

LANGUAGE, TRUTH
AND
LITERATURE

An examination of some ways in which truth enters into literature, with special reference to the implications of the consequent moral dimension of literature for critical judgements about literature.

by

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Thesis

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To Colin, and J.K.

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Introduction

"What is truth?" said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer'. I was reminded of Bacon's characteristically arresting observation when I was politely asked by two members of a university English department what the subject of this thesis was. Reluctantly I revealed that it had to do with truth in literature. A kind of grim jokiness immediately possessed the pair, which I quickly understood to be the manifestation of intellectual embarrassment. It was an important topic to raise, of course, but an impossible one to deal with (just as Pilate's was an important question to ask and an impossible one to answer). And as I mumbled disconsolately at the edges of my argument, they made their excuses and left. But as they left, one of them presented me with a quotation. It was this, from Sidney's 'An Apologie for Poetry':

Now, for the Poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lyeth. For, as I take it, to lye, is to affirme that to be true which is false ... and therefore, though he recount things not true, yet because he telleth them not for true, he lyeth not.¹

This exchange, though trivial, seemed then, and still seems to me, to be representative of the current critical attitude to truth in literature: a willingness to admit its importance, accompanied by embarrassed flight from any attempt to establish why, or in what way, or how that might affect critical judgements about literature. The quotation is further symptomatic: neat, subtle, excusing literature from attacks on the validity of its statements because it does not make statements capable of falsification (and so verification) in the first place: it can't be accused of falsehood, because it can't be accused of truth. And anyway, of course, truth is multifarious, complex, relative, subjective ... The modern literary critic doesn't rule truth out in literature, but neither does he rule it in. His position is clearly portrayed in these words by A.D. Lovejoy in the introductory essay to an important collection of essays on Romanticism:

1. P. Sidney, Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney, ed. K. Duncan-Jones and J. van Dorsten (Oxford, 1973), p. 102

Least of all does it seem possible, while the present uncertainty concerning the nature and locus of Romanticism prevails, to take sides in the controversy which still goes on so briskly with respect to its merits, the character of its general influence upon art and life. To do so would be too much like consenting to sit on a jury to try a criminal not yet identified, for a series of apparently incompatible crimes, before a bench of learned judges engaged in accusing one another of being accessories to whatever mischief has been done.¹

This flight from judgement has to do both with a nervousness about the overlap between literature and life in discussions about Romanticism ('its general influence upon art and life' - and Lovejoy goes on to talk about 'undiscriminating diagnoses of the moral and aesthetic maladies of our age', p. 7); and with the chaos of critical judgements in this field (and in others), which he calls 'this confusion of terminology and of thought which has for a century been the scandal of literary history and criticism, and is still, it would not be difficult to show, copiously productive of historical errors' (p.7). The field of Romanticism may be especially fraught with this difficulty, but it is a pervasive difficulty. Critics are nervous about claiming correctness - truth - for their judgements, in a climate in which such a multiplicity of approaches to literature is available. Critical judgements about truth in literature therefore become doubly problematic: a tentative, subjective critical judgement - about truth? And then there is that unpleasant term, 'moral' (Note the holding - away - with - the - fingers tone of Lovejoy's 'dangerously indiscriminating diagnoses of the moral and aesthetic maladies of our age'). Whole generations of students of English literature are being brought up on the view that F.R. Leavis was a crude moralist, paranoiac about the state of culture and life; and that this view of the most influential critic of the twentieth century to date is more widely held was clearly evidenced in both the paucity and the tone of his obituaries.

1. English Romantic Poets, ed. M.H. Abrams (1975), p.6.

Of course, it is easy to see why literary critics are nervous of getting mixed up with moral judgements. Moral judgements on their own are notoriously difficult to make, moral philosophers cannot agree about how to make them, and so if this difficulty of judgement is added to the difficulties of making the critical judgement itself, the possibility of reaching a correct judgement (always supposing that to be possible or indeed desirable) retreats to a point where it ceases to be a useful aim at all.

