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To Peter Grant,  
who taught me poetry and a good deal more

# How to Read a Poem

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## Chapter 5

# How to Read a Poem

### 5.1 Is Criticism Just Subjective?

There is an argument against the close analysis of literary form that goes something like this. Establishing what a poem literally says, or what metre it may use, or whether it rhymes, are objective matters on which critics can concur. (Punctuation also used to be ranked among these things, in the age before the owners of pubs began unwittingly casting doubt on the genuineness of their own products by advertising 'real' ale.) But talk of tone, mood, pace, dramatic gesture and the like is purely subjective. What I hear as rancorous you may hear as jubilant. You read as garrulous what strikes me as eloquent. Tone in a poem is not a matter of F major or B minor. Ironically, only a few features of form – metre and rhyme, for example – can actually be formalised. Form in poetry is mostly unformalisable. There can be no consensus on these questions, so it would be better to drop such fanciful talk altogether and concentrate on what we can be sure of.

There is something in this allegation. There is no exact science of these matters, and there is indeed a good deal of room for disagreement in discussing poems. But we may note to begin with that being able to disagree over an issue does not necessarily imply pure subjectivism. We might clash over whether torture is permissible or not, yet there may still be a right and wrong to the question, whatever our dissensions. We might disagree over whether someone is waving or drowning, but it is unlikely that he is doing both. Unless the swimmer has a remarkably nonchalant attitude to his death, one of us is almost bound to be wrong. Opinions we advance in purely

conjectural style may later turn out to be cast-iron certainties, as more evidence becomes available.

As far as literary arguments go, take, for example, Robert Browning's darkly Gothic poem 'Porphyria's Lover', in which the speaker, possibly a psychopath, describes how he coolly decided to strangle his mistress:

... I found  
A thing to do, and all her hair  
In one long yellow string I wound  
Three times her little throat around,  
And strangled her ...  
And thus we sit together now,  
And all night long we have not stirred,  
And yet God has not said a word!

The offhandedness of that 'thing to do', as though the speaker might equally well have chosen to trim his moustache, is especially chilling. But how is one to read the last line? The most obvious interpretation is surely as a cry of (perhaps slightly manic) triumph: the lover has deliberately tempted God by this dreadful deed into revealing himself, and God has remained silent. So perhaps the whole grisly murder was an experiment in demonstrating the truth of atheism. Yet I have heard the line delivered by an actor in a tone of sullen resentment. For this reader, no doubt, the speaker is not a jubilant atheist but a would-be believer, who has sacrificed his lover in an attempt to force God into revealing his hand, and is now bitterly downcast by the Almighty's obdurate silence. He has, so to speak, lost his Maker and his mistress at the same time, and all for nothing.

There is no foolproof way of deciding between such competing interpretations. We cannot appeal to Browning, and even if we could it might well not settle the question. This is not only because poets can be peculiarly obtuse about the meaning of their own work. T. S. Eliot, for example, once described *The Waste Land* as just a kind of rhythmic grouching, though he was probably being disingenuous. It is also because when Browning was once asked what one of his poems meant, he replied that at the time of writing it, 'God and Robert Browning knew; now, God knows.' Yet those who feel that these questions are too chancy and subjective, in contrast with 'what the poem says', might care to note that 'what the poem says' is not always that well-founded either. Take, for example, Browning's title. We know that Porphyria is the name of the murdered woman, since the poem makes this clear. Which means that the lover must be the male speaker. But why do we assume that the speaker is male? There is nothing in the text to indicate this. It is simply a

hypothesis we bring to the piece in order to make sense of it. Perhaps the speaker is also a woman, and this is a lesbian relationship gone horribly awry.

No doubt it would be rather brazen to adduce the phrase 'tonight's gay feast' in support of this hypothesis. It is also the case that the vast majority of murderers are men, not least those killers driven by sadistic sexual motives. The arrogant sexual possessiveness of the speaker is much more stereotypically masculine than feminine. And the odds against an eminent Victorian poet writing a piece about lesbian sexuality, however cunningly he concealed it, are positively astronomical. Titles are part of poems, and we may note that this title, significantly, refers to the murderer and not his victim. So even the title reflects a morbid self-obsession which, stereotypically speaking, is arguably more masculine than feminine. (Actually, one suspects that Browning put the lover rather than the victim in the title to place some distance between himself and his protagonist, treating him as a pathological case.) Even so, we cannot absolutely rule out a lesbian reading. One of the apparently most self-evident facts about the poem turns out to be contestable.

Questions of tone crop up again in these celebrated lines from Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress':

But at my back I always hear  
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near:  
And yonder all before us lie  
Deserts of vast eternity.  
Thy beauty shall no more be found;  
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound  
My echoing song: then worms shall try  
That long-preserved virginity,  
And turn your quaint honour to dust,  
And into ashes all my lust.  
The grave's a fine and private place,  
But none, I think, do there embrace.

As with a lot of so-called Metaphysical poetry, the speaker seems sportive and serious at the same time, so that a good actor delivering these lines would need to convey their urbane sophistry (the speaker is really just trying to get her into bed with a lot of high-toned metaphysics), along with their undertow of urgency and anxiety (he really is worried about decay and death). It is possible that he is being both debonair and deadly earnest, and to suppose this makes the piece more interesting and ambiguous. The tone of the last two lines, depending on how you judge the overall ratio between erotic teasing and ontological anxiety, could be anything from roguish to playfully

sardonic to cuttngly sarcastic. You could deliver them to reveal a real impatience and irascibility beginning to peep through the cavalier wit, or as impishly bantering, or as a piece of hard-boiled flippancy.

Tone, mood and the like may be matters of interpretation over which critics can conflict; but this is not the same as their being purely subjective. As we have just seen, we can conflict over meaning as well. But there are usually limits to such contentions. It is just possible that Porphyria's lover is a woman, in the sense that you can adopt this hypothesis and still make sense of the work; but nobody would suggest that the lover is a giraffe. This is not just because Victorian writers did not generally go in for poems about bestiality, but because the textual evidence simply would not support it. Giraffes do not wind people's hair three times around their throat and strangle them. Their hearts do not swell at the thought that they are worshipped by a woman. Nor do they entertain thoughts about God, atheistic or otherwise. If someone asked us how we know that giraffes do not spend their time feverishly brooding on metaphysical questions, it would be enough to reply: by looking at what they do. We do not have to get inside their brains to be reasonably sure of this, just as I do not have to get inside your brain to know that when I see you rolling at my feet with your hair on fire emitting strange noises, you are clearly not happy.

Something of the same is true of more elusive questions like mood, address, implication, connotation, symbolism, sensibility, rhetorical effect and the like. There can be serious divergences of opinion about these things, but there are also constraints on how deeply these may run, at least for those who share the same culture. This is because tones and feelings are quite as much social matters as meaning. It is not that meaning is public whereas feeling is private. It is only a disreputable philosophical tradition which persuades us to think this way. On this theory, my feelings are something private and subjective. I know them inwardly, intuitively, simply by looking inside myself. But if this is so, it is hard to see how I can ever misidentify what I am feeling. It becomes difficult to say things like 'I don't know whether I'm afraid of her or not', or 'I thought at the time that I cared for him, but looking back I realise that I didn't care for him in the least.' In any case, when I look into myself, how do I identify what I find there? How do I know that what I am feeling is envy and not disgust? Only because I already have the concept of envy to help me identify this feeling among the whole welter of emotions and sensations I discover when I reflect on myself. And I learnt this concept by being introduced into a language as a child. If I did not have language I would still have feelings, but I would not know what they were. And some feelings which I have now I would not have at all.

Bertolt Brecht puts the point well:

One easily forgets that human education proceeds along highly theatrical lines. In a quite theatrical manner the child is taught how to behave; logical arguments only come later. When such-and-such occurs, it is told (or seen), one must laugh. It joins in when there is laughter, without knowing why; if asked why it is laughing it is wholly confused. In the same way it joins in shedding tears, not only weeping because the grown-ups do so but also feeling genuine sorrow. This can be seen at funerals, whose meaning escapes children entirely. These are theatrical events which form the character. The human being copies gestures, miming, tones of voice. And weeping arises from sorrow, but sorrow also arises from weeping.<sup>1</sup>

Brecht's case is rather too 'culturalist': very small babies laugh, for example, long before they have grasped the social institution of laughter. They also cry and smile, activities which have a biological basis. Even so, Brecht is on to something vitally important, which he has learnt not 'philosophically' but through his practical activity as a playwright and theatre director. Emotion in the theatre is clearly a public affair, which is not so obviously the case in the bedroom. Brecht spent much of his life watching actors *learn* modes of feeling, and the kinds of speech and behaviour which seemed appropriate to them. The theatre could show him something about real life which real life tended to conceal. He was able to extend what he found in theatre rehearsals to human emotions in general, and their 'mimetic' or imitative character. Being brought up in a culture is a matter of learning appropriate forms of feeling as much as particular ways of thinking. And all of these are sedimented in that culture's language and behaviour, so that to share a language is to share a form of life. To imagine that this means that our feelings are never sincere would be like thinking that I can never use the words 'I love you' and mean them because millions of people have used them before.

In a culture which lacked the concept and institution of private property, for example, one could not conceive a burning desire to become a billionaire entrepreneur. This is not to claim that such a culture would be without feelings of greed or ambition, simply without these specific forms of them. People do not generally feel revolted by the very sight of their second cousin if they do not inhabit cultures in which there are strong taboos on their marrying them. What we can feel is to some extent determined by the kinds of

<sup>1</sup> Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic (London, 1964), p. 152. See also Terry Eagleton, 'Brecht and Rhetoric' in Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Essays 1975-1985* (London, 1986).

material animals we are. But what we might call styles of feeling are shaped by our cultural institutions. And both of these are public affairs.

Children, then, observe various kinds of behaviour around them, and learn to grasp this as *expressive* behaviour. Their understanding of emotions is thus bound up with the kind of material things people do, and with their own growing participation in such practical forms of life. Like actors (though not, in fact, Brechtian actors), they sometimes begin by miming styles of emotion and end up by feeling them for real. In cultures like our own, they then usually go on to be taught that feelings are private, natural, internal and universal. But this is just how our kind of culture feels about feelings. There are indeed natural, universal feelings, such as grief at the death of a loved one, which we have because we are the kind of creatures we are; but what we make of that grief is a cultural affair. And there are other emotions, such as feeling embarrassed about using the wrong cutlery at a formal dinner party, which might be unintelligible to some other cultures.

