

Chapter 5

How to Read a Poem

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 grousing, 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

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

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 winged 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 underflow 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 cuttingly sarcastic. You could deliver them to reveal a real impatience and irascibility beginning to peep through the cavalier wit, or as implicitly 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 learn 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.¹

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

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

¹ 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).

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 *comp d'tat* or a telephone 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 meanings 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 meanings 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.² 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

² 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 weary, weary,
 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 sardonically 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 phrases like 'I am weary, weary, / 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 dragged into the overall atmospheric effect, in an absurdly homogenising way. A useful adjective to describe this is *willful*, 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?*), imply 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', 'blest', 'stone', 'fool', 'bread', 'trod', 'glitter', 'Sweet' and 'sweetness' figure among these. If he wants to suggest human squalor he writes something like 'foul dirch'; 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 gabbble '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, exalted, 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 *finibry*, 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 aspects 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 cartoon 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,
Come 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 restlessly higher 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 (*ababbc*) 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 night
 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 'e' 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

irregular pattern. It is as though he has left the untidy stitches on his poetry visible.
 years, once again, may serve as another illustration of the adroit use of syntax.

Under my window-ledge the waters race,
 Osters below and moor-hens on the top,
 Run for a mile undimmed in Heaven's face
 Then darkening through 'dark' Rafferty'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 bellentistic waffle about how beautifully the sinuous curving of the syntax mimes the flow of the stream. In a magisterial sweep, Years propel 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'.³ 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

³ 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.⁴ 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 firewaterlover returned with such a vinesmelling fortyrudor ages rawdownhams tanyouhlide 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?

⁴ 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 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 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 glib 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 growling, 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 discomfortingly 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 serious 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 falling 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.
 Ferch 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 Walsingham
Met you not with my true love
by the way as you came
How shall I know your true 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)¹

That delicately lifting 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 nearly 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:²

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

¹ It is, however, to be found in a bawdy poem called 'The Ramble' by the English Restoration poet Alexander Radcliffe, which rhymes 'ditors' 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-ingenuous 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-guits:

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. 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

¹ 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.'⁷ 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.⁸ 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,

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

⁸ See R. Frazer, 'The Origin of the Word "Image"', in *English Literary History*, vol. xxviii, 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, four 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.'⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.

⁹ Paul Haefliger, quoted in Furbank, *Reflections*, p. 56.

¹⁰ 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 *Grundriss*, 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 Yuri 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.

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 sheezy 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

a genuinely catholic taste. Two aspects of this magnificent poem are immediately unattractive to the typical modern reader: its elaborately formal diction, and its solemnly elevated tone. Diction means the kind of vocabulary conventionally considered suitable for poetry, and the point about modern poetry is that there isn't one. Most modern poetry uses what we might roughly call everyday speech. It is the effects it conjures from this speech which are 'poetic', not the fact that it uses a special idiom set apart from ordinary language. Neoclassical poetry, by contrast, as the critic Donald Davie observes in his study *Purity of Diction in English Verse*, achieves some of its peculiar effects by seeming to fend off certain terms which can be felt hovering on its margins but which it would be indecorous to allow in.

Shakespeare is not constrained by diction either; plundering any sort of vocabulary that comes to hand. This is no doubt one reason why many readers today find it easier to thrill to his language than to the language of, say, John Milton. There is a feeling abroad in some quarters that the native genius of the English language is to be informal and colloquial, and that any more formalised speech is more suitable to high-toned nations like the French. This belief is sometimes accompanied by an interest in Morris dancing and flagons of warm cider.

But there are other cultural situations in which if you did not employ a quasi-technical language for poetry, what you produced would not really be counted as a poem. A great many terms would be regarded as inappropriate for poetry, perhaps because they are too 'low'. This censorship extended into the twentieth century: plenty of Georgian poets would not have contemplated using words like 'steam engine' or 'telegraph' in their work. There are, to be sure, much plainer eighteenth-century poems than 'Ode to Evening'; Collins is especially enamoured of ornate poetic figures. But these figures are by and large the kind of thing that an eighteenth-century reader would have expected from his or her volumes of verse.

The other unappealing aspect of the lines to some modern readers is their tone, which seems equally removed from everyday life. Odes like this are expected to sound reasonably exalted. We may note that this noble or dignified tone is relatively uniform: it does not modulate much in accordance with whatever it is the poem is observing, nor is it intended to. Thus, when the poet makes tracks for the humble hut to shelter from the rain, we might expect some major shift of tone, but we don't get it. Instead, we get the kind of tension between form and content that we have investigated previously. If the hut is humble, the poem's language is not. It records the 'simple' bell of the hamlets or villages in fairly lofty terms. Just as the language of the poem seems to view things from an Olympian vantage point, without

needed dose-ups, so the poet makes use of his refuge in the hut for a panoramic *swiftness* of the landscape around him, sweeping from the sublime mountains and swelling floods) to the modest domesticity of the hamlets or small villages). The high and the low are also combined in the image of the church spires, which are mysteriously 'dim-discovered' yet furnished with 'simple' bells. The grandeur of this spectacle is at odds with the work-air place from which it is observed. And this, for an eighteenth-century readership as well as for many of us today, is perfectly appropriate and acceptable.

The poet is not really part of the landscape he contemplates, and this, again, is part of its poetic decorum. It is true that he dips into the scene briefly by *subliming* in the fiction of being driven to seek shelter from the rain, as though on account for how he gets from one part of the terrain to another; but the *desire* of the hut is then abandoned. For the poem is not about the poet and his wanderings, which might seem distastefully subjectivist to a neoclassical author like Collins. It is about Evening itself. What holds its various experiences together is not the fact that they all occur to one William Collins, which would indeed be a Romantic sort of gambit, but the fact that they are all part of a conveniently wide-ranging abstraction known as Evening. And Evening, once it has arrived, covers just about everything.