The academic success of structuralism and its offshoots has hardened this critical uncertainty into a positive position, with its retreat from meaning and its emphasis on form. In a collection intended to characterise the nature of criticism at that point (1970), Contemporary Criticism, Malcolm Bradbury noted that, in contrast with a previous characterising collection, The Critical Moment, for 1965, there had been two important changes in criticism:

But two things are apparent. The first is that in various ways they not only assume but pass beyond the assumption ... that a work of literary art is primarily and inescapably a verbal artefact. The second is that there has been a sharp inclination to diverge from the long-term concern in English literary discussion with the humanistic and humane aspects of literature as a moral medium, a 'storehouse of recorded values', in I.A. Richards's phrase.¹

Today those changes are beginning to enter the mainstream of critical teaching through the universities and polytechnics. It is significant that two of the most prominent recent meta-critical works, about critical theory - or rather, in a significant change of terminology, literary theory - concern themselves almost entirely with this dimension of criticism. Terry Eagleton's Literary Theory (1983) ranges through 'Phenomenology', 'Structuralism', 'Post-Structuralism' and 'Psychoanalysis', with a brief look at 'Political Criticism'.

1. Contemporary Criticism, ed. M. Bradbury and D. Palmer, (1970) p. 31.

His discussion of Eliot, Leavis, Empson, Richards, and New Criticism is an historical one, perceiving them as part of the rise of English, but no longer as a part of modern literary theory. Modern Literary Theory, a collection of accounts edited by A. Jefferson and D. Robey (1982) is similarly concerned with highly theoretical theories, in the exposition of which there is scarcely a mention of the work, and the preoccupation of most of the theories presented (very lucidly) is with form. Both of these works are on many university and polytechnic reading lists and are likely to influence powerfully the way in which approaches to criticism are taught; but in that they simply reflect an influence which is already established, an influence which is generally 'anti-content.'

Thus in current literary criticism we have a formalised retreat from judgement, in interpretation and evaluation, and a further retreat from questions of truth as they are raised by literature, and the two retreats are intermeshed. Now this multiplicity and relativity are in some ways to the good of literary studies, not least because they reflect the same richness and generosity to be found in literature itself, capable of so many, and such different, approaches. Yet it seems to me that these qualities of criticism have been determined partly by the need for criticism to establish itself as an academic and intellectual discipline over the last thirty years. Paradoxically, the multiplicity of critical positions reveals not so much an openness of judgement as a greater closed-ness, a turning in upon itself of each individual position, an entrenchment of values. The voice of the individual critic is authoritative and certain, even as he is aware of the multiplicity of his study. Note again Lovejoy's remarks about critical disagreement over Romanticism:

The only radical remedy - namely that we should all cease talking about Romanticism - is, I fear, certain not to be adopted. It would probably be equally futile to attempt to prevail upon scholars

and critics to restrict their use of the term to a single and reasonably well-defined sense. Such a proposal would only be the starting-point of a new controversy.

As I have earlier indicated, this combination of individual certainty and critical multiplicity comes to a head over the question of truth in literature. This has much to do with the largeness of the idea of truth, which critics shy away from: Truth with a capital T. Critics would do well to read J. L. Austin's essay on 'Truth'.² The first thing Austin does is to defuse his title, in characteristic fashion: elegant, incisive, and - true. (Incidentally, Bacon was clearly on to something!):

'What is truth?' said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer. Pilate was in advance of his time. For 'truth' itself is an abstract noun, a camel, that is, of logical construction, which cannot get past the eye of a grammarian. We approach it cap and categories in hand: we ask ourselves whether Truth is a substance (the Truth, the Body of Knowledge), or a quality (something like the colour red, inhering in truths), or a relation ('correspondence'). But philosophers should take something more nearly their own size to strain at. What needs discussing rather is the use, or certain uses, of the word 'true'. In vino, possibly, veritas, but in a sober symposium 'verum'.

In one sense, critics, peculiarly concerned as they are with cases, already demonstrate an (unwitting) understanding of Austin's injunction. Ask the average critic or teacher of literature about the moral dimension of his critical judgements and he will be somewhat coy. Ask the same person whether Wordsworth's 'A slumber did my spirit seal' is optimistic or pessimistic (which comes down to whether it registers belief in eternal life or despair of it), and he will have a definite answer which he will be willing - and eventually determined - to defend. And his answer will very often have to do with what he believes Wordsworth to be offering as true.

1. English Romantic Poets, ed. M.H. Abrams (1975), p.7

2. 'Truth', Philosophical Papers, 3rd edition (1960).

I have used Wordsworth's lovely poem as a test case on large numbers of students from 'O' level to degree level, and it constantly divides readers in a predictable fashion.

