which has for subject both *your time* and *to pardon*, and implies, still with sweetness and pathos (it is an extraordinary balance of feeling), 'that is all I could have expected of you.'

Bvt wherefore do not you a mightier waie
Make warre vppon this bloudie tirant time?
And fortifie your selfe in your decay
With meanes more blessed than my barren rime?
Now stand you on the top of happie houres,
And many maiden gardens yet unset,
With vertuous wish would beare your liuing flowers,
Much liker then your painted counterfeit:
So should the lines of life that life repaire
Which this (Times pencil or my pupil pen)
Neither in inward worth nor outward faire
Can make you liue your selfe in eyes of men,
To give away your selfe, keeps your selfe still,
And you must liue drawn by your owne sweet skill.
(xvi.)

Lines of life refers to the form of a personal appearance, in the young man himself or repeated in his descendants (as one speaks of the lines of some one's figure); time's wrinkles on that face (suggested only to be feared); the young man's line or lineage—his descendants; lines drawn with a pencil—a portrait; lines drawn with a pen, in writing; the lines of a poem (the kind a Sonnet has fourteen of); and destiny, as in the life-line of palmistry—*Merchant of Venice*, 11. ii. 163.

This variety of meaning is rooted more effectively in the context because *lines of life* and *that life* may either of them be taken as subject of *repair*; taking the most prominent meanings, 'lineage' and 'the features of yourself and your children,' *lines* is subject, and this is also insisted upon by rhythm and the usual sentence order; *that life* means 'life such as your present one.' But *that life* (*repair*) is given a secondary claim to the position by *this* (. . . *make*), which follows, evidently in contrast, as subject in the next line. (Punctuations designed to simplify the passage all spoil the antithesis.) *This* has a bracket expanding its meanings: *time*, bringing old age that will pencil you with wrinkles, or a riper manhood that will complete your beauty; *this Times pencil*, firstly,