This, then, allows Collins to meander around in an apparently desultory fashion, inspecting this or that at his leisure, while ensuring, as a good neoclassical author should, that all of this adds up to a harmonious totality. He allows himself a Romantic latitude within a classical whole. These particular lines of the poem are in fact the only part of it in which the author himself puts in a personal appearance. It would be poetic bad manners to centre everything on himself. He does not even view the landscape himself; instead, this activity is delegated to the hut, which seems to do his viewing for him. From the gradual dusky veil' to the end of the poem, he effaces himself from view and disappears entirely into the poem's language, which turns in impersonal fashion to a personification of the various seasons of the year.

The ode, then, is not at all to do with the poet's unique experience of the world, as a poem by Keats might be. Nor is it meant to be. We hear very little about how the poet feels about what he observes. We are not dealing with 'consciousness' here, as we might be with Wordsworth or Thomas Hardy. Wordsworth is on the whole less concerned to give us a detailed image of Nature than a detailed map of his mind. The living, breathing, active subject of Collins's poem is not the poet but Evening, on to whom subjectivity is to speak, is displaced. But if the poem is not particularly concerned with the human subject, neither in a sense is it to do with the natural object.

Everything its author sees is mediated by elaborate literary codes, as is clear from some earlier lines of the work:

... O nymph reserved, while now the bright-haired sun
Sits in yon western tent, whose cloudy skirts,
With brede ethereal wove,
O'erhang his wavy bed . . .

There is no direct perception here at all, and no call for it. Collins is not actually looking at anything. He does not need to peer out of his study window to call the sun bright-haired, to portray clouds as skirts, or to speak of the sea as a wavy bed. This is not the kind of verse which puts any great store by meticulous observation. We post-Romantics tend to regard this as a deficiency, but for Collins it would not have seemed so, nor need it seem so to us. He might well have considered it eccentric and indecorous to think up strikingly specific phrases which sought to capture the exact tints and surgings of the ocean.

For the greatest English eighteenth-century critic, Samuel Johnson, this would be an idle distraction from the poet's proper business of conveying general truths. It is a measure of the gulf between pre-Romantics like Johnson and post-Romantics like ourselves that Johnson found generalities deeply interesting and particularities rather pointless. Scientists might want to investigate the sun in greater detail than 'bright-haired', but there is no call for poets and moralists to do so. And this applies to the study of humanity as well: what is important are the few great things that human beings share in common, not their arbitrary deviations from this uniform nature. The specialist scrutiny of individual cases obscures the few fundamental facts about them that we need to know in order to assess their place in the great scheme of things. So terms like 'bright-haired', which seem to us a kind of poetic jargon, are also ways of avoiding jargon, in the sense of specialist language. 'Bright-haired' and 'wavy bed' tell us as much as we need to know. Conventional terms are more informative than freakishly new-fangled ones. But even these terms must not be staidly conventional; they must involve some degree of inventiveness on the poet's part. Later in the poem a forest becomes a 'sylvan shed', which is inventive enough.

The poem, then, is really about neither human subject nor natural object, but the medium in which they commingle, which is language itself. It is an intricate, highly artificial rhetorical exercise, even though its subject matter is supposedly Nature. The work is not meant to be 'true to Nature'; instead, Nature is made to be true to it by being recast in terms of symbol, allegory,

mythology, stock literary epithets and the like. Nature itself becomes a text or aesthetic object. There is nothing very natural about it. When the poet implies that he is attracted to the simple life by heading for the hut, this is as much a poetic convention as referring to Evening's dewy fingers drawing a dusky veil. It is not that the ode is insincere: terms like 'sincere' and 'sincere' are no more applicable to it than they are to a duck's quacking, or to the carpentering of a rosewood dining table. It has become fashionable to talk of poems as being about themselves, but in much of Collins's ode this is literally true. Almost the entire first half of the work consists of the poet appealing to Evening to teach him how to sing her praises – which means that almost half the poem is about the act of writing the poem itself. In the process of this appeal, the poem waxes lyrical about Evening, so that it does what it asks to do in the act of asking to do it. All this occurs in a single sentence of considerable syntactical complexity which stretches for twenty lines:

If ought of oaten stop, or pastoral song,
May hope, chaste Eve, to soothe thy modest ear,
Like thy own solemn springs,
Thy springs and dying gales,
O nymph reserved, while now the bright-haired sun
Sits in yon western tent, whose cloudy skirts,
With brede ethereal wove,
O'erhangs his wavy bed:
Now air is hushed, save where the weak-eyed bat,
With short shrill shriek flits by on leathern wings,
Or where the beetle winds
His small but sullen horn,
As oft he rises 'midst the twilight path,
Against the pilgrim borne in heedless hum:
Now teach me, maid composed,
To breathe some softened strain,
Whose numbers, stealing through thy darkening vale,
May not unseemly with its stillness suit,
As, musing slow, I hail
Thy genial loved return!

What this says in bare grammatical outline is: If you would like a song, Evening, teach me one yourself. But in saying this, the poem digresses and elaborates so much, taking a circuitous route through one sub-clause after another, that it becomes the song which it is asking to sing. The form of the poem – the

performative act by which it is requesting inspiration – becomes its content. This, to be sure, involves some grammatical sleight of hand: there is a slightly awkward transition, for example, from ‘O’erhangs his wavy bed’ to ‘Now air is hushed’. Everything up to ‘wavy bed’ can be read without grammatical strain as part of the poet’s address to Evening, but ‘Now air is hushed’ shifts to a descriptive passage which really stands on its own and can’t easily be folded into the act of addressing Evening. It is not clear by what logic the poem slides from the performative to the descriptive. The act of addressing Evening is taken up again in ‘Now teach me, maid composed’, as the poem regains its rhetorical stride after this deviation into descriptiveness.