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.¹

The more obvious, and I would venture to say the more generally accepted, interpretation of this poem is an optimistic one, that Wordsworth finds comfort for his loss in the way in which Lucy has been embraced by the earth and remains in some sense living through the earth's, and nature's, continual motion, a more lasting life than the transitory mortal one. Consolation is especially evident in the first verse: 'slumber', 'seal', 'I had no human fears'; but its comfort reaches forward into the second verse: 'she neither hears nor sees' reminds us that therefore there are no further 'human fears' for her safety, and she will never feel 'the touch of earthly years' - her early death has, paradoxically, saved her from the decay of age and the threat of mortality, before that had time to be realized as a threat. 'Roll'd' and 'earth's diurnal course' has so many Wordsworthian echoes of the positive spiritual power of the universe ('Rolls through all things' in 'Tintern Abbey', 'even as if the earth had rolled With visible motion her diurnal round' in The Prelude, which stresses the child's oneness with that motion), that those lines and their associations render death almost a blessed release from the less satisfactory motion of human existence. And so on.

But while this optimistic view of the poem is the more Wordsworthian, there is a perfectly tenable interpretation which takes stronger hold the more one reads it. In this interpretation,

1. This and subsequent Wordsworth references from W. Wordsworth, The Poetical Works, ed. T. Hutchinson, revised E. de Selincourt (1950).

certain words leap out: 'she seemed a thing' 'that could not feel' (and notice the force of that 'that' instead of 'who', surely placed here not simply through grammatical nicety). The insistent negatives pile up: 'no human fears', 'could not feel', 'no motion', 'no force', 'neither hears nor sees'. Suddenly 'seal', feels less like consolation and more like cauterization. 'Slumber', 'roll'd' and 'trees' still have their softness, but 'rocks, and stones' seem deliberately harsh, and even the commas in this last line, carefully delineating these objects, add to the sense of separation and isolation. In spite of what we know of Wordsworth's feeling for all parts of nature, the relentless diurnal motion of the senseless body, round and round with those rocks and stones, seems cruel, harsh and bleak. Incapable as she is of sensation, she cannot feel the earth's embrace, and yet must still be hurled round by its perpetual motion. The mortal 'touch of earthly years' suddenly seems infinitely more comforting and natural. The bleakness of loss comes through powerfully in this view.

It might seem that my own example argues against me: what better evidence of the subjectivity of critical judgements and the multiplicity of the work, and so the impossibility of the emergence of a truth? In fact, however, 'Slumber' shows two sides of the same coin. The poem incontrovertibly speaks of loss and grief, even in the consoling version, so that even as the poet speaks with relief of having 'no human fears', we feel a certain sense of loss in him in that he has lost the fears only because he has lost the loved object of them. Any truth on offer here certainly has to do with the appropriateness of grief; otherwise the offering of consolation to the grief would make little sense. When we look at the duck-rabbit picture, we may see a duck or a rabbit; but there are many other animals we cannot see. If someone claimed on looking at the duck-rabbit that he saw a giraffe, the fact that the picture contained two possible representations within the same lines would not protect him from the charge that he was seeing things. Wordsworth's poem

is very much like the duck-rabbit; in human terms we might see it as the voices of two different friends, with different beliefs, speaking to someone bereaved.

That there is no contradiction here will perhaps be clearer if we compare the case with Blake's contrasting sets of poems, Songs of Innocence and Experience.¹ Wordsworth's poem is of course a heightened version of the conflict explored by Blake, because in Wordsworth's case the conflict is contained within the one poem. Blake's 'Infant Joy' offers us one truth about birth; his 'Infant Sorrow' offers another, opposite truth. It is conventional critical wisdom that Blake would want the Truth to be seen as an interplay between the two. Why then did he go to such pains to make 'Infant Joy' (and the other Songs of Innocence) so containedly expressive of one idea? Because he wanted the reader to see that truth - and then meet the equal and opposite truth in 'Infant Sorrow', and see that truth whole, too. Then he could put the two together and see the complex truth. Blake wanted the reader to have these apparently conflicting experiences independently of each other, so that the complex truth would be subsequent to and dependent upon those independent experiences, those independent truths.

Now I am not suggesting that Wordsworth is offering a Blakean synthesis in 'Slumber'; I draw the analogy simply as a reminder that poets can and do offer apparently conflicting truths in different poems, and that they do is not sufficient to render them not truths.