It is also hard to see why we should think of our emotions as being 'inside' us, and so shut off from public view. It seems strange to say of someone who is busy smashing up the furniture and tearing out great clumps of his hair that his anger is inside him. We can conceal or dissemble our emotions, of course, but they are not hidden by nature; and concealing them is a complex social practice which we have to learn. Infants, unfortunately, have not yet got the hang of it. One sees what it means to say that someone who is behaving maliciously has malice 'inside' her, since malice is among other things, a matter of feelings, and feelings are not part of the public world in the same way that pool tables are. In another sense, however, to say this is as odd as to say that someone who is singing has the notes inside her. It is simply a misleading way of saying that it is *she* who is singing or feeling malice, not someone else. Emotions are not private affairs which we can occasionally choose to put on display, not even for the English. This is as false as the idea that meaning is a private process in our heads.

An example of a falsely subjective approach to feeling can be found in the singer Van Morrison's versions of some Irish songs. What is amiss with Morrison's performances, at least for some of us devotees of traditional Irish music, is that they seem to regard emotion as something to be superadded to the tunes and lyrics. This is why Morrison engages in so much florid, 'feelingful' improvisation when singing them, inserting a wailing repetition here or a choked bit of sobbing there. It is as though he does not trust his material enough to appreciate that the feelings are, so to speak, already *there* in the songs, inseparable from their words and music. The tunes and lyrics are as they are because they express or embody certain patterns of feeling in their

actual materials; so that if these materials were different, the emotional patterns would be different too. Listening to Morrison, one is tempted to adapt a line by Wallace Stevens about another singer: 'But it was he and not the song we heard.'

It is as if Morrison's performances in this field reflect a flawed epistemology, surprised though he would doubtless be to hear it. If only he would stop indulging in sudden snatches of 'passion' and heartfelt heavy breathing, he might come to see that he does not need to add his own 'subjective' feelings to the songs. All he has to do, like a *sean-nós* (traditional) Irish singer, is to articulate them by letting them flow through him, rather than to stamp his 'personality' all over them. Such an articulation is 'subjective' in the sense that every singer or musician does things in his or her own way; but it is not 'subjective' in the sense that the meaning and emotional power of these pieces are purely in the gift of the performer. This is one reason why Irish musicians have been known to perform with their backs to the audience.

To regard feeling as subjectively superadded is also to see the songs themselves as so much inert material waiting for life to be breathed into them by the performer. The other side of subjectivism is objectivism. The songs are just brutally there, senseless and emotionless in themselves, to be stirred into expressive meaning at the touch of a human subject. It is a view which subtly devalues everything but human consciousness, and is thus, for all its pious cult of feeling, a typical piece of humanistic arrogance.

## 5.2 Meaning and Subjectivity

Just the same view can be taken of language. For one kind of theorist, poems are just meaningless black marks on a page, and it is the reader who constructs them into sense. This is true in one sense and false in another. We may note first of all that to speak of 'meaningless black marks' already involves us in meanings. It is notoriously hard to get back behind meaning altogether, for much the same reasons as it is impossible to imagine ourselves dead. We may also note that to regard words as black marks is an abstraction from what we actually see on a page. And this is an operation which already requires a good deal of interpretative labour. Every now and then, we see a row of black marks and then realise that what we are seeing is words, just as every now and then we see a large grey patch and then realise that we are looking at an elephant. Most of the time, however, we see words and elephants, not black marks and grey patches. Someone who keeps seeing grey patches

where he ought to be seeing elephants should pay a visit either to his optician or his psychiatrist.

It is true, even so, that all we literally have are words on a page. Reading these words as a poem means restoring to them something of their lost material body. It involves grasping them as tonal, rhythmical, metrical, emotional, intentional, expressive of meaning, and so on. In a face-to-face dialogue, the material body of language is as solidly present as its meanings are, and this acts as a control on interpretation. We know that the tone is despairing because the other person is clutching a sodden handkerchief and tottering on a very high window ledge. Or we can ask a speaker whether he is being sarcastic, and adjust our understanding of his words accordingly. Or we know that she does not intend 'Let us put continents between us!' metaphorically because she is handing us our air ticket to Sydney as she speaks. Poetry is language which comes without these contextual clues, and which therefore has to be reconstructed by the reader in the light of a context which will make sense of it. And such contexts are in embarrassingly plentiful supply. Yet they are not just arbitrary either: on the contrary, they are shaped in turn by the cultural contexts by which the reader makes sense of the world in general.

So in one sense none of the formal features we have been examining is actually 'there' on the page. But neither are they just arbitrarily implanted by the reader. If this were so, then the reader could make a particular pattern of black marks mean anything she chose, which would be to strip her of her culture. Belonging to a culture means that not everything is up for grabs all of the time, as it might be for a cultureless being like God. It means that the world comes to us not as brute fact or raw material, but as already signifying. And this applies as much to the words on a page as to a *coup d'état* or a telegraph pole. Being part of a culture also entails that we are not inexorably bound by these built-in interpretations, as we can imagine a crocodile being constrained by its biology to interpret certain kinds of stuff as edible. Some cultural versions of the world (the assumption that eating boot polish is excellent for your health, for example) are fairly free-floating, and thus quite easy not to be coerced by. But because a lot of interpretations are actually built in to our form of life, resisting them (if that seems the right thing to do) involves us in a struggle. And there are some solidly entrenched assumptions and investments built into our culture which we probably could not even imagine being without, like the assumption that there are other people.

We can make the cluster of black marks 'syrup' mean 'historicism', given enough context. But we cannot do it just by deciding to do it, since this would be a meaningless ceremony. We would not be able to make the new meaning stick. It would simply have no force within our social life. Since meanings

are deeply bound up with our cultural behaviour, we cannot change language radically without transforming a lot of what we actually get up to. To think otherwise, to adopt an image of Wittgenstein's, would be like a man passing money from one of his hands to the other and thinking that he had made a financial transaction.<sup>2</sup> All the same, one could imagine a situation in which 'syrup' plausibly meant 'historicism'. Perhaps the more traditionalist members of an English department wish to conceal their contempt for historicism from their more avant-garde colleagues, and adopt this code in order to do so. But doing this means being aware of what 'syrup' commonly means, or at least being aware that it is not commonly regarded as a synonym for 'historicism'. Opting for a new meaning involves being conscious of the culturally agreed one. In any case, one could not even have the concept of 'new meaning' unless one already had a language.

Take, for example, the question of connotation. It is characteristic of poetic language that it gives us not simply the denotation of a word (what it refers to), but a whole cluster of connotations or associated meanings. It differs in this respect from legal or scientific language, which seeks to pare away surplus connotations in the name of rigorous denotation. By and large, legal and scientific language aims to constrict meaning, whereas poetic language seeks to proliferate it. This is not a value judgement: there are times when the rigorous definition of a word is just what we need (it may come in handy, for example, when we are up in court on a treason charge), and there are other times when it is pleasant to cut the signifier free from its anchorage in a single sense and let it interbreed with other bits of sense.

Connotations are less controllable than denotations, which is one reason why lawyers, scientists and bureaucrats are nervous of them. But doesn't this then pose a problem for poets? If connotation is a kind of free associating, how can a poem ever come to mean anything definite? What if Shakespeare's line 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' reminds me irresistibly of fried bananas? The brief answer to this is that meaning is not a matter of psychological associations. Indeed, there is a sense in which it is not a 'psychological' matter at all. Meaning is not an arbitrary process in our heads, but a rule-governed social practice; and unless the line 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' could plausibly, in principle, suggest fried bananas to other readers as well, it cannot be part of its meaning.

It may be that Shakespeare's Cordelia reminds me of a cross-dressed version of my uncle Arthur; but I am aware that this is not the case for those

<sup>2</sup> All references in this work to Wittgenstein are taken from his *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, 1953).

readers who have not had the pleasure of meeting my uncle Arthur; and that Shakespeare, for all his prescience and preternatural insight, was unlikely to have had my uncle Arthur in mind when he wrote *King Lear*. There are, to be sure, all kinds of situations in which the line between the private and public connotations of words is uncertain. But unless a connotation can plausibly exist for someone else, it cannot exist as a meaning for me either. The stray personal associations which drift in and out of our heads when we are reading *Lear* are of interest to our psychotherapist, not to the literary critic. Meaning is not a matter of having pictures in your head. You can enjoy Blake or Rilke with no pictures in your head at all.

So meanings are neither randomly bestowed by readers, nor objectively there on the page in the sense that a watermark is. The same goes for value judgements. Value judgements are not objective in the sense that mahogany cocktail cabinets are, but this does not mean that they are simply a matter of private whim. In any culture, there are certain complex sets of criteria as to what counts as good or bad poetry; and although there can be an enormous amount of disagreement over how these criteria are to be applied, or whether they are valid in the first place, their application is far from just a subjective affair. People may wrangle over whether a particular patch of colour counts as green, but this does not mean that 'green' is a purely subjective judgement. It is possible to see that a poem is a fine achievement yet dislike it intensely, just as you can love a poem you regard as aesthetically atrocious; and this suggests that value judgements are not the same as private tastes. 'I do like a good bad poem' is not an unintelligible statement. Much the same goes for such matters as mood, register, pitch, pause, and so on, upon which overall value judgements are built. If these are not just arbitrary, it is partly because they are so closely bound up with meaning, and meaning is not something that we simply legislate. A poem does not instruct us that it is meant to be melancholic; but this mood, even so, may be in some sense built into its language.

Take, as an illustration of melancholy, the first verse of Tennyson's poem 'Mariana':

With blackest moss the flower-plots  
 Were thickly crusted, one and all;  
 The rusted nails fell from the knots  
 That held the pear to the gable-wall.  
 The broken sheds looked sad and strange;  
 Unlifted was the clinking latch;  
 Weeded and worn the ancient thatch

Upon the lonely moated grange.  
 She only said, 'My life is dreary,  
 He cometh not,' she said.  
 She said, 'I am aweary, aweary,  
 I would that I were dead!'