Even so, the verbal quality of that description can be related to the self-referential act which is the poem itself. Lines like ‘With short shrill shriek flits by on leathern wing’ and ‘His small but sullen horn’ betray a high degree of linguistic self-consciousness, as though the poet has his eye on the phrase rather than the object. ‘Small but sullen’ is a little too fastidiously qualifying, while ‘short shrill shriek’ overdoes the alliteration. The ostentatious artifice of these phrases signals a self-conscious distance between the poem’s language and its objects, or between art and Nature. We are reminded insistently of that art, too, in the metre’s constant alternation of pentameters and trimeters, lines of five stresses and lines of three. Just as the poem curves back on itself structurally, by being about the song which is itself, so some of its more local verbal effects are peculiarly self-regarding. We are perpetually aware of the gap between the ‘mind’ of the poem, as expressed in its form and language, and the natural world of which it speaks. In other hands – Thomas Hardy’s, for example – this gap can become the stuff of tragedy; but ‘Ode to Evening’ is not a tragic poem, even if its blitheness of spirit feels at times a little laboured, weighed down as it is with all that top-heavy imagery.

When the poet talks about visiting a lake on the heath, or taking refuge in a hut, he is not describing actual events, and we are not meant to imagine that he is. He is talking in a general kind of way. These are the sort of things one might typically do, not necessarily things that one actually has done or will do. Only in one or two places does Collins seem to be speaking about realities actually present to his eyes, as when he writes of the sun ‘now’ sitting in the sky, and then, a few lines later:

Now air is hushed, save where the weak-eyed bat,
With short shrill shriek flits by on leathern wings,
Or where the beetle winds
His small but sullen horn,
As oft he rises ‘midst the twilight path . . .

no sooner do we seem to occupy an actual time and place than we take leave of it again. The beetle winds his horn in the present, as ‘oft’ he rises on the path. What seems actual turns out to be typical or general. Collins is interested in the kind of thing beetles tend to do, not in any individual beetle. And in this he is in accord with neoclassical doctrine and decorum. His ode is Evening, not to a specific evening.

6.2 William Wordsworth, ‘The Solitary Reaper’

Our next poem is William Wordsworth’s ‘The Solitary Reaper’:

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt
More welcome notes to weary bands
Of travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands:
A voice so thrilling ne’er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Will no one tell me what she sings?
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of today?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again?

Whate’er the theme, the maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;

I saw her singing at her work,
 And o'er the sickle bending;
 I listened till I had my fill:
 And as I mounted up the hill,
 The music in my heart I bore,
 Long after it was heard no more.

The first verse appears rather more excited than seems appropriate. Furnished with no less than three exclamation marks, it is almost as much about the observer as the woman he is looking at. Behold her . . . Stop here, or gently pass! . . . O listen!': there is an insistent, exclamatory butronholing of an imaginary spectator (who might also be the reader), as though he or she might otherwise miss the significance of an apparently unremarkable scene. It is the woman's song which seems to entrance the poet, more than her appearance and certainly more than the work she is at. He tells us that the vale is 'overflowing with the sound' of her voice, which seems a bit hyperbolic. Is she really singing at full volume, or is this a perception stirred by something in the music which is more than the music? Anyway, the comment seems as excessive as the overflowing of the woman's voice, and we are in the dark as to why this might be so.

The next verse compares the woman's voice to the nightingale and the cuckoo, but in a structurally odd kind of way. What the poem says is that this human voice is far more soothing and thrilling than the chirping of these birds, but grammatically speaking it says it in such a way as to throw all the poetic emphasis upon the birds themselves – that is to say, on what is formally being dismissed as inferior. And this creates a certain disproportion in the verse, though one that it carries off without any notable strain. If you want to praise a woman's musical talent, you do not generally claim that her voice is more alluring than the sound of a cuckoo heard in springtime in the far-flung Hebrides where it seems to break the silence of the seas. Or that it is more welcome than the sound of a nightingale chanting to weary bands of travellers in a shady haunt in the sands of Arabia. By the time the eye arrives at the end of these clauses, the reader is in danger of forgetting that all this is something that the Highland lass's voice is superior to, and has begun to focus on the images as autonomous entities. Images which offer to illustrate end up by distracting.

This, in fact, is a quite common device in poetry. A version of it can be found in the line 'No star is o'er the lake, its pale watch keeping', where we are first told there is no star and then, contradictorily, that it is keeping its pale watch. What the line means is that there is no star, of the kind

which customarily keeps its pale watch, over the lake; but the effect, as in the Wordsworth verse, is to dismiss the star and conjure it into presence at the same time. This also happens in T. S. Eliot's 'Gerontion':

I was neither at the hot gates
 Nor fought in the warm rain
 Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,
 Bitten by flies, fought.

All this is what the speaker *didn't* do. The gates he wasn't at were hot; the rain in which he didn't fight was warm; the salt marsh he didn't stand in came up to his knees; and the flies didn't bite him at the moment he wasn't swinging a cutlass.