But now suppose that Wordsworth is offering us not just a descriptive truth but a prescriptive one; not 'this is how it is', but 'this is how it should be'. Indeed, Sidney's remark, quoted earlier, that the poet 'nothing affirmeth' is immediately undermined by his saying immediately afterwards that the poet is 'not labouring to tell you what is, or is not, but what should,

1. W. Blake, The Complete Poetical Works, ed. W. H. Stevenson, text by D. V. Erdman (1971).

or should not be.' If a poet tells us how we should behave, he is affirming: he is affirming what is right. So is Wordsworth here telling us what or how we should feel about the loss through death of someone loved? If so, we cannot then sustain both interpretations of the poem; he could not be saying both 'this is how it should be' and 'this is not how it should be' at the same time, without incoherence.

It is at this point, I think, that critical disagreement truly begins. For when critics disagree about a poem such as 'Slumber', whilst they are indeed in disagreement about interpretation, on the basis of the evidence in the poem, at a deeper level they may often be in disagreement about their own 'should's'. Religious belief is a fundamental divider, here as everywhere, and as such it has become the focussing example of a number of problems about the role of truth in literature. I have mentioned that 'Slumber' characteristically divides people in correspondence with their individual beliefs, certainly amongst 'uneducated' readers (i.e. newcomers to Wordsworth, but with an interest in and liking for poetry). Those with a bleak view of the universe take the bleak interpretation of the poem; those with an optimistic view (i.e. one which embraces life after death in some form) take the Pantheistic interpretation. And this is scarcely surprising; it would be more surprising if we were able to disconnect our beliefs from our reading of the poem, especially as it addresses itself to spiritual matters.

But note that although our response may be guided by our own beliefs in this case, it is only a general guidance. We do not have to be Pantheists to take the optimistic reading, even though the poem expresses that reading in Pantheistic terms. So that, while many contemporary Christians would explicitly reject a Pantheistic view of the universe, they would accept its terms here in the service of a generally Christian view as opposed to a totally non-Christian view. In this, bringing our own beliefs

to poetry is not on all fours with bringing them to, say, an argument about life after death. The poem can adjust or reinforce or exapnd our beliefs far more speedily and directly, and in a different way. If, in argument, the Pantheist expresses the organic embrace of death to us, his description would not be sufficient per se to persuade us if our beliefs were firmly opposed to or substantially different from his. But

Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

might well be sufficient to enable us to accept the general truth of ^{the}organic view expressed here, or anyway to see it briefly, glimpsed as the duck might be glimpsed and then lost to the rabbit.

Beliefs are not, however, all that we bring to the reading of a poem. My own interpretation of 'A slumber did my spirit seal' was initially influenced much more powerfully by what I considered to be Wordsworth's view of the universe, i.e. a Pantheistic one, than it was by ^{my}own scepticism. And while my understanding of Wordsworth's view is itself no more than a belief, based on the variety of evidence available to us about the poet, it is not itself a moral belief, it is a belief about someone else's moral belief. As such, it is one of the many things which as readers we might properly, indeed which we ineluctably, bring to our reading of poetry. Our moral belief cannot settle the issue, but neither can scholarship. In the end it is the poem which does that.

I have been talking about the way in which belief affects interpretation. But what of the way in which it affects our view of the truth which a poem may offer? If Wordsworth is saying that we should find consolation in the organic embrace of nature which continues to give life to the dead, then if the reader does not agree with him, and furthermore is not persuaded by the poem to agree, where is the truth? In this situation, perhaps the poem does become equivalent to the argument in life, and subject to the same difficulties. People are passionately

opposed to each other in life about religious belief; Christians and atheists alike believe themselves to have perceived a great truth. The one cannot persuade the other of his truth. But this does not rule truth out of court. Verum, not veritas.

What is clear in the Wordsworth, I think, is that it speaks of human values, and there is a community of feeling between both Christian and atheist in their response to this. Imagine a reader who questioned the whole idea of the propriety of grief and objected to the poem on those grounds - a L'Etranger sort of response. Our disagreement with such a reader over 'Slumber' would be more profound than a disagreement between the 'bleak' and the 'optimistic' readers, deep-seated though that may be.