There is nothing in principle to stop us from reading this aloud as though it were intended to be uproariously funny, gasping with giggles and chortling uncontrollably. Many a high-toned poem from the past seems hilarious to us in the present. But we do not usually assume that these works were *intended* to be hilarious. There is something mildly comic about the iron predictability of the word 'dead' in the last line of this stanza, but the effect is clearly unwitting. There is no obvious signal that the poem is sadistically sending up its protagonist, winking roguishly at us over her head at the sight of her dejection. How do we know that the mood of this verse is supposed to be gloomy? It would be enough to say that we spoke English. Words and phrasings like 'I am aweary, aweary, / I would that I were dead!' have a certain kind of sensibility or emotional value built into them. People do not tend to say this sort of thing when they have just been bequeathed a fine old Tudor farmhouse along with several thousand acres of fertile land.

What is amiss with the piece, in fact, is that it is all too obvious what mood it intends to nurture. The emotional climate of the piece is far too coherent. Almost every word, sound and image is remorselessly dragooned into the overall atmospheric effect, in an absurdly homogenising way. A useful adjective to describe this is *voulu*, which means 'willed' in French and which suggests too contrived, self-conscious an effort. The piece lacks the faintest flicker of spontaneity. Nothing in this windless enclosure is allowed to have a life of its own, or to kick back against the stifling climate of woe in which it is shrouded. Even the nails fall obediently from the wall, dutifully performing their minor role in the whole over-orchestrated scene.

The piece is meticulously overwrought. Despite its technical adeptness, it succeeds only in being inert about inertia. It is thus an illustration of what is sometimes called the mimetic fallacy, whereby poets try to justify the fact that their works are dishevelled or unbelievably boring by claiming that messiness or boredom is what they are about. Even the rhyme scheme is pressed into the service of this stagnant oppressiveness, with that 'strange'/'latch'/'thatch'/'grange' pattern in the middle lines. This *abba* style of rhyming, which Tennyson also puts to work in his most celebrated poem 'In Memoriam', has a curiously haunting, plangent effect, as well as creating a sense of revolving solemnly in a circle. It is a suitable sort of rhyme for a poem

in which the heroine's existence has been frozen into a single, sluggish moment of time.

It is not for us, then, just to decide on what mood is at stake here. In a similar way, it is not just up to us to determine what sort of feeling someone's behaviour is expressing. We have noted already that people may dissemble their feelings, but this is not to deny that there is an internal relation between what they feel and what they do. If there were not, they would not need to dissemble. Besides, poets, like goldfish, are incapable of dissembling. This is not because they are searingly honest, but because whether authors of fiction really did experience an emotion they write about is not the point. As we have seen, the word 'fiction' cues us not to ask such irrelevant questions. We can ask whether a piece of poetry sounds sincere or insincere, but we cannot determine this by finding out whether the poet actually had the experience she is portraying. The author may have done so and still sound insincere. The fact that you really have been abducted by aliens on numerous occasions does not automatically make your account of it convincing. Shakespeare did not need to experience sexual jealousy in order to create Othello. When he penned some of Hamlet's most magnificently distraught speeches, perhaps all he was feeling was whether the imagery sounded suitably diseased.

Sincerity and insincerity in poetry are qualities of language, not (at least for literary critics) moral virtues. In his embarrassing poem 'Chicago', Carl Sandburg praises the city in these terms:

Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive  
 and coarse and strong and cunning.  
 Flinging magnetic curses amid the toil of piling job on job, here is a tall bold  
 slugger set vivid against the little soft cities;  
 Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning as a savage pitted against  
 the wilderness . . .

Sandburg may genuinely have had these feelings, but the slapdash language (*magnetic curses?*), limply stereotypical phrases ('cunning as a savage') and macho swagger suggest that the feelings themselves are bogus. We cannot establish whether a piece of language is sincere simply by consulting the speaker or writer. Someone may imagine that they are deriving a mystical experience from an appalling bit of doggerel, but they must surely be mistaken. They may be having a profound experience for some other reason (perhaps they are sipping vintage claret while they are reading, or thrusting red-hot needles into an effigy of Donald Trump), but the poem itself could not be the reason for their emotion. A poem can be the *occasion* for an emotion, as when

those who are grieving the loss of a child find comfort in some lushly sentimental verses. But 'literary' feelings are *responses* to poems, not just states of emotion which occur in their presence. And for a feeling to count as a response, there must be some internal relation between it and the poem itself.

Our actions are expressive of feelings in the same way that words are expressive of meanings. There can be all sorts of ambiguities about what someone is feeling, just as there can be about what they are meaning. We speak of the feeling 'behind' someone's actions, just as we speak of the meaning 'behind' someone's words; but this spatial metaphor is surely misleading. When Cleopatra says that she wore Mark Antony's sword, the fact that her meaning is unclear (does she mean this literally, or is it sexual symbolism?) is not because it lies 'behind' her words, as though it is too remote to gain access to. This would be like thinking that not being certain whether a painting is of a storm at sea or the wild white locks of an elderly lunatic is because its subject matter lies 'behind' the painted shapes on the canvas. When someone is cowering and gibbering with fear, their fear is present in their bodily activity in the same way that a meaning is present in a word. But this does not mean that we could not misinterpret their fear as rage or shame.

### 5.3 Tone, Mood and Pitch

So we can misinterpret, say, the tone of a poem. But this is not because the tone lies 'behind' the words, or because the reader arbitrarily assigns a tone to words which are toneless in themselves. Let us look, for example, at the final stanza of W. B. Yeats's 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul':

I am content to follow to its source  
Every event in action or in thought;  
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!  
When such as I cast out remorse  
So great a sweetness flows into the breast  
We must laugh and we must sing,  
We are blest by everything,  
Everything we look upon is blest.

Most readers will hear a defiantly exultant tone here, though some may also discern a touch of bravado and some may not. It might be thought that 'Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!' is rather too self-satisfied a gesture, with just a hint of virile bluster; but some may simply hear it as a rather agreeable kind of gusto. Some readers may query that phrase 'When such

as I . . .', which might be taken to insinuate that especially momentous consequences will flow from the poet's casting out of remorse since he is a good deal more morally conscientious than the average run of folk. In fact, the grammar of the lines that follow, with the shift of preposition from 'I' to 'we', implies that the speaker's act of self-acceptance has a transfigurative effect not just upon himself but on everyone else as well. He has managed to relieve not only his own guilt but that of the whole human race, an achievement previously regarded as confined to Jesus Christ.

Yet there is also something moving, as often with Yeats, about the bold, apparently artless directness of the lines and their jubilant, chant-like refrain ('We must laugh and we must sing, / We are blest by everything'). It is though the lines risk a certain naivety, trusting as they do to a deeper wisdom. 'So great a sweetness flows into the breast' could only be a line by Yeats, with its boldly self-assured stress on a single, simple word ('sweetness') rather than some more complex term or phrase. Whereas Keats goes in for compound epithets like 'cool-rooted', Yeats tends to prefer simple, elemental words like 'great', 'beat', 'stone', 'fool', 'bread', 'trod', 'glitter'. 'Sweet' and 'sweetness' figure among these. If he wants to suggest human squalor he writes something like 'foul ditch'; and these stock words and phrases, used recurrently, come to assume the status of a kind of code, accruing complex meanings which do not need to be spelled out but which seem communicable at a glance. Yeats has a most unmodernist faith in his verbal medium, one inherited in part from the Irish oral tradition. He does not appear to feel that words need to be skewed, telescoped or overpacked in order to have an effect. If something in his poetry is ambiguous, it is probably a mistake.

'Everything we look upon is blest' is a questionable enough claim, but the reader probably lets Yeats get away with it since his ecstatic triumph, seen in the context of the poem as a whole, seems dearly enough won. He has paid for it in bitter experience, rather than bought it on the cheap. Compare those lines, then, with these from his poem 'The Tower':

And I declare my faith:  
I mock Plotinus' thought  
And cry in Plato's teeth,  
Death and life were not  
Till man made up the whole,  
Made lock, stock and barrel  
Out of his bitter soul,  
Aye, sun and moon and star, all,  
And further add to that



That, being dead, we rise,  
Dream and so create  
Translunar Paradise. . .

If the first passage is a matter of defiant exultation, this, surely, is one of pompous self-indulgence. The booming, bombastic tone, which seems to hold the lines together by sheer bull-headed assertion, is of a piece with the doctrinal arrogance of 'Death and life were not / Till man made up the whole'. The fact that this statement is palpably untrue does nothing to intensify its poetic force. Something seems to have gone momentarily awry with the iambic trimeter in that line 'Aye, sun and moon and star, all', which compels us to gabble 'sun and moon and star' if we are to keep the stresses regular, while 'And further add to that' sounds more like a solicitor dictating to his secretary than a sage about to divulge a mystical secret. The terseness of the lines is perhaps meant to have a vatic effect, but come through as merely sententious. 'Translunar Paradise' is not made any less bogus or unbelievable by those thrustingly assertive capital letters. There are, however, some strikingly inventive para-rhymes: 'faith'/'teeth', 'thought'/'were not', 'that'/'create' and (much less felicitously) 'barrel'/'star, all'.

Tone means a modulation of the voice expressing a particular mood or feeling. It is one of the places where signs and emotions intersect. So tones can be arch, abrupt, dandyish, lugubrious, rakish, obsequious, urbane, exhilarated, imperious and so on. But it is not easy to distinguish tone in poetry from mood, which the dictionary defines as a state of mind or feeling. Perhaps we could say that the mood of 'Mariana' is melancholic, while the tone is doleful or lugubrious. Then there is timbre, which means the distinctive character of a voice or musical note, apart from its pitch and intensity. Timbre in the Tennyson piece could be taken to denote its uniquely Tennysonian quality, one that would be unmistakable to anyone who has read a fair amount of his poetry. We are speaking here of a poet's distinctive hallmark or signature. Robert Lowell's verses are very Lowellish, while nothing is more Plath-like than a Sylvia Plath poem. Swinburne, alas, never ceases to be Swinburnian.