The secret of this imbalance in Wordsworth's verse is probably that he is not particularly interested in the Highland lass herself. He is interested, rather, in the kind of thoughts and images she inspires in him, even if these images are formally offered as less precious than the woman herself. The fact that the third word of the piece is 'single' may be significant here: stark, solitary figures marooned in bleak landscapes are peculiarly evocative for Wordsworth, but they generally serve the purpose of pointing, like symbols, beyond themselves. It is the deeper imaginative dimension they evoke which really matters to him. The wanderers, small farmers and blind beggars who inspire him in this way rarely have much substance in themselves, and the same goes for the solitary reaper. It is her lonely self-absorption which seems to fascinate the speaker, who perhaps sees in it a reflection of his own poetic solitude. Not only a reflection, in fact, but an inspiration: her very enigmatic presence is a source of 'exotic' imagery for him. There may be a sense in which he is pointing excitedly to an image of himself. An idealised image, perhaps, since the woman seems to have a composure and autonomy about her which the poet himself might feel that he lacks. She does not seem to be anxious about being alone, and if she has spotted this poetically aroused English tourist lurking near her field she is clearly unperturbed by him.

It is the first line of the third verse which delivers the surprise punch: 'Will no one tell me what she sings?' Only now do we realise with a jolt that the speaker can't actually understand what the woman is singing about, presumably because she is singing in Scottish Gaelic. This, however, proves to be no great loss. On the contrary, it provides the poet with yet another flight of fancy, this time about what the lass *might* be singing about. The subjunctive mood jumps the indicative. Because he does not know the theme of her actual song the speaker can treat it as a blank text on to which to project his own

poetic fantasies. In fact, one suspects that query 'Will know one tell me what she sings?' is a purely rhetorical one – that he would really rather not know, since such determinacy of meaning would diminish the scope of his own musings. Because the song means nothing definite to him, it can mean more or less anything, or at least anything suitably melancholic. Wordsworth is in some-thing like the situation of John Keats before the Grecian Urn, posing a series of breathless questions to it ('What men or gods are these? What maidens loath?') which are all the more gratifying because no very precise answers are available.

In the final verse, the speaker tells us that he listened to the woman until 'I had my fill'. He has reaped what gratification he wants from her, without even knowing who she is, and now he is ready to travel on. In a sense, then, it is he who is the solitary reaper. As he does pass on, he bears the music in his heart long after the woman herself is out of sight. But in a sense she was out of sight all along, as no more than a convenient figure around which to organise his own flights of fancy. He remembers the lass's music, but the experience seemed a kind of memory even when he was having it. He relates to her rather as a modern tourist relates to a medieval castle through a camera lens, content to know nothing of its history but assured of having garnered an image of it as a souvenir for the future.

So Wordsworth has had his momentous encounter with a symbolist poet – with a discourse in which he savours the signifier all the more keenly because the signified or meaning is obscure to him. One strength of the poem, as with much of Wordsworth's work, is that he does not seem to grasp exactly why the experience is so haunting and arresting, any more than he understands what the woman is singing. It is as though the impenetrability of her song, rather than its sweetness and certainly rather than the singer herself, touches in him a kind of obscurity too deep to articulate. One can see how this might be an alarming experience, as it can be elsewhere in Wordsworth: one stumbles upon an alien, solitary figure, absorbed in its own strange despondency, which seems to turn its back enigmatically on the poet himself. But the mood of the poem is not troubled or fearful, though it is part of its complex effect that we can glimpse how it might be.

Instead, the speaker draws a reflective pleasure from the sadness of the reaper's song; indeed, sadness in Wordsworth is often more consoling than distressing. Perhaps she is offering him a lesson in how to overcome sorrow by transforming it into art; so that his own poem, while partly on the subject of grief, is nevertheless tranquil and self-possessed. In this sense, the poem doubles what the reaper does. Whether this achievement is somehow

bought at her expense is one of the questions the reader is left to ponder. The woman sings in a mournful way of what may well be tragic events (though they may well not be either); but it does not follow that she is downcast herself, and the fact that she carries on working while she is singing suggests that she isn't. The song is perhaps more a work ritual than personally expressive, so that it is gloomy but she is not. And this, too, might be something that Wordsworth learns from the experience. One can see how this might be a source of comfort to a poet given to fits of glumness. 'Melancholy' suggests a tempered kind of dejection, one which is far from distraught. Wordsworth might also draw a lesson from the fact that in certain circumstances, such as a labour chant, poetry can have a pragmatic value, which was scarcely obvious to most Romantic poets.

Rather than feeling threatened by the autonomy and anonymity of the reaper, the speaker seems anxious to preserve these qualities. This, perhaps, is the point of 'Stop here, or gently pass': he does not want to call attention to his presence because this would turn the woman from an observed object to a perceiving subject, thus ruining what is most evocative about her. In another version of the work, 'I listened till I had my fill' becomes the tautological 'I listened, motionless and still', like a man with a pair of binoculars who is trying not to scare off a rare but skittish bird. Anyway, whatever it is which the experience touches in the poet, he is shrewd enough not to moralise it away. It is when Wordsworth tries to spell out the moral significance of these mute, cryptic, disorientating encounters that he is at his most tedious.

6.3 Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur'

For our third Nature poem, we move to the other end of the nineteenth century and Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'God's Grandeur':

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reek his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
 And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