So, I would argue, the apparently contradictory truths offered by 'A slumber did my spirit seal' are not mutually exclusive truths, in the way that '2 and 2 make 4' and '2 and 2 make 5' are mutually exclusive. Winston Smith's acceptance of the truth of '2 and 2 make 5' in Nineteen Eighty-Four was^a vital capitulation because it was the capitulation of truth to non-truth, the acceptance that the Ministry of Truth could falsify truth, and in doing so determine it. But as O'Brien and his fellows clearly understood, this was not the ultimate capitulation; the final step towards 'truth' (i.e. non-truth) which Winston had to take was the surrender of his humanity, in the form of his betrayal of his love for Julia - no ordinary betrayal as Winston himself fully understands. His plea about the rats ('Do it to Julia!') is contrasted with his earlier memory of his mother and of the final sacrifice she and his small sister had made for him:

He was out in the light and air while they were being sucked down to death, and they were down there because he was up here. He knew it and they knew it, and he could see the knowledge in their faces. There was no reproach either in their faces or in their hearts, only

the knowledge that they must die in order that he must remain alive, and that this was part of the unavoidable order of things¹.

At the point at which Winston records this memory, he laments the fact that such sacrifices for love are no longer possible; but as the novel progresses he becomes the focus not only of the reader's but of his own hopes that such love is still possible. Room 101 destroys the hope, and in so doing destroys a truth more important than that 2 and 2 make 4.

Literature can reveal, sustain and demonstrate many things to us; but perhaps the most important truths it reveals are of the same order as that which Winston Smith surrenders in Nineteen Eighty-Four. The different aspects of understanding which Wordsworth's Lucy poem offers us are, I would suggest, of that order. They speak to us of loss, one in a different tone from the other, as two different friends might speak to someone who has been bereaved. Those who are not believers in anything beyond the existence of mortal flesh might see the proffered comfort of the Pantheistic interpretation as false comfort; believers might see the view of the harsh diurnal roll as needlessly bleak. But both have to do with an understanding of the human condition, an understanding which is necessarily, by virtue of the nature of being human, generous - what George Eliot called 'the broad fact of being struggling, erring human creatures'.²

Why, then, it might be asked, speak of truth here? Why not speak merely of understanding? And perhaps if struggling, erring human creatures can be understood by their fellow human creatures, the concept of error becomes difficult to apply. I have said that generosity is the key to humanity, and to truth in literature; but generosity has its limits. If it did not, we would be unable to take the point of what happens to Winston Smith in Nineteen Eighty-Four, because we would be busy understanding O'Brien.

1. G. Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949)

2. The George Eliot Letters, (1954 - 73), ed. G.S. Haight, Vol III, p.111.

Understanding can be taken to a certain point. Koestler takes us to that point in Darkness at Noon, enabling us to see why and how Rubashov decides that it is right to confess in public trial; in doing so he almost, courageously, threatens our understanding of the final truth of the novel. Yet as the bullet enters Rubashov's brain in the final sentences of Darkness at Noon, and the bullet (metaphorically?) enters Winston Smith's brain at the end of Nineteen Eighty-Four, though their states of understanding are quite different from each other (Rubashov's inner self has not capitulated, Winston Smith's has), and though, correspondingly, the respective authors' visions are less or more pessimistic, we are clear that the truth expressed is at heart the same: that the loss of that final inner self is an irrevocable, tragic loss of humanity. Orwell can show us his terrible vision of the fate of the last man on earth, and we can share his pessimism or we can allow our optimism to stand against his warning (or perhaps take heed of his warning), but either way we feel a terrible sense of loss at the final words of the novel: 'He loved Big Brother'. A world in which we did not feel that common sense of loss would be a world of different values from our own (and I include in that world the Communist countries whose values Orwell may have believed he was attacking, given that Stalinism was the face of Communism presented to him and to Koestler).¹ Similarly, Wordsworth's 'A slumber did my spirit seal', whether seen pessimistically or optimistically, still, it cannot be gainsaid, deals with loss, the loss of someone loved with which, as human beings, we are all familiar, whether through direct experience, extrapolation from the experience of others, or the exercise of the imagination in relation to the unavoidable fact of being mortal. A work of literature which negated that sense of loss would speak less of the truth, and be a lesser work, than others which confirmed, indeed affirmed it. And here we must remind ourselves that Nineteen Eighty-Four is a work of fiction, yet it is capable of showing us, simultaneously, that Winston Smith