We can speak, too, of the pitch of a poetic voice, meaning whether it sounds high, low or middle-ranging. One might imagine the pitch of the last line of 'Porphyria's Lover' – 'And yet God has not said a word!' – as either a high-spirited whoop or a low growl, depending on how one interprets its meaning. Like most other aspect of form, pitch is bound up with what sense we make of the words. One can even talk of a poem's volume, meaning how loud or soft it sounds. Nobody could read these lines of George Herbert as a hushed whisper:

I struck the board and cried, 'No more;  
I will abroad!  
What? Shall I ever sigh and pine?  
My lines and life are free, free as the road,  
Loose as the wind, as large as store.  
Shall I be still in suit?'  
(The Collar)

We know that the poet is shouting here because he tells us so. We can feel his anger and frustration in the abrupt, quick-fire shifts of rhythm, the helplessly broken phrases, the way the lines deliberately fail to cohere into a shapely semantic pattern despite their graphological shapeliness on the page. Similarly, John Donne's line 'For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love', with its air of jocular impatience, is presumably not meant to be delivered in a blandly self-effacing voice. Nor is this feminist clarion call from Anna Laetitia Barbauld:

Yes, injured Woman! rise, assert thy right!  
Woman! too long degraded, scorned, oppressed;  
O born to rule in partial Law's despite,  
Resume thy native empire o'er the breast!  
(The Rights of Woman)

Barbauld overdoes the exclamation marks, but there is no other piece of punctuation designed to stress a rise of volume or intensity. They are the most expressive of punctuation marks, if also the most subtle.

Some poems, however, are so deathly quiet that we have to strain our ears to catch what they are saying. Another piece of Tennyson, this time from 'In Memoriam', may serve as an example:

Be near me when my light is low,  
When the blood creeps, and the nerves prick  
And tingle; and the heart is sick,  
And all the wheels of Being slow . . .  
Be near me when I fade away,  
To point the term of human strife,  
And on the low dark verge of life  
The twilight of eternal day.

This sounds rather like the hoarse, whispered words of a terminally ill patient, so that we have to lean in close to the pillow to hear what is being

murmured. It would be incongruous to deliver it in a raucous bellow, as it wouldn't be to bawl out the immortal opening lines of Tennyson's 'Charge of the Light Brigade': 'Half a league, half a league, / Half a league onward . . .'. How do we know this? We pick it up as we pick up the fact that twilight comes at the end of the day. It is part of our cultural behaviour.

#### 5.4 Intensity and Pace

Intensity is another category of poetic feeling, distinct from tone, pitch and volume. There are muted intensities as well as full-blooded ones. This extract from a sonnet by Elizabeth Barrett Browning could not be read as flippant:

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.  
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.  
I love thee to the level of every day's  
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.  
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right.  
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise . . .

This is too earnest and high-minded for modern taste. 'For the ends of Being and ideal Grace' is gauche and too much of a mouthful, while 'to the level of' sounds an oddly prosaic note. We also tend to be put off by weighty capitalised abstractions like 'Right' and 'Praise'. But the Victorians would presumably not have found the poem excessively intense. The poem uses the rhyme form Milton tended to favour in his sonnets, one which in the first eight lines (or octave) employs an *abba* scheme twice. This is also typical of Petrarch's sonnets. Another Victorian woman, Christina Rossetti, handles this double *abba* rhyme scheme more adroitly:

Remember me when I am gone away,  
Gone far away into that silent land;  
When you can no more hold me by the hand,  
Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.  
Remember me when no more day by day  
You tell me of our future that you planned:  
Only remember me; you understand  
It will be late to counsel then or pray . . .

The rhymes here, tolling like a bell, are vital to the mournful mood. As often in Victorian verse, the *abba* is emphasised graphically as well, by indenting the two middle lines. Some readers may find Rossetti's tone rather too tremulous for comfort, skating a little close to self-pity; but the lines are nonetheless impressive in their sad dignity. The last line is forced by the exigencies of the metre into altering the more predictable 'too late' into 'late', which has a slightly curious effect: it surely won't just be *late* for him to give her advice after she is dead, unless he is an accomplished table rapper. And it is hard to see how he could not understand this, unless he is of exceedingly low intelligence.

Another, somewhat neglected formal category is pace. Some poems creep, some jog sedately along, while others hurtle hectically forward. A piece like Browning's 'How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix' moves so rapidly that it is hard to keep up with it:

I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he;  
I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three;  
'Good speed!' cried the watch, as the gate-bolts undrew;  
'Speed!' echoed the wall to us galloping through . . .

Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' swirls like wind itself:

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,  
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,  
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,  
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The wingèd seeds, where they lie cold and low . . .

The enjambement between the stanzas is needed to keep the wind gusting without even the briefest lull. And this single whirlwind of a sentence is sustained over more than five stanzas, as the sub-clauses sweep restively hither and thither.

Compare this, then, with the mesmerically slow pace of Tennyson's 'The Lotus Eaters':

'Courage!' he said, and pointed toward the land,  
'This mounting wave will roll us shoreward soon'.  
In the afternoon they came unto a land

In which it seemed always afternoon.  
 All round the coast the languid air did swoon,  
 Breathing like one that hath a weary dream.  
 Full-faced above the valley stood the moon;  
 And, like a downward smoke, the slender stream  
 Along the cliff to fall and pause and fall did seem.

This tries rather too wilfully to create a mood of lethargy, all the way from the repetition of 'afternoon', with its effect of stasis and sterile circularity, to the languid alexandrine of the last line (always a risky kind of metre in English). The close-packed, sonorously recurrent rhymes (*ababbcbcc*) contribute to the sense of getting nowhere, if delectably so. No sooner do the rhymes creep forward an inch than they seem to lapse listlessly back upon themselves.

### 5.5 Texture

Tennyson's stanza also provides a convenient example of what we might call texture. 'Texture', which the dictionary defines as the feel or appearance of a surface or substance, is a matter of how a poem weaves its various sounds into palpable patterns. True to its indolent mood, this stanza from 'The Lotus Eaters' generally avoids sharp consonants (apart from 'pointed' and 'pause', the *p* sound of which is known as a plosive) in favour of softer, more sibilant sounds, along with a high vowel count. You can read the lines aloud without an inordinate amount of lip-work, thus re-enacting the somnolent state they portray.

Or look at the final, superb stanza of Yeats's 'Among School Children':

Labour is blossoming or dancing where  
 The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,  
 Nor beauty born out of its own despair,  
 Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.  
 O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,  
 Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
 O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
 How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Unlike 'The Lotus Eaters', there is a great deal of busy consonantal activity going on in this opulent tapestry of sound, not least an extraordinarily numerous set of *b* sounds ('blossoming', 'body', 'bruised', 'beauty', 'born',

'blear-eyed', 'blossomer', 'bole', 'brightening'). Yet they are not particularly obtrusive, as though the poetry is innocently unaware of them; and this is partly because they are subtly interwoven with a variety of other sounds, as in that marvellous line 'Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil'. 'Blear' picks up the sound of 'nor', but with a pleasurable difference, while 'night' reflects the vowel sound of 'eyed'. There are also some finely accomplished semi-rhymes – 'soul'/'oil'/'bole', 'despair'/'blossomer'.

Texture is also an important aspect of Thomas Hardy's poetry, as in the first verse of 'The Darkling Thrush':

I leaned upon a coppice gate  
 When Frost was spectre-grey,  
 And Winter's dregs made desolate  
 The weakening eye of day.  
 The tangled bine-stems scored the sky  
 Like strings of broken lyres,  
 And all mankind that haunted nigh  
 Had sought their household fires.

Even without close analysis, it is surely clear how close-packed or densely woven the sound texture is here, with every syllable in this lean verse being encouraged to work overtime. The whole stanza, highly compressed yet utterly lucid, is without an ounce of surplus fat. In the third and fourth lines, for example, the alliteration of 'Winter's' and 'weakening', and 'dregs' and 'desolate' is counterpointed by the less intrusive assonance of 'made' and 'day', along with the semi-assonance of the last syllable of 'Winter's' and the 're' sound of 'dregs'. That unmelodious 'tangled bine-stems' is chock-full of muscular syllables rammed haphazardly up against each other, a cluster of sharply diverse sounds which the reader has to work especially hard at before being rewarded with the more easily consumable consorting of 'scored' and 'sky'. The whole passage is remarkable for its tight interweaving of abstract allegory and keenly observed naturalistic detail.

### 5.6 Syntax, Grammar and Punctuation

A good many poetic effects are achieved through syntax. Like grammar, this has the advantage of being more 'objective' than tone or mood, and thus more easily demonstrable in its workings. Consider the opening lines of Edward Thomas's 'Old Man':

Old Man, or Lad's-love – in the name there's nothing  
 To one that knows not Lad's-love, or Old Man,  
 The hoar-green feathery herb, almost a tree,  
 Growing with rosemary and lavender.  
 Even to one that knows it well, the names  
 Half decorate, half perplex, the thing it is:  
 At least, what that is clings not to the names  
 In spite of time. And yet I like the names.

The herb itself I like not, but for certain  
 I love it, as some day the child will love it  
 Who plucks a feather from the door-side bush  
 Whenever she goes in or out of the house. . . .

One striking feature of these lines is the way they are so courageously prepared to sacrifice elegance to honesty. The jagged, knotted syntax struggles to unpack the poet's constantly swerving thoughts about the plant he is contemplating. As it does so, its hesitations, stops and starts and doublings-back act out something of the convolutions and self-qualifications of his response to the herb. Syntax is pressed into the service of a tenacious commitment to truth, as each proposition threatens to cancel out the previous claim in a dogged struggle to pin down just what the speaker feels. A plain exactitude is all: the herb is 'almost' a tree, but not quite; the names 'half' decorate and 'half' perplex, but not entirely so. 'At least' then instantly qualifies that statement, and the stumbling, unmelodious monosyllables of the line in which it occurs – 'At least what that is clings not to the names' – are ready to risk clumsiness for the sake of a rigorous truthfulness.