There is an ambiguity running through this poem which does not instantly spring to the eye. Hopkins was a Roman Catholic priest, and Roman Catholics are officially free to believe either that Nature was involved in the Fall along with humanity, or that only humanity is fallen. This is more than just an academic issue, since if Nature is fallen then it cannot easily act as a medium of divine grace for human beings; whereas if it remains unfallen, it can provide post-lapsarian beings with just such a taste of innocence and joy. 'God's Grandeur' is perhaps most interestingly read as equivocating between these two positions. We are told to begin with, in an authoritative flourish, that 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God', and that this grace seems readily available: 'It will flame out like shining from shook foil'. But the foil in this finely wrought image has to be shaken in order to shine, which suggests that divine grace is not as readily available in Nature as all that. A certain effort (that of shaking the foil) is necessary to come by it. Nature is charged with grace, but it does not release it spontaneously. Hopkins, then, is able to avoid what for him would be two heretical extremes: on the one hand, the radical Protestant view that grace and Nature are absolutely at odds with one another, and on the other hand what is known as the Pelagian heresy, for which grace is natural to us. The poem needs to tread a fine line between denigrating Nature, which would be to forget that it is God's creation, and elevating it to divine status in a way which would run the risk of pantheism. The Catholic position here is that Nature, including human nature, has the potential for grace – it is, so to speak, predisposed to share in God's life – but that this sharing in the life of infinite love nevertheless requires a laborious self-transformation. Nature needs to go beyond itself to become truly itself; but it has the built-in capacity to do so, which radical Protestantism would deny. Grace is not spontaneous, but neither is it arbitrary. It does not already suffuse the world, but it is not alien to it either.

The same delicate tension is sustained in the next image: 'It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil / Crushed'. 'Gathers to a greatness' suggests an organic, spontaneous process; but that 'Crushed' abruptly intervenes as we step across the line-ending to insist, once again, that human agency is involved here. The shift from one line to another is also a shift of perspective.

of modern environmentalism, Hopkins then laments the way that Nature has been polluted by humanity. If the first lines of the poem emphasised the need for active human participation in the business of grace, we are now grimly reminded of how predatory such human activity can actually be. 'Generations have trod, have trod, have trod' is a touch too onomatopoeic, rather too obviously inviting us to hear the plodding of polluting feet in its sound and rhythm; but the packed sound-pattern of the next two lines, with their complex criss-crossing of assonance and alliteration, are richly expressive of human alienation from the natural world. The prejudice against shoes, though ('nor can foot feel, being shod'), is surely rather excessive. is Hopkins really recommending a mass reversion to barefootedness?

The foot image, however, is in a sense consoling. It suggests that the problem is with us, not with Nature. Nature may still be as charged with grace as ever; it is just that we have insulated ourselves from it by our modern technologies. The same goes for words like 'smeared', 'bleared' and 'smudge', which suggests a purely surface contamination. Smearings, blearings and smudgings you can wipe off. 'Scorched with trade' is rather more troubling, since to scorch is to scorch, and scorch marks cannot be rubbed off, but the general impression created by the imagery is of a Nature only superficially tainted by its most rapacious inhabitant. As the poem laments, then, its imagery simultaneously qualifies that lamentation. Nature cannot be seen as too deeply infected by humanity, since this might appear to question one's belief in its divine goodness, as well as to allot humanity itself too much cosmic significance. Surely men and women can't seriously despoil what God has created? This sanguine view is then reinforced by the opening lines of the second stanza:

And for all this, nature is never spent;
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things . . .

'For' here means 'despite'. Humanity may do its worst, but Nature's resources are inexhaustible. There is a play on words here with 'spent' and 'dearest', terms which have financial overtones. The commercialism which the poem has just been denouncing ('trade') now provides it unobtrusively with a source of imagery. Nature has the munificence of a benevolent billionaire, and will never go bankrupt. Yet in case we grow too complacent about its opulence, 'deep down' puts us on the alert. The freshness which lives in things is deep down, and thus, so the implication runs, not spontaneously available. We are back to shook foil and crushed oil. Hopkins must not play up the commonness of grace to the point where he plays down

original sin. Perhaps it is just as well that Nature's treasures are so deeply stored, since then we are less able to defile them: but what keeps them secure is also what makes them hard to gain access to.

The poem's final, extraordinary image maintains this tension to the end:

And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

First we have the sanguine viewpoint again: Nature's freshness may seem to have vanished, but this is no more an irretrievable loss than the sun going down. The sun goes down (or, as the modern theory has it, the earth turns up) only to spring back up again in the morning. Grace would seem as universally available as light. Yet the last two lines of the poem implicitly rebut this assumption. The coming and going of the light as the earth turns is itself the work of the Holy Spirit. It is because he sits like a brooding hen on the great egg of the globe that the light is hatched out of it each dawn. Daylight is not as natural and spontaneous as it seems. Like the shining of the foil and the gathering of the oil, it is the result of a labour. The world is 'bent', meaning both literally curved and morally corrupt; and only God's constant agency can conjure something beneficial from it. Hopkins has thus neatly avoided both pantheism, the doctrine which would see God and Nature as identical, and Pelagianism, a heresy which denies or denigrates the Fall of humanity. But he has done so while celebrating the dearness and freshness of the natural world, in a poignant contrast with human depravity.

Another way of looking at the poem is to see it as an allegory of poetry itself. Hopkins is renowned for the muscular inventiveness of his language, but we have seen already that this may well reflect a certain modernist suspicion of language, as well as a celebration of it. Language in its everyday state is, so to speak, fallen: it is bleared and smudged with trade, degraded to a mere instrument of commercial and bureaucratic communication; and to be stirred into life again, the poet must wreak what the Formalists, as we have seen, called a certain organised violence upon it. Hence all that Hopkinsian cramming and dislocating and burnishing of language, which some find gorgeous and others find merely eccentric. A hostile critic once remarked that Hopkins took the English language and left it a 'muscle-bound monstrosity'. Language in its common-or-garden state is no medium of grace and truth; but if you shake it and crush it, heightening, stretching and compressing its words, you may persuade it to release a precious insight. Poetry,

like grace, does not come naturally. You have to work for them both. Yet poetry is not unnatural either. The creative imagination is a reflection of God's action within the individual; and like divine grace it 'redeems' the world by restoring it to us in all its pristine freshness.