1. Whose fiction was quite dramatically imitated by life very soon after he had completed his novel.

(an imagined character) willingly forgoes his humanity, and that he should not do so. We know, when we read those words 'He loved Big Brother', both that he did, and that it was wrong - and that it was wrong, not just for Winston, but for mankind in general. In the same way, we know when we read the opening sentence of Pride and Prejudice : 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife'¹, that the want of a wife is more in mind of the wife (or the wife's family) than in that of the single man, and that the setting this up as a truth is ironic, and that moral truths of a different order from this are to be presented in the novel. And in the same way we know when we read Swift's 'Modest Proposal' that what he proposes is savage and terrible, that he knows it is, and that what he writes throws into relief the view that current (i.e. current with Swift, though it might equally be current with ourselves) English treatment of 'the Irish question' is itself to be thrown into question. Apparently Swift's modest proposal was taken at its face value by some people at the time it was published; would we be reluctant to say that these people were wrong? Certainly I think we would be most reluctant to say that they were right.

Literature does affirm, and so it can lie. That it is fiction, either in the sense of the novel or drama, which purport to deal with representations of life, but which are far removed from life; or in the sense of poetry, which makes statements ('Beauty is truth, truth beauty') often of an unmistakably didactic kind ('that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know'), but which can overrule normal standards of literal truth in the single stroke of a metaphor - that literature is fiction does not in itself free it either from affirming or from lying. But that it is fiction does demand that we treat its statements in somewhat different way from that in which we treat similar statements in life; the two manners of treatment will be related, but not the same. And as truth is in question here, clearly it is vitally important that we get the manner of treatment right. This is a large part of our critical task.

1. J. Austen, Pride and Prejudice, ed. F.W. Bradbrook (1970).

The examples I have given of cases where we wish to speak of truth with a common voice may strike the reader as weighted in a particular direction; Darkness at Noon and Nineteen Eighty-Four are overtly political works, and both of them took their base from current political events (Darkness at Noon turning out to be uncannily accurate in its predictions, with life imitating art in close detail); Swift's work was a commentary on a current political crisis in Ireland, and perhaps to that extent not literature in the accepted sense - though as the level of the irony indicates it was clearly fiction in some sense. Let me briefly consider some more problematic examples, partly to show that there is a wide range of cases, each differentiated from the others, and that our critical response to them will be similarly differentiated in detail. That truth is in the offing here does not mean that there is a monolithic approach to be taken, any more than it would do so in life. We can still speak of mitigating circumstances in relation to what we clearly and generally recognise as crime in life; even the Law does not treat one case exactly as it treats another. A similar, but perhaps greater flexibility to individual cases is needed with literature.

One of the justifiably famous passages from Wordsworth's Prelude is that in which he recounts stealing the rowing boat (Book I, ll 357 - 400).¹ It is a marvellous passage, and much of its success seems to have to do with the move from the particular event, with its insights into 'troubled pleasure', to the intumed isolation and oppression of the inner state (a move from outer to inner which indeed characterises most of the best passages of this work). Even if we do not share Wordsworth's view of Nature as a moral or spiritual guide, there is a sense of deep truth in the expression of the initial 'troubled pleasure,' the subsequent guilt given form in the 'pursuit' of the 'huge peak', and the final 'blank desertion' of the spirit robbed of its 'pleasant images of trees, Of sea or sky'. But it was not until recently, after a long acquaintance with the passage, that I attempted to work out the precise logistics of that pursuit at

1. W. Wordsworth, The Prelude, ed. J. C. Maxwell (Harmondsworth, 1978)

the heart of the passage. In doing so (aided by some literal-minded students with rather more practical knowledge of rowing than I had) I realised that I had always misunderstood the passage, and in particular the relation of the syntax to the geography of events. I had always imagined the boy rowing forwards towards the 'craggy ridge' the horizon, so that when the 'huge peak' towers up between him and the stars, I had thought of its towering up ahead of him, in the direction towards which he was rowing, rendering it a highly dramatic apparition. The syntax, I had thought, seemed cleverly to reflect this relationship (as, again, it so often does in Wordsworth, and especially in The Prelude). But I had reckoned without the fact that an oarsman has his back to the prow of the boat; the craggy ridge on which the boy fixes his eye is in fact on the horizon from which he is departing, as is the 'huge peak', which appears as he moves further away from it. This does of course explain 'Strode after me', and it also explains how the huge peak could suddenly appear to the boy, by reason of the parallax effect. Mine was a misunderstanding based on ignorance.¹ But the point of my example is twofold: the actual logistics of what happens in this passage are crucial to our proper understanding of both what it says and what it implies about fear and guilt; and a true understanding of those logistics does lessen the power of one aspect of what Wordsworth describes. Here truth does have to do with accuracy to fact, and a particular sort of accuracy which may have to do both with the range of our experience and the depth of our knowledge as readers. If the reader has neither rowed a boat nor had any experience of rowing, he/she might understandably entertain the mistaken belief that boats are usually rowed with the face to the prow (and while it is by no means impossible to row in that way, it is considerably harder – and indeed Wordsworth makes it clear that the boy is rowing in the conventional way, because he can see the 'small circles glittering idly' which the dipped oars leave behind them). Similarly, the experience