This statement, in turn, is then immediately qualified by 'And yet . . .'. The poet, with the perversity of his trade, likes the names but not the herb itself, we learn to our bemusement as we step across that break in the lines; and this is so abrupt a turnaround that it comes through as a mildly dramatic *élan*, a kind of mischievous pulling-out of the carpet from under the too-credulous reader. Punctuation co-operates in this ceaseless, unstable revision of response, as the first few lines of the poem seem positively overloaded with commas, one of which rather redundantly backs up a dash. The poet simply isn't certain enough of how he feels about the herb to produce a smoothly unfractured sentence about it. Instead, one scrupulously qualifying sub-clause tumbles hard on the heels of another. It is the candour of the passage which is part of its attraction – the way that the poet lets us see his doubts, shifts of viewpoint and sudden modulations of feeling as they occur to him, without feeling the need to smooth this ungainly process into an

integrated pattern. It is as though he has left the untidy stitches on his tapestry visible.

Yeats, once again, may serve as another illustration of the adroit use of syntax:

Under my window-ledge the waters race,  
 Otters below and moor-hens on the top,  
 Run for a mile undimmed in Heaven's face  
 Then darkening through 'dark' Raftery's 'cellar' drop,  
 Run underground, rise in a rocky place  
 In Coole demesne, and there to finish up  
 Spread to a lake and drop into a hole.  
 What's water but the generated soul?

('Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931')

The verse, as polished as Thomas's lines are irregular, almost deliberately provokes us into belletristic waffle about how beautifully the sinuous curving of the syntax mimes the flow of the stream. In a magisterial sweep, Yeats propels a single sentence around the corners and through the syntactical thickets of seven lines of poetry, pausing fractionally to register the quotation marks around 'dark' and 'cellar', without for a moment losing his poise. The last line, with its artful change of key, is a kind of final flourish to this masterly performance, with its look-no-hands bravura. It is as though the line is there to show that the poet has some breath left in him even after this virtuoso display.

We might, however, feel disconcerted by the calculated dramatic shift in the last line from the topographical to the metaphysical. One obvious riposte to that rather cavalier rhetorical question 'What's water but the generated soul?' has just been provided by the poem itself, in the shape of a detailed description of a landscape. Are we now supposed to imagine that all this was merely symbolic? The last line risks a certain glibness, a too-easy conversion of reality to allegory. It is purely assertive. We might also feel that the whole *tour de force* of the stanza is excessively deft – that it subdues this tumultuous flow rather too effortlessly to a single shapely narrative. But it is syntactical structure put to superb poetic use.

Grammar is part of the scaffolding of a poem, but it can also function as a poetic device in its own right. The first verse of T. S. Eliot's 'Whispers of Immortality' provides a convenient example:

Webster was much possessed by death  
 And saw the skull beneath the skin;  
 And breastless creatures underground  
 Leaned backward with a lipless grin.

Critics have argued the toss over the significance of that 'leaned'.<sup>3</sup> Does the meaning of the verse fall into two halves, so that we learn first that Webster was much possessed by death and saw the skull beneath the skin, and then, as a separate piece of information, that breastless creatures underground leaned backward with a lipless grin? This would make 'leaned' the past tense of 'lean'. This reading of the poem is reinforced by the presence of the semicolon at the end of line 2, which would seem to mark the one idea off from the other. But it makes for a slight strain as well, since there doesn't seem to any grammatical relation between the two ideas, even if that 'And' in the third line leads us to expect one. It would be rather like saying: 'My grandmother was a career criminal, and a bumble bee settled on my nose.'

So we could read the verse instead as a single unit of meaning: perhaps 'breastless creatures underground' is the object of 'saw', just as 'the skull beneath the skin' is. Maybe Webster saw them both. But what then do we make of 'leaned'? One suggestion is that this is not the past tense of 'lean' but the past participle, as in 'The broom was leaned against the fridge.' The breastless creatures are leaned backward, rather than engaging in the act of leaning backward. But then it is harder to make sense of the semicolon. If the creatures do not lean back by their own motion, this might very slightly diminish the horror of this macabre image, since then they appear not so nightmarishly alive. One wonders, incidentally, what is so horrific about the creatures lacking breasts, since men and children lack breasts, too, at least of the adult female kind. Is the gruesome point that they are females who have had their breasts lopped off?

### 5.7 Ambiguity

There is perhaps an ambiguity in this verse, then; and such ambiguity is built into the nature of poetry. This is partly because, as we have seen already, poems do not come readily equipped with material contexts to help delimit their possibilities of meaning. But it is also because, being 'semantically saturated', their meanings are often highly compressed, which may make them more difficult to unravel. An example can be found in Gerard Manley Hopkins's beautiful little lyric 'Spring and Fall', which is about a young girl weeping over the transience of human existence. The speaker tells her, by way of rather

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted for some of this discussion of the word to William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Harmondsworth, 1961), pp. 78-9.

backhanded consolation, that she will be less sensitive to such matters when she grows up, and then adds: 'And yet you will weep and know why'. William Empson, following his mentor I. A. Richards, points out that this line can have a whole number of meanings, some of which can be laid out here:

And yet you insist on weeping, and you know why you do.  
 And yet you insist on weeping, and you also insist on knowing why.  
 And yet you insist on weeping, and know why! (Listen, I'm about to tell you!)  
 And yet you will weep in the future, and you know why you will.  
 And yet you will weep in the future, and you will know then why you do.  
 And yet you will weep in the future, and know why! (Let me tell you!)

Empson discerns other possibilities, too.<sup>4</sup> I think the line actually means 'And yet you insist on weeping, and you also insist on knowing why.' The fact that the first 'will' is in italics makes one of the first three options more likely than any of the last three. Yet there is nothing to rule out any of these alternative readings.

It is worth noticing the difference between ambiguity and ambivalence. Ambivalence happens when we have two meanings, both of which are determinate but which differ from one another. Ambiguity happens when two or more senses of a word merge into each other to the point where the meaning itself becomes indeterminate. Alexander Pope uses the word 'port' jokingly at one point in his poetry to mean both 'harbour' and an alcoholic drink, which as a simple pun is an example of ambivalence. James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, by contrast, is full of words which conflate different meanings to the point of indeterminacy, as in 'the firewaterloover returted with such a vinesmelling fortytudor ages rawdownhams tanyouhide as would the latten stomach even of a tumass equinous', the meaning of which is not entirely clear.

An example of ambiguity can be found in Philip Larkin's 'Days':

What are days for?  
 Days are where we live.  
 They come, they waken us  
 Time and time over.  
 They are to be happy in:  
 Where can we live but days?

<sup>4</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 148.

Ah, solving that question  
Brings the priest and the doctor  
In their long gowns  
Running over the fields.

There is an implicit play here on the idea of time and space. Days are slices of time, but we live in them as we might inhabit a space. And running across a field is a matter of speeding up time in order to shrink space. The second verse is a masterpiece of bare suggestiveness, pivoting so much on a single spare image which is nevertheless compellingly visualisable. Without rubbing its sparseness in our faces, the verse gets away with as little as it decently can, while somehow managing to make that pregnant phrase 'in their long gowns' resonant of a lot more than itself. But are the priest and the doctor running to bring comfort and counsel to this metaphysical questioner, or are they oppressive, Blakeian figures rushing to bind him into a straitjacket? The phrase 'running over the fields' has faintly sinister undertones: we do not associate respectable, long-gowned figures with such unseemly scampering. Is there an implication of panic here, as the middle-class guardians of orthodoxy are pitched into crisis? The rural fields and the long gowns perhaps hint at a traditional, pre-modern community, for which such meaning-of-life inquiries may appear impious. So we do not know in what tone to read the last verse, whether grim or equable.

A particularly fine ambiguity occurs in the opening lines of Shakespeare's 138th sonnet:

When my love swears that she is made of truth  
I do believe her, though I know she lies . . .

Apart from its obvious meaning, this could also mean 'When my love swears that she is truly a maid (virgin), I do believe her, though I know she lies (has sexual intercourse).'

There is also the celebrated ambiguity of Shakespeare's 94th sonnet. Here is the poem in full:

They that have power to hurt and will do none,  
That do not do the thing they most do show,  
Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,  
Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow,  
They rightly do inherit Heaven's graces,  
And husband nature's riches from expense;  
They are the lords and owners of their faces,

Others but stewards of their excellence.  
The summer's flow'r is to the summer sweet  
Though to itself it only live and die;  
But if that flow'r with base infection meet,  
The basest weed outbraves his dignity:  
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;  
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

Reading through the sonnet, we begin to wonder whether the speaker is praising the person he is addressing, or censuring him, or both. The root of the ambiguity is surely that the speaker is trying to turn what could well be seen as vices in his lover (if that is who he is talking about) into virtues. Conversely, what might sound like virtues could be vices. The Macbeth witches' 'Fair is foul and foul is fair' might thus serve as the sonnet's slogan. Having the power to hurt yet not hurting sounds admirable; but if commending this also means congratulating people who do not do the thing they most do show, it seems to involve paying tribute to hypocrisy. Men and women who are slow to temptation sound praiseworthy, but we are troubled by that 'stone' and 'cold', as well as by the feeling that there is something exploitative about stirring others' feelings while remaining imperturbable oneself.

Likewise, inheriting Heaven's graces and husbanding nature's riches from expense seem positive attainments; but if this makes you a lord and owner of your face, a kind of proprietor or entrepreneur of your self, we are suddenly not so convinced that it is entirely estimable. If we have read much Shakespeare, we might be aware that he seems generally to disapprove of this new-fangled, bourgeois idea of self-proprietaryship or possessive individualism, in which it is 'as if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin' (*Coriolanus*). Shakespeare usually regards this fantasy of self-authorship, in which one sunders all blood ties and communal affiliations, as deeply destructive. Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida* remarks to Achilles that 'no man is the lord of anything . . . Till he communicate his parts to others', a claim which would seem to make identity without relationship a kind of cipher. It is good to know that the summer's flower is sweet to the summer, though rather more disquieting to hear that it lives and dies only to itself, which makes it sound rather unpleasantly self-absorbed.