There is a typically modernist 'extremism' behind this poetics. Truth is accessible only when you press things to their outer limit. Only in some Room 101 of the human spirit, faced with the vilest horror you can imagine, can you give voice to it. Everyday life, by contrast, is banal, illusory, inauthentic. You have to shake it very hard to get anything worthwhile out of it. The same goes for human beings, in a certain traditional conservative view of them. In their natural state men and women are indolent, selfish, violent creatures; only by disciplining and chastising them can you force anything half-decent out of them. Hopkins himself was a conservative, who found 'trade' distasteful from the standpoint of a spiritual aristocrat, not from that of a socialist. He was also something of an ascetic, concerned with subjugating the flesh. His poetics, like his politics, brood upon the way a stringent Jesuitical discipline (of rhythm, internal rhyme and so on) may bring the best out of its raw materials. If this is too gloomy a view of human nature, the opposing liberal vision tends to be too dewy-eyed. Human beings will do the right thing spontaneously if only you leave them to their own devices. It is pushing them around which causes all the trouble.

6.4 Edward Thomas, 'Fifty Faggots'

The final work to examine is Edward Thomas's 'Fifty Faggots', written early in the twentieth century:

There they stand, on their ends, the fifty faggots
 That once were underwood of hazel and ash
 In Jenny Pinks's Cope. Now, by the hedge
 Close packed, they make a thicker fancy alone
 Can creep through with the mouse and wren. Next Spring
 A blackbird or a robin will nest there,
 Accustomed to them, thinking they will remain
 Whatever is for ever to a bird.

This Spring it is too late; the swift has come,
 'Twas a hot day for carrying them up:
 Better they will never warm me, though they must
 Light several Winters' fires. Before they are done

The war will have ended, many other things
Have ended, maybe, that I can no more
Foresee or more control than robin and wren.

It is a change to find a poet actually working in the midst of Nature. In Collins's 'Ode to Evening' we see no signs of labour at all, and the poet's stance to the landscape is purely contemplative. (Much the same is true of the novels of Jane Austen, which hardly ever portray anybody at work on the landed estates which form their backdrop.) Wordsworth is watching someone else working but not working himself, and the reaper's labour is not the focus of his attention. The Hopkins poem is sharply critical of work upon the natural world, which it can see only as a form of ravage and pollution. In this poem, however, Nature is not a landscape to be surveyed but a working environment to be engaged with. Work is the process by which human beings transform their natural environment in order to meet their needs, and Thomas makes no sentimental apology for hacking faggots (or bundles of firewood) from a copse. Country people need to keep warm in winter, and relate to Nature not primarily as an aesthetic object but in terms of its use-value.

It is generally town-dwellers who gaze upon Nature as a timeless aesthetic spectacle, in what one might call the day-tripper view of the countryside. They do not typically see Nature as fuel and food – as something to eat as well as something to stare at. Whereas 'Fifty Faggots' is clearly a poem by someone who lives in a rural environment, knows his way around and names the landscape in familiar local terms ('Jenny Pink's Copse') rather than, like Collins, in the more exalted nomenclature of myth and allegory. Nature comes to us not 'in itself', but as socially mediated: Thomas is interested in the way it is woven through with human meanings and purposes, and not just human ones either: even the birds see Nature not as a reality in itself but as somewhere to nest.

Even so, this is not a natural landscape which is *centred* on the human. 'Man' is not lord of all he surveys, appropriating what he wants from Nature with the consumerist lack of effort of a Wordsworth plucking memories like pansies as he wanders on his way. Thomas's relationship to Nature is among other things one of sweat and struggle: carrying the faggots up to the hedge was an arduous business, which he tells us with a pleasant touch of wit has warmed him more than the fires that the wood is intended for ever will. Nature is not a blank text to be inscribed as the fancy takes you, but recalcitrant stuff with a life of its own.

The closing lines of the piece – '... many other things / Have ended, maybe, that I can no more / Foresee or more control than robin and wren'

– 'decentres' the supposedly privileged nature of human consciousness by stressing its ignorance and fallibility, thus putting humanity on the side of the equally agnostic birds rather than raising it above them. ... that I can no more / Foresee or more control than robin and wren' presumably means that the poet can no more foresee or control the future, or indeed events happening elsewhere in the present, than the birds can. But it is also possible to read 'robin and wren' as the objects of the verbs 'foresee' and 'control', so that the line comes to mean 'I can no more foresee or control these events than I can foresee or control robin and wren.' This involves some grammatical strain, since you can speak of foreseeing a disaster but not, normally, of foreseeing a bird. Yet this possible sense lingers within the more obvious meaning of the line, to suggest humanity's lack of control or dominance over its surroundings, the way it cannot second-guess either the natural or the human processes at work around it.

The human is also dislodged from any particularly exalted status within Nature by the poem's quiet insistence on how alien natural things are to us, as well as how intimate. Humans and animals interact within the same context, as mice and wrens may creep through the faggots which the speaker has stacked, and birds will later come to nest in them. Yet they also inhabit their own quite separate time-schemes, worlds of meaning and spheres of activity, and the very interaction of these with each other shows up, ironically, how different they are. A bird's idea of eternity is inscrutable to us, though we can assume it is not the same as ours. Its comings and goings intersect with our own history and practice, but also cut through them like an alternative universe. It is as though different worlds sit cheek by jowl, interrelated but non-interfering.

Whereas natural landscapes are often seen as static and changeless, Thomas's poem is alive with transformation. The faggots were once 'under-kind. What looks like a static object is just a kind of snapshot or cross-section of a complex temporal process. A world which is actually a set of processes appears to us like a set of fixed objects. Stacked by the hedge, the bundles of firewood 'make a thicker', which (since thickers are fairly fixed features of a landscape) lends a kind of deceptive air of permanency to what is actually a bunch of sticks in transit from copse to winter fires. This, presumably, is how the mouse and the wren will treat it, just as the nesting blackbird and the robin will behave as though this ephemeral pile of timber has always been there and always will be. Even so, it is too late for what will happen next year to happen this year: the two temporal frames are disjoint.