1. Ouida makes a similar kind of mistake in one of her novels; in an effort to render her hero superior to the crew with which he is rowing, she says that 'all rowed fast, but none rowed faster than he'!

which Wordsworth records of the pursuing peak might strike the reader as even more mysterious than intended if he/she were not familiar, either through experience or through theory, with the parallax effect, because there would be nothing except the power of guilty imagination to explain the sudden apparition and pursuit of the huge peak. The boy's guilt is powerful, and both contributes to the experience and is represented by it; but it is central to Wordsworth's view of Nature, I think, that the experience is not wholly explained by the power of imagination, but has at its root a natural, if somewhat odd, phenomenon, that the relative motion of an object is greater when the object is closer to the perceiver than when it is further away. If we do not understand this, we misunderstand the truth of the passage. Similarly, if we mistakenly believe that the boy is heading towards, and facing, the object of his terror, we misunderstand what is going through his mind when he turns the boat, and so we misunderstand the nature of his fear. In fact, when the boy turns the boat, he actually turns the boat towards the object whose pursuit, apparently, he is trying to escape. Of course, in doing so, he avoids the sight of it - and will, eventually thus bring the boat into a position where, if he were facing it, he would no longer be able to see it. It is clear, I think, from the accurate detail of the passage, that Wordsworth is attempting to record the physical situation as accurately as possible ('circles glittering idly', 'as I rose upon the stroke', 'went heaving through the water like a swan'). Thus when he records the turning of the boat back in the direction of the peak, he knows what he is saying. He may wish to indicate that he knows the fear to be irrational, based on an optical illusion, and that therefore it made more sense to avert his eyes rather than attempt to speed away from the pursuit; and this might coincide with a belief that the best thing would be to return the boat so that there would be no further cause for guilt (and so no further cause for pursuit). He is frightened by the peak, but he is not frightened of it. And Wordsworth would be perfectly capable of hanging much upon such a distinction.

If anyone should see my approach here as unnecessarily literal-minded, I would point to the fact that Wordsworth himself demands a certain literal-mindedness, a practicality of approach, in the recording of everyday experience, and as I have shown, this passage only makes real sense if such an approach is taken. I have to see my former ignorance, and the interpretation based upon it, as incorrect, and I can no longer countenance such a reading. And yet I feel that thus something is lost from the passage. It still does not make complete sense to me that the boy should have turned his boat back towards the object which had, so terrifyingly, seemed in pursuit of him. 'For so it seemed' - indeed; but for Wordsworth seeming is very much like being; and 'with purpose of its own And measured motion like a living thing Strode after me' has its own form of life. The terror persists so strongly that it banishes the boy's usual pleasant and fruitful relationship with the forms of nature entirely, replacing it with 'unknown modes of being' and 'huge and mighty forms'; and these are to take on an importance of their own in the rest of the development of a poet's mind which he charts. For me, the mystical 'dim and undetermined sense' of the end of the passage strikes with less truth because of my knowledge that the boy actually turned the boat towards the object whose pursuit he feared. If the boy was frightened by the peak, but not of it, because of his awareness that it only seemed to be pursuing him, would he be so likely subsequently to suffer the 'blank desertion', the sense of being separated from Nature, the haunting by 'huge and mighty forms, that do not live Like living men'? Only if the apparition of the peak appears clearly to be only a metaphor, a reminder of his own guilt, and of the innate power of nature. The connection between the experience of the external world and the subsequent powerful inner experience is broken. ~~This~~ This passage then becomes unlike other Prelude passages of a similar sort; for example, the skating scene, with which it is often linked. For in the skating scene, the boy's experience of unity with the living world is all one with the mystical inner understanding of that unity which follows.

directly upon the physical one:

then at once
Have I, reclining back upon my heels,
Stopped short; yet still the solitary cliffs
Wheeled by me - even as if the earth had rolled
With visible motion her diurnal round!
Behind me did they stretch in solemn train,
Feebler and feebler, and I stood and watched
Till all was tranquil as a dreamless sleep.