The trouble is that we cannot simply balance positive against negative here, since we have the uneasy suspicion that the two are sides of the same coin. If this is so, then the sonnet's vision is (in an exact rather than sloppy sense of the word) dialectical. It seems as though the flower is sweet to the summer not in spite of living only for itself, but because of it; and that for

it to break out of this narcissistic condition, which would appear a valuable emancipation in itself, might well involve its becoming infected. Relating to others makes you vulnerable to moral contamination, or even to some less comfortably abstract form of defilement like venereal disease; and this means that you might end up worse off than if you had stuck to your frigid self-enclosedness. Indeed, you might well end up worse off than most people would in the same circumstances, since the fact that you are so aloof and self-absorbed means that you don't have much experience of relationships, and are therefore more likely to be exploited or end up in an emotional mess than those who do. Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds. The high-minded, if they take a tumble, are likely to make a greater splash than those without such moral pretensions.

So the speaker is arguing that a split between how you are and how you appear, which is usually regarded as a moral defect, may in fact be a virtue. Those, for example, who are sexually attractive but don't capitalise on the fact, are creditable versions of hypocrites. In any case, they are not really responsible for the desire they arouse in others, even though it may be precisely their standoffishness which provokes it. And emotional frigidity is not as reprehensible as it might seem if the consequence of it is to keep you out of temptation. Even a repellent sort of vanity or self-love may at least prevent you from injuring others. And though narcissism is sterile, other people may get something out of it (the summer's flower is sweet to the summer), so that it is not quite as worthless as it might appear.

Even so, it seems a touch hyperbolic to describe people like this as inheriting Heaven's graces, and 'husband(ing) nature's riches from expense'. Shakespeare likes the idea of good husbandry or stewardship because it involves preserving and expending in judicious measure, as opposed to being profligate with oneself, as some of his characters are, or jealously hoarding oneself, as other of his figures do. If you are spendthrift with your self then you give it away so recklessly that you end up with no self to bestow; whereas if you hoard yourself you also end up without an identity, since Shakespeare seems to agree with Ulysses that human identity is a relational affair. The icily self-possessed men and women he is portraying here sound as though they belong firmly to the second category; but the verse, perversely intent on idealising certain deficiencies, makes it appear as though they fall into the category of judicious stewards.

'Other but stewards of their excellence' now shifts the role of steward, which lurks unstated behind the verb 'husband', to the colleagues of the frigid brigade. But there is an ambiguity here: does 'their' excellence mean that of the emotionally autistic people, or that of those around them? The line could mean

that whereas the frigid people are fully in command of their own resources, those around them merely benefit from these resources in a second-hand, mediated sort of way. They cannot own the self-possessed people as these individuals own themselves, and so are reduced to the rank of servants or stewards in relation to them. Perhaps they bathe in their reflected glory, and thus make use of their talents without being proprietors of them, as a steward might. Or perhaps the line means that whereas stonily unmoved people appear to own themselves, other people relate to themselves like stewards, tapping into their own powers and talents but without, so to speak, actually having the title deeds to them. This, one would gather from the rest of Shakespeare's writing, is the sort of condition of which he would approve; but here, once more, the sonnet sounds less in two minds about this way of living than we suspect that its author might actually be. There are some definite hints of disingenuousness. The piece is like a guileful speech for the defence by a counsel who knows that his client is guilty.

Why does the poet seem to be intent on making the best of a bad job? We might speculate that the sonnet is written about his lover, and meant to be read by him or her, so that it is really an indirect form of address. Perhaps, as William Empson conjectures, the lover is in some kind of danger, and the speaker is rather desperately trying to prevent him from some foolhardy involvement by praising his imperfections. This might be a more persuasive tactic than appealing to his virtues, which may be in embarrassingly scant supply. The lover should realise that his narcissism is a strength and refuse to compromise it. Or perhaps the distraught poet is trying forlornly to rationalise to himself his lover's airy indifference. In this case, it is as though he himself is being thrust into the ignoble position of a bad steward, squandering his self-possession, and thus may be implicitly contrasting his lover's coolness with the grovelling, weed-like condition to which this haughtiness has reduced him.

Maybe the lover is being tempted to go off with someone else, and the sonnet is the speaker's sophisticated strategy for arguing him out of it. He may contract a moral or physical disease if he does so, thus losing the chilly self-possession which is his most alluring feature. To act would be to undo himself, ruining the very qualities which make him so easy on the eye. This is why he would resemble a festering lily. The speaker may be letting his partner know in a flagrantly self-interested sort of way (though it may also be the truth) that only by not yielding himself to his new lover will he be able to keep that lover on the hook. He may even be hoping that his partner will be so impressed by this commendation of what seems most defective about him that he will abandon his new lover and fall back into bed with his old partner. The poet is cloaking his amorous self-interest in just the kind of noble

altruism which might turn his lover on. Or perhaps there is no such rhetorical situation at stake, and the sonnet is simply remarking on the irony by which even our vices can turn out to be perversely virtuous.

If the lover has been in some way trifling with the poet's affections, something similar may be said of the poem's relation to the reader. Its technique is to keep the reader guessing, catch her on the hop, refuse to sediment into a single, unequivocal attitude. And this seems a kind of poetic equivalent to erotic teasing, no sooner offering us a crumb of comfort than swapping it for a poisoned barb. We are uncertain where the poet actually stands, but this may not be because the poem is exactly ironic. It may be investigating what we might call an 'objective' irony, but it does not follow that it does not mean what it says. Maybe Shakespeare is perfectly sincere in believing that to be lord and owner of oneself may be to diminish the degree of human damage one might wreak. It is just that he also probably believes – outside the confines of the poem, so to speak – that there is also much that is undesirable about such self-lordship. But there is no reason why he has to say that here, even if the phrase 'are themselves as stone' hints at it almost too heavily. Nobody, not even Shakespeare, has to say everything at once.

## 5.8 Punctuation

One of the most neglected formal techniques is punctuation. It is puzzling, for example, why there should be an exclamation mark after the lines from Eliot's 'Whispers of Immortality' which read: 'Daffodil bulbs instead of balls / Stared from the sockets of the eyes!' Exclamation marks are clumsy markers of emotion for such a suavely adept poet as Eliot. They are naive, usually superfluous, and almost always overemphatic. So one suspects that this one is somehow ironic, though it is hard to see how. It is, so to speak, in quotation marks. There is a tender lyric by e. e. cummings which ends with this verse:

(i do not know what it is about you that closes  
and opens; only something in me understands  
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)  
nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands  
(somewhere I have never travelled, gladly beyond')

cummings often leaves out punctuation marks altogether, or, as here, squeezes them between words as though he wants them to be as unobtrusive as

possible. (This actually makes them more obtrusive.) One can see why he doesn't want a full stop after 'roses' or 'hands': it would be too forceful, definitive a gesture for such delicate, gossamer-like verse, which may also be one reason why the poet avoids capital letters. (A less reputable reason may be the assumption that 'onion' is democratic whereas 'Onion' is elitist.) Full stops would chop up into discrete units of meaning what is intended as a series of fragile, tentative statements. They would end-stop his feelings. But in that case he might have been better off without those commas in the last line, leaving it to the reader to introduce the pauses. The title of the poem is also its first line, and one sees why it needs that comma: without it, it might sound as though he means 'somewhere I have never travelled gladly', which given the meaning of the poem's first lines would be something of a slap in the face for his lover. But it is a pity, all the same, that the comma should have to intrude.

cummings also uses colons, semicolons and commas in the body of the poem that could have been omitted. (Colons, incidentally, have today almost passed out of existence, along with string vests and sideburns.) If you want an effect of perpetual open-endedness you can leave the line-endings to do the work of pausing, rather than full-stop them. The verse puts its first three lines in parenthesis, as though they are a kind of musing aside; and this also has the added bonus of throwing that poignant final line into relief, since it is the only unbracketed one in the stanza. The synaesthesia of 'the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses' is not quite as accomplished: eyes deeper than all roses is an imaginative conceit, or even a voice deeper than all roses, though that is rather too literal to be quite as effective; but 'the voice of your eyes' is surely just incongruous.

## 5.9 Rhyme

Rhyme is one of the most familiar of all technical devices, and we have seen a good deal of it so far. Perhaps it reflects the fact that we take a childlike delight in doublings, mirror images and affinities, which have something magical (but also something disquieting and uncanny) about them. There is pleasure to be reaped from repetition: small children tend to go on repeating well beyond the point that most adults find tolerable. In its predictability, repetition may yield us a sense of security. For Freudians, it reflects the natural indolence of the psyche – the fact that left to ourselves, without the goad of economic necessity, we would simply lounge around the place all day in various scandalous states of *jouissance*. We do not like to expend too much libidinal energy,



and repetition is one way in we can 'bind' such energy and thus avoid an excess of expenditure. It is true that too much repetition is tedious, but rhyme can overcome this danger because it is a unity of identity and difference. We hear 'dragon' and 'wagon' as akin, but also as dissimilar.

Perhaps because modern life is felt to be somehow dissonant, a good many poets begin to abandon the use of rhyme as we enter the modern age. Or, like the First World War poet Wilfred Owen, they compromise by using para-rhyme, words which almost chime in unison but don't quite:

Happy are men who yet before they are killed  
Can let their veins run cold.  
Whom no compassion fleers  
Or makes their feet  
Sore on the alleys cobbled with their brothers.  
The front line withers.  
But they are troops who fade, not flowers,  
For poet's tearful fooling:  
Men, gaps for filling:  
Losses, who might have fought  
Longer: but no one bothers.  
(*'Insensibility'*)

There is a mourning, haunting, almost eerie quality to these superbly inventive para-rhymes: 'killed'/'cold', 'fleers'/'flowers', 'feet'/'fought', 'fooling'/'filling', 'brothers'/'withers'/'bothers'. Everything is uncomfortably awry, off-key, out of kilter, as one might expect from a writer living through unimaginable human carnage. One imagines that full-blooded rhyme would seem a kind of false harmony to a poet like this, who has been reduced by the horrors of war to actually commending insensitivity and the conscious blunting of compassion. One can imagine the scandalised reaction of many a Victorian to this humane counsel.