The speaker inhabits different time-schemes, too. The wood-carrying which took only a brief time to heat him up can be contrasted with the longer-term destiny of the faggots, one which will stretch the length of several winters. And this time-stream can be measured in turn against the great public time-frame known as political history, so that the First World War, in which Thomas fought and was killed, will be over before the faggots have been used up. It is odd to think of such a modest, local event as the consumption of firewood in an English village outlasting such a global narrative as the war. No grand totality of these various time-schemes appears possible: they do not seem to add up to some master-narrative which would make sense of them all. Instead, for Thomas as much as for Thomas Hardy, it is the ironic, contingent, purely random way they collide with each other which is most imaginatively compelling.

Things exist in the present, but also, in a ghostly, indeterminate kind of way, in the future. They have a similarly hazy existence, through memory, in the past. Memory and anticipation are faculties which only human animals possess, furnished as they are with the power of imagination. Robins presumably do not cherish fond memories of their infantile years, or blackbirds expect the farmer to return next Wednesday at ten minutes past three. Only an animal with language is able to do that. So the speaker knows more than mouse and wren, but much of what he knows concerns how much he doesn't know. One might almost claim that human beings have consciousness in order to know what they don't know. They are aware of their own ignorance and powerlessness, as birds presumably are not; and it is this alone, perhaps, which raises them above their fellow animals. Human beings live in the subjunctive mood, as well as in the indicative one.

If the poet has an edge over the birds in knowing that there is such a thing as the future, he is nevertheless as ignorant as they are of what it might hold: '... many other things / Have ended, maybe'. 'Things' is significantly vague, and the fact that they have ended is by no means sure. So one cannot even be certain of events which have already taken place, let alone those still to come. Only the future will disclose whether something which might have ended in the present really has done so, so that once more we have a crossing and merging of time-streams, this time within human history itself. Projecting ourselves forward in imagination lends our lives an anxiety and instability to which blackbirds are immune. The present is hollowed out by the way it intimates a set of possible futures, just as it is overshadowed by the various pasts from which it evolved. Yet it is not quite that living in time robs us of solid self-identity in a way that can be contrasted with the repleteness of the faggots. For they, too, as we have seen, have a history, and thus

only an illusory self-completeness. The difference is rather that we live out the chancy, provisional nature of our history in the form of lack, desire and imagination, whereas the natural life-forms around us do not.

The *fleeting*, open-ended nature of things, despite many a poetic cliché to the contrary, is not simply to be lamented. In fact, this poem is not necessarily lamenting it at all. Transience means among things that the war will not last for ever, even if the poet's confidence that it will be over before the faggots are finished is somewhat at odds with his general agnosticism. Envisaging the future may make you dissatisfied with the present, but it may also prevent you from absolutising it. The 'many other things' that may have ended are not necessarily all positive. Just as a fugitive feature of the landscape (the faggots) can be mistaken by a bird for a customary one, so aspects of a customary way may have vanished overnight with the military upheaval. But we should not conclude that this is all to be regretted. It is the sheer fact of ephemerality, rather than the specific losses and gains that it brings, that seems to preoccupy the poem. The piece is full of a sense of clashing perspectives, ironic juxtapositions and relative standpoints. In this sense, its very form is 'liberal', questioning the kind of dogmatic rhetoric which was associated with the war itself. It makes a virtue out of not being sure, at the same time as its closing lines betray the insecurity which such a lack of assurance can breed.

The mood of the poem, then, is not elegiac. In fact, Thomas is too busy thinking in these lines to indulge in any very intense emotion. It is hardly the kind of compliment one could pay to, say, Tennyson. The language of the work is low-key, businesslike and briskly anti-rhetorical. It accepts in its level-headed way the clashing, ironic, untotalisable nature of things, but it is not excessively stoical about it. The tone of the last few lines is matter-of-fact and a touch wry, rather than nostalgic. The poet himself intrudes on the scene he portrays only at a couple of points. Sensibility is subordinated to poetic personality – ironic, unassuming, coolly realistic, really rather English – comes strongly through. It is a poem which, in an understated, self-effacing English way, refuses to flaunt its superbly accomplished technique.

6.5 Form and History

The French critic Roland Barthes once observed that a little form could be a dangerous thing, while a large amount of it could be salutary. What he

meant was that a narrow kind of formalism treats poems superficially, neglecting what they say for the way that they say it, whereas a more subtle attention to form grasps it as a medium of history itself. To speak of the politics or ideology of form is to speak of the way in which formal strategies in literature are themselves socially signifying. And the social or ideological messages poems emit may well be in conflict with what one might call the ideology of their content.

Take as an example the heroic couplet, as we have seen it deployed in Alexander Pope's mock-heroic poem *The Dunciad*. We have noted already how the elegance and economy of this device, with its trim balances, inversions and antitheses, its sense of words locking with preordained precision into their allotted places, reflects a certain notion of order, reason, harmony and cosmic necessity. It would not be difficult to relate this notion in turn to the traditional world-view of the English landowning and patrician class of which Pope is so eloquent a spokesman – so that what we get in the regular stressings and stretchings of these clipped pairs of pentameters is nothing less than a whole social ideology.