'Cobbled' is brutal in its dehumanising force, its impact intensified by the fact that it is a sudden image in lines which have been so far fairly free of them. But the casual savagery of the term has to be held in tension with 'brothers'. It is not that the soldiers are not as much brothers as ever, just that they cannot afford the kind of sentimentality which would say so. Feeling can kill: any too-powerful emotion is likely to make the soldiers more vulnerable to their situation, and thus to intensify its dreadfulness. It is callousness here which is compassionate. This applies to *'Insensibility'* as well as to the troops: one can sense its deep-seated anger, but also the icy control which throttles it back so that the poem can take place.

*'Insensibility'* even lip-curlingly denies its own status as poetry, which in these conditions can be no more than tearful fooling. As a piece of stony-hearted anti-poetry, it is in conflict with itself (though it is also meticulously crafted). It goes out of its way to take a smack at metaphor, even though 'cobbled with their brothers' is precisely that. Its language, for such a sensuous poet as Owen, is ascetic and austere. The line 'The front line withers' stands starkly isolated and end-stopped, four laconic words marooned at the verse's centre. It is as though any attempt to elaborate this bald fact would be a lie. If the rhymes are off-key, so is the metre, which shifts between lines of varying numbers of feet. The final phrase of the verse – 'but no one bothers' – contrasts the unavoidable anaesthesia of those plunged in the thick of warfare with the rather more culpable insensitivity of those kicking their heels comfortably at home, not least perhaps the politicians who sent the soldiers there. *Insensibility* applies to both groups, but for quite different reasons.

While we are on the subject of war poetry, it is worth contrasting Owen's poem with John McCrae's *'In Flanders Fields'*:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,  
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.

Perhaps this is the kind of war poem Owen had in his sights, though it is hardly tearful fooling. There is a jauntiness about the metre (an iambic tetrameter) which is at odds with the tragedy of the war, though perhaps not so much at odds with the martial clarion-call of the final verse. Far from exploiting the dissonance of para-rhyme, the piece (if one leaves aside the refrain) rings changes on only two rhyming sounds, thus generating a peculiarly close-knit rhyme scheme. This creates a faintly chant-like effect – one

which again seems askew to the sombre feeling, but which fits well enough with the poem's rousing last lines.

What the lines say is that the dead will only feel vindicated if those left alive create even more corpses, a bloodthirsty demand for such a noble-spirited elegy. It is hard to square the piece's high-minded mournfulness with its call to arms, which is too close to vengeance for comfort. It is not the kind of sentiment one can imagine Wilfred Owen easily endorsing; indeed, it sounds like that of a non-combatant safely ensconced behind the lines. But McCrae was in fact a Canadian soldier who survived some of the bloodiest episodes of the war. It is not clear why the dead soldiers might not sleep even though poppies grow above them, unless the allusion is to the poppies' opiate effect. But it seems incongruous and undignified to suggest that the dead warriors are sleeping because they are doped.

Finally, it is worth glancing at the Second-World War author John Pudney's celebrated piece 'For Johnny', with its tight *aa/bb* rhyme scheme:

Do not despair  
For Johnny-head-in-air;  
He sleeps as sound  
As Johnny underground.

Fetch out no shroud  
For Johnny-in-the-cloud;  
And keep your tears  
For him in after years.

Better by far  
For Johnny-the-bright-star,  
To keep your head,  
And see his children fed.

These terse lines, to be delivered with an officer-like crispness of accent, struggle so hard to avoid sentimentality that they lapse right into it, in a bravely-choking-back-emotion sort of way. And the rhyme scheme is among other things a way of mastering the emotion. Throttling back feeling can be a perverse way of stimulating it, as with the Dickensian type of rough-diamond sentimentalist who reaps a secret *frisson* from pretending to be gruff. It is the very tight-lipped disowning of feeling here which comes through as a lump in the throat. Yet the poem is impressive in a kitschy kind of way. It is a fair specimen of a disreputable species, hovering between genuine emotional power and barely-suppressed sentimentality. It is also an example of pragmatically effective verse: no doubt it consoled a good many families who had lost sons

and husbands in the war. It is saddening, even so, to learn that the author of this gem, which Laurence Olivier read on wartime radio and Michael Redgrave quoted in a patriotic film, was also the author of *The Smallest Room*, a history of the lavatory.

## 5.10 Rhythm and Metre

Rhythm in poetry is not the same as metre. Metre is a regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, whereas rhythm is less formalised. It means the irregular sway and flow of the verse, its ripples and undulations as it follows the flexing of the speaking voice. Much of the effect of English-language poetry comes from playing the one off against the other. Shylock's line in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* –

How like a fawning publican he looks!

– is an iambic pentameter, with the following pattern of stresses (the syllables in bold type being the stressed ones):

How **like** a fawning **publican** he looks!

An actor who delivered the line like this, however, would no doubt receive a less than rapturous response from the audience. Instead, he might articulate it like this:

How like a fawning **publican** he looks!

which clings to the curve of the speaking voice. But the metre leaves open various possibilities. Its beat can be heard as a dim throbbing behind the actual delivery, forming a stable background against which the freestyle acrobatics of the voice can stand out. It is as though metre supplies the score on which rhythm improvises.

Rhythm is one of the most 'primordial' of poetic features. It can be a simple matter of tripping and liting, or it can well up from a much deeper psychic level, as a pattern of motion and impulse which is inherited from our earliest years, which has tenacious somatic and psychological roots, and which is imprinted in the folds and textures of the self. A baby of six months cannot talk, but scientists have established that it can detect subtle variations in the complex rhythmic patterns of Balkan folk-dance tunes. And it can do so even if it is born in Boston.

A poem by Walter Raleigh shows just how beautifully sinuous and flexible poetic rhythm can be:

As you came from the holy land  
of Walsinghame  
Mett you not with my true love  
by the way as you came  
How shall I know your trew love  
That has met many one  
As I went to the holy lande  
That have come, that have gone . . .  
(‘As You Came from the Holy Land’)

That delicately lilting second line, consisting as it does of just two words, comes as a wonderfully subtle rhythmical modulation after the more conventional metre of the first line. As we shift from line to line, we move in a kind of fine surprise from one set of cunningly varied rhythmic impulses to another. If the sense is continuous, the rhythmic units which go to make it up are delightfully diverse and unpredictable.

Something similar can be said of Stevie Smith’s legendary ‘Not Waving But Drowning’:

Nobody heard him, the dead man,  
But still he lay moaning;  
I was much further out than you thought  
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking  
And now he’s dead  
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,  
They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always  
(Still the dead one lay moaning)  
I was much too far out all my life  
And not waving but drowning.

The first stanza alternates lines of three stresses with lines of two, a pattern which the second two stanzas sustain in a more irregular way. The effect of this is a kind of rise and fall, or a shift from a major to a minor key, as the more expansive line is followed up by the more downbeat, diminished one. A sense of bathos lurks behind this device, one which informs the poem as

a whole: from the tragedy of drowning to the triviality of waving is a mere nuance of perception. The two keywords, ‘waving’ and ‘drowning’, are dissonant but vaguely reminiscent of each other, as though from a distance one could mistake the one for the other, just as from the beach one can confuse the actual gestures.

The first two lines of the second stanza conform to the metrical pattern of the first, as bathos breaks out again with that comically matter-of-fact ‘And now he’s dead’; but with ‘It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way, / They said’ the rhythm goes grotesquely awry. One would expect this clumsily lurching line to be broken up into two neatly balanced ones (‘It must have been too cold for him, / His heart gave way, they said’), but Smith wants to get a sense of the dead man’s companions’ flurried, disorganised chatter. Like a breathless snatch of gossip, the line lacks punctuation. It has the clumping lack of symmetry of everyday speech. Smith also wants to create a ridiculous effect, deflating the high drama of the drowning by ineptly crowding this cack-handed line with too many words, as though the stanza has suddenly bucked out of her control. Then, after this ridiculously gauche line, one which captures the *faux-naïf* quality of the poem as a whole, we have bathos once more, with the lame trailing-off of ‘They said’ being incongruously allotted a whole line to itself. The swimmer even muffs the big moment of his death, unable to rise to the grandeur of the tragic; and the verse follows suit by disastrously losing its sense of rhythm.

The final stanza is spoken by the drowned man himself (there are three interweaving voices in this brief poem), and devalues his death even further by suggesting that it is really not much different from his life. His explanation, however, has come too late: nobody hears him in death, just as nobody heard him in life. Perhaps this is not entirely the fault of the friends: perhaps he really did lark about, as a way of proudly concealing the fact that he was in trouble, and so is partly responsible for the farcical misinterpretation which was his existence. The poem beautifully blends comedy and poignancy.

Let us look finally at a poem by a distinguished, unduly neglected poet of eighteenth-century Ireland, William Dunkin. Dunkin’s finest piece is entitled ‘The Parson’s Revels’, and is couched in a very rare stanza form:<sup>5</sup>

His voice was brazen, deep, and such,  
As well-accorded with High-dutch,  
Or Attic Irish, and his touch  
Was pliant;

<sup>5</sup> It is, however, to be found in a bawdy poem called ‘The Ramble’ by the English Restoration poet Alexander Radcliffe, which rhymes ‘clitoris’ with ‘Tell stories’.

Dubourgh to him was but a fool;  
He played melodious without rule,  
And sung the feats of Fin McCool,  
The giant . . .

The rhyme scheme in the poem is a kind of comic ritual in itself. Dunkin uses some deliberately inept rhymes ('scurvy'/'topsy-turvy', 'from it'/'vomit', 'dead aunt'/'pedant'), but the real comic effect is reaped from the way the first three lines of each verse (which are iambic tetrameters) set up a rhythm which is suddenly disrupted by the final, lamely tacked-on phrase. These final phrases come after a slight pause, during which the reader just has time to wonder what monstrously over-ingenious rhyme is about to be perpetrated. The final phrase, with its brief trisyllabic lilt, is inevitably bathetic:

Each blithesome damsel shews her shape,  
Enough to burst her stays and tape,  
And bangs the boards: the fiddlers scrape  
Their cat-guts:

Brave C—, foe to popish dogs,  
In boots, as cumbersome as clogs,  
Displays his parts, and B—jogs  
His fat guts.