In Pope's own time, it was an ideology under threat from the dunces who constitute the subject of his satire – the literary hacks and timeservers who value the present over the classical past, innovation against tradition and mobility over hierarchy. This swarm of social parasites Pope associates with the rapid commercialisation of writing in his day, and so with the rising fortunes of the middle classes. There is a sense, then, in which the tension between the form and the content of his poem reflects a conflict between two social classes or world-views, one on the wane and the other on the ascendancy.

In fact, the iambic pentameter – the most common kind of English metre – is itself saturated with social meaning. What makes it so supremely serviceable is the interplay it sets up between the spontaneous flexing and flowing of the speaking voice, and the unobtrusive, impersonal framework which undergirds it. The line is a triumph of reconciliation between order and freedom, necessity and spontaneity, the rule-governed and the open-ended. In blending the distinctive tone of an individual voice with a sense of stability, it allows for just the kind of balance between the individual and the social order which liberal societies tend to favour. In avoiding the individualist anarchy of free verse, it equally rebuffs the kind of cultural form in which the collective dominates over the individual. 'Three Blind Mice', whose baffling aporias and ambiguities we have investigated already, would be an example of such a collectivist form, one in which the ritual chant and regular thuds of the rhythm allow the reader or speaker a minimum of personal freedom. You can't read such a nursery rhyme in an individualised, uniquely 'meaningful' way, as a

Stratford actor might deliver a Shakespeare speech; instead, the rhythm of the lines more or less determines how we are going to recite them.

It would have been possible, in discussing Blake's 'Tyger' poem, to relate the speaker's ambivalent awe and admiration of the tiger to some familiar responses to the Industrial Revolution, an historical episode which hovers in the poem's background. In such a reading, the ambiguous feelings of the piece might be seen among other things as an allegory of that revolution's internal contradictions – how it is both enslaving and emancipating, a sub-line liberation of energy and a brutally dehumanising process. It might be possible, too, to read the tremulous melancholy of Tennyson, in 'Mariana' and 'In Memoriam', as a social as well as personal phenomenon – a response to the gradual haemorrhaging of spiritual meaning from an increasingly materialist, mechanistic Victorian England, with its tortuous crises of faith and deep-seated terror of social revolt.

The fact that Tennyson so often seems not to know why he is sorrowful – that his grief lacks an 'objective correlative' or determinate object – might be relevant here. Here, it is mood or sensibility – what Raymond Williams has called a 'structure of feeling'¹ – which provides the vital hinge between text and history. In the work of W. B. Yeats, by contrast, it is very often tone which alerts us to the wider historical context of the poetry: that of the precipitate decline of the Anglo-Irish governing class of which Yeats was a self-appointed representative, the collapse of whose fortunes can be dimly heard in the poet's guilt, *hauter*, mournful resignation or defiant exultation.

Even syntax can provide the mediation between poem and history, as is clear from Edward Thomas's 'Old Man' and 'Fifty Faggots'. The knotted, faltering syntax of these pieces, with their bristling thickers of qualifications, reflects a modernist sense of the extreme elusiveness of truth, as time-where simple exactitude becomes a kind of sweated labour. It is surely not hard to trace in this crisis of knowledge the deeper upheaval which was the war in which Thomas fought and died, a trauma which seemed to many who endured it to call into question the foundations of Western civilisation itself. There is no longer a grand narrative of progress in a piece like 'Fifty Faggots', just a random collision of distinctive time-streams, in which the present is shot through with a haunting sense of absence and irreparable loss. If these works of Thomas are not 'just' Nature poems, it is because there is no such thing.

¹ See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), Ch. 9.

A full examination of these matters is not the task of this book. Yet it is worth noting that of all literary genres, poetry would seem the one most stubbornly resistant to political criticism, most sequestered from the winds of history. It has its own thickness and density, which are not to be summarily reduced to symptoms of something else. Yet it is not only that a rigorous distinction between poetry and history is itself historically quite recent, and would have bemused many an eminent poet of the past. It is also, not least in the modernist epoch, that the poem's very recalcitrance to social analysis, the way it cuts itself loose from conventional perceptions, is itself an eloquent historical phenomenon. What kind of society is it on which poetry feels it has to turn its back? What has happened to the content of social experience when the poem feels compelled to take its own forms as its content, rather than draw from a common fund of meaning? To write the history of poetic forms is a way of writing the history of political cultures. But to do this, we have first to grant those forms their material reality, and this book has been one attempt to do so.

Glossary

- addressee:** the actual or intended recipient of an utterance or work of art.
- alexandrine:** a line of six iambic feet, e.g. 'Which like a wounded snake drags its slow length along'.
- allegory:** a text or narrative whose literal meanings can be read as coded signs of other meanings, such as moral or spiritual ones.
- alliteration:** the recurrence of the same sounds at the beginning of adjacent words (e.g. 'Round and round the rugged rocks the ragged rascal ran').
- ambiguity:** a word or piece of writing whose meaning is difficult to determine because it allows for alternative interpretations (e.g. 'Refuse to Be Put in This Basket').
- ambivalence:** the holding of two determinate but conflicting meanings in tension within an utterance.
- anapaest:** a metrical foot (or unit) consisting of two unstressed (or 'short') syllables followed by one stressed (or 'long') one: *di-di-dum*.
- assonance:** a set of mutually echoing, half-rhyming sounds, usually vowel sounds, in the separate words of a line or phrase (e.g. 'dapple-dawn-drawn').
- bathos:** a movement from the sublime to the commonplace or ridiculous.
- blank verse:** unrhymed iambic pentameters.
- bombast:** pompous or extravagant language.
- cadence:** the spontaneous rhythms of the voice in ordinary speech, as opposed to the set patterns of poetic metre.
- chiasmus:** the linking of two phrases, the second of which reverses the order of items in the first (e.g. 'the majesty of death, and death of majesty').
- conceit:** a witty or fanciful image.