The final phrases, almost afterthoughts, are too laconic to bear the emphasis which the verse throws on them, and this itself is a comic effect. The phrases are necessary to round off the sense of each stanza, yet rhythmically speaking they seem like feebly superfluous gestures. Each stanza thus seems to end on an embarrassing anti-climax, as the speaking voice trails away. It is as though the sense needs these phrases but the metre does not, since it and its trim, triple rhyme are already complete in themselves. This tension between feeling that the phrases are internal to the verses, yet also pointlessly external to them, is a kind of wit.

### 5.11 Imagery

Finally, a word about imagery. Just as rhyme, metre and texture involve an interplay of difference and identity, so do most images. Similes and

metaphors insist on affinities between elements which we also acknowledge to be different; and the more we attend to the kinship between the terms, the larger the differences may loom. Metonymy links elements in a contiguous way (bird/sky, for example), thus also creating an equivalence between things which we recognise to be disparate. Synecdoche substitutes a part for a whole (wing for bird, for example, or crown for monarch), and parts and wholes are both different and allied.

The term 'image' is in some ways misleading, since it suggests the visual, and not all imagery is of this kind. Auden, for example, is famous for images which yoke together the concrete and the abstract: 'Anxiety receives them like a Grand Hotel'; 'And lie apart like epochs from each other'. Part of the point of similes like this, which belong to an era in which the whole idea of representation is in crisis, is that they baffle any attempt to visualise them. But this is true in a sense of all such equating of one thing with another. We speak of similes and metaphors as images; but both of them are forms of comparison, and it is hard to see how a comparison can be a picture.<sup>6</sup> We can describe jealousy as a green-eyed monster, but this tends to mean that we picture a green-eyed monster rather than jealousy. You can take a photograph of a goat, but not of lechery. You can hold the two parts of the comparison together in language, just as in language you can have a purple-coloured pain, a grin without a cat, a square circle, a person who is both dead and alive, or a cathedral which is built entirely out of stone but also entirely out of jelly. But it is not easy to portray any of these phenomena visually. What image does 'My love is like a red, red rose' bring to mind? A rose with well-plucked eyebrows and dainty legs? It is language's lack of visualisability which confers such enviable freedom upon it. Seeing language as no more than an image or representation of reality is a way of restricting its liberty. In literary history, the words for such policing of the signifier are realism and naturalism – movements which, despite their exclusiveness, have been immensely fertile and productive.

It is true that there are kinds of imagery which do not involve visualisation. We speak, for example, of aural or tactile imagery. Yet the word remains more deceptive than illuminating. For some eighteenth-century critics, imagery referred to the power of poetry to make us 'see' objects, to feel as if we were in their actual presence; but this implied, oddly, that the function of poetic language was to efface itself before what it represented. Language makes things vividly present to us, but to do so adequately it must cease to interpose its own ungainly bulk between us and them. So poetic language

<sup>6</sup> A point made by P. N. Furbank in his *Reflections on the Word 'Image'* (London, 1970), p. 1.

attains its pitch of perfection when it ceases to be language at all. At its peak, it transcends itself.

Images, on this theory, are representations so lucid that they cease to be representations at all, and instead merge with the real thing. Which means, logically speaking, that we are no longer dealing with poetry at all, which is nothing if not a verbal phenomenon. F. R. Leavis writes of the kind of verse which 'has such life and body that we hardly seem to be reading arrangements of words . . . The total effect is as if words as words withdrew themselves from the focus of our attention and we were directly aware of a tissue of feelings and perceptions.'<sup>7</sup> It is ironic that on this view, poetry can create the impression of real things more powerfully than the visual arts. When we gaze at a painting of a landscape, we know that what we are seeing is not the landscape itself, precisely because the painting is itself a visual object, one which distinguishes itself from what it depicts in the very act of being faithful to it. But when the medium of representation is not itself visual, as with poetry, this is not so obvious.

The idea of the 'image', which first emerges in its modern sense in the late seventeenth century, arises from the suspicion of rhetoric felt by an Age of Reason.<sup>8</sup> Words are not to act as slippery figures of speech, but to behave as 'images' or clear representations of things. It is ironic, then, that in some later criticism 'imagery' and 'figures of speech' come to be more or less synonymous. Modern movements like Imagism inherited this belief in clear representations, as poets like H. D. and Ezra Pound, alarmed by a commercial and bureaucratic language which seemed out of touch with concrete reality, sought to yoke words and things more tightly together. The idea of the concrete springs to the fore when reality itself seems to have become abstract. 'No ideas but in things' became William Carlos Williams's programmatic slogan. Language on this view is at its most trustworthy when it is thing-like, and thus not language at all. At its most authentic, it flips over into something else.

Imagery, then, did not originally mean such devices as metaphor and simile. In fact, it meant almost the opposite of them. The word harboured a marked hostility to figurative language, rather than denoting certain familiar uses of it. It was only with the Romantic movement, when it was accepted that even the clearest perception of the world involves the creative imagination,

<sup>7</sup> F. R. Leavis, 'Imagery and Movement: Notes in the Analysis of Poetry', *Scrutiny*, September 1945, p. 124.

<sup>8</sup> See R. Frazer, 'The Origin of the Word "Image"', in *English Literary History*, vol. xxvii, pp. 149-61.

that the two notions began to coalesce. What had started out as a matter of clear representations now touched on the very essence of the poetic imagination, which combines, distinguishes, unifies and transforms. Moreover, if our knowledge of reality involved the imagination, then imagery was cognitive, not merely decorative. It could no longer be dismissed as so much superfluous embellishment. Instead, it lay at the very heart of the poetic. Rhetoric and reality were no longer at daggers drawn. Metaphor was now more or less equivalent to the poetic as such. It was a supremely privileged activity of the human spirit, not just a rhetorical device.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, 'imagery' had come to mean pretty much what it means for us today. Yet what exactly *does* it mean? Some dictionaries inform us that the term means 'figurative language', in the sense of language which is non-literal. But similes are surely literal enough. There is nothing figurative in claiming that your boyfriend looks like a toad, as opposed to claiming that he is a toad. It is true that the word 'literal' is much abused these days, as in 'I literally fell through the floor in amazement', where the word 'literal' is itself figurative. But similes are quite literally literal. Nor is everything we call a figure of speech a non-literal use of language. This is true enough of hyperbole (exaggeration), litotes (understatement), irony, personification and so on; but what of a figure like chiasmus, in which a pattern of words is repeated in reverse order? The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that chiasmus is a figure, yet defines 'figure of speech' as a non-literal use of words. Are imagery and figures of speech the same thing, or is the former confined to simile and metaphor?

The theory of imagery, then, is in something of a mess. One critic informs us that 'Imagery is a form of metaphor or figurative speech, a kind of picture language.'<sup>9</sup> Yet on some theories, metaphor, figurative speech and picture language are either distinct or mutually incompatible. Another commentator, seeking perhaps to square the circle, defines imagery as any concrete as opposed to abstract representation in poetry, whether literal or figurative.<sup>10</sup> One reason why the idea of the image looms so large in the post-Romantic era is because of literature's evolving love affair with the concrete. As we have seen already, the cult of the concrete particular dates largely from this period; and images are thought to be peculiarly solid, vivid and specific. Yet this is a mistaken assumption. There are lots of similes and metaphors, not least in, say, Elizabethan poetry, which are not at all sensuously particular.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Haeffner, quoted in Furbank, *Reflections*, p. 56.

<sup>10</sup> See Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford and New York, 1990), p. 106. Baldick's book is an excellent guide to its subject.

You can have hazy general images as well as grippingly specific ones. In any case, as we saw in discussing Seamus Heaney, the idea that some uses of language are more concrete than others needs to be handled with care. It is true that an elaborately detailed verbal portrait of a green-eyed monster is less abstract than the concept of jealousy; but the words 'green-eyed monster' are not less abstract than the word 'jealousy'. No word – as opposed to an idea – is more concrete or abstract than any other.

In any case, it is a mistake to equate concreteness with things. An individual object is the unique phenomenon it is because it is caught up in a mesh of relations with other objects. It is this web of relations and interactions, if you like, which is 'concrete', while the object considered in isolation is purely abstract. In his *Grundrisse*, Karl Marx sees the abstract not as a lofty, esoteric notion, but as a kind of rough sketch of a thing. The notion of money, for example, is abstract because it is no more than a bare, preliminary outline of the actual reality. It is only when we reinsert the idea of money into its complex social context, examining its relations to commodities, exchange, production and the like, that we can construct a 'concrete' concept of it, one which is adequate to its manifold substance. The Anglo-Saxon empiricist tradition, by contrast, makes the mistake of supposing that the concrete is simple and the abstract is complex. In a similar way, a poem for Yury Lotman is concrete precisely because it is the product of many interacting systems. Like Imagist poetry, you can suppress a number of these systems (grammar, syntax, metre and so on) to leave the imagery standing proudly alone; but this is actually an abstraction of the imagery from its context, not the concretion it appears to be. In modern poetics, the word 'concrete' has done far more harm than good.

But enough of theory for the moment. It is time now to turn back to the poems themselves, in a final analysis of some well-known English verses.

## Chapter 6

### Four Nature Poems

#### 6.1 William Collins, 'Ode to Evening'

In this final chapter, I want to examine some English Nature poems as a further exercise in close critical analysis. There is no particular rhyme or reason in the selection of these pieces, no obvious connections between them, and no special significance in the fact that they are all about Nature. They simply provide convenient texts to scrutinise.

The first is an extract from the eighteenth-century poet William Collins's 'Ode to Evening':

... Then lead, calm votaress, where some sheety lake  
Cheers the lone heath, or some time-hallowed pile  
Or uplands fallows gray  
Reflect its last cool gleam.  
But when chill blustering winds, or driving rain  
Forbid my willing feet, be mine the hut  
That from the mountain's side  
Views wilds, and swelling floods,  
And hamlets brown, and dim-discovered spires,  
And hears their simple bell, and marks o'er all  
Thy dewy fingers draw  
The gradual dusky veil.

It would be hard to find a style of poetry more alien to the modern sensibility. A modern reader who can enjoy this kind of stuff has developed