(I, ll. 456-463)

Of course, the stolen boat passage does not suddenly cease to be 'true' because of this understanding. But for me there is a change of emphasis, and a slight loss of power, and these do affect the truthfulness, particularly of the last few lines. But more importantly, this example shows that poetry can, just as much as fiction, be profoundly affected by our understanding of its relationship with the real world. But, as always in literature, this relationship is not a simple or direct one.

Sometimes a single word can make all the difference to the truth of a poem. In Donne's 'A Valediction: forbidding mourning', as he is completing the compasses comparison, Donne writes:

And though it in the centre sit,
Yet when the other far doth rome,
It leanes and hearkens after it,
And growes erect, as that comes home.¹

Excessive interest in the compasses image has tended to distract from the fact that this Valediction is one of Donne's most moving and most straightforwardly serious love poems. There are a couple of wry, private smiles in the lines contemptuously referring to less passionate lovers ('the layetie' and 'dull sub unary lovers') but the lines which deal with himself and his lover are unreservedly serious. Thus when a colleague once suggested to me that there was an obvious sexual pun in that 'erect' I felt that it could not be intended. Yet no-one loves a pun better than Donne, and certainly a pun for him could be a serious matter. Furthermore sexual passion was for him very much a part of profound love. What then could be wrong with such a pun on 'erect'? What

1. The Metaphysical Poets, ed. H. Gardner (1961).

seems to me to be wrong with it is that it literally stands out too sharply from the rest of the poem, drawing attention to itself and its announced sexuality, where the rest of the image, and indeed of the poem, has emphasised the refinement of their love ('Careless, eyes, lips, and hands to misse') and its ability to span separation. In standing out thus, a rather self-conscious double-entendre, it is unlike Donne's usual treatment of sexual love, which is to see it as being of a piece with spiritual love (vide 'The Extasie'). And would it lead us further to see significance in 'stiffe twin compasses'? There is also the fact - again a literal-minded point - that the foot which grows erect is, in the terms of the comparison, the female foot. However, here the relationship of the poem to what is literally the case is, I think, of very little importance, in contrast to the Wordsworth example. Here far more important is the unity of tone and sentiment in the poem, with which a pun on 'erect' seems to interfere. The presence of the sexual pun would redound back on the truthfulness, of the earlier images in conveying a love uninterrupted, indeed extended, by absence.

These examples touch very lightly on the many difficulties which beset the critic when he begins to concern himself with truth, as he does when he asks himself any of the following questions:

1. When Keats writes

Beauty is truth, truth beauty: that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.¹

are these better lines than

A thing of beauty is a joy forever

on which William Dean Howells commented as early as 1891, in his Criticism and Fiction, that it should properly have read, 'Some things of beauty are sometimes joys forever'?² And was Howells right? How would we demonstrate this?

2. When Dickens gives us the following passage about Dora's dog, Jip, to convey the death of Dora in David Copperfield:

1. This and subsequent Keats references to The Poems of John Keats, ed. M. Allott (1970).

2. W. Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction, ed. C.M. Kirk and R. Kirk, (New York, 1959).

More restless than he ever was, he crawls out of his house, and looks at me, and whines to go upstairs.
 'Not tonight, Jip! Not tonight!'
 He comes very slowly back to me, licks my hand, and lifts his dim eyes to my face.
 'Oh, Jip! It may be never again!
 He lies down at my feet, stretches himself out as if to sleep, and with a plaintive cry, is dead.
 'Oh, Agnes! Look, look here!'
 That face, so full of pity and of grief, that rain of tears, that awful mute appeal to me, that solemn hand upraised towards Heaven!
 'Agnes?'
 It is over. Darkness comes before my eyes; and, for a time, all things are blotted out of my remembrance.⁴

Why is it - as it clearly is - less truthful than this passage from the same novel, also dealing with David's loss, but of his young mother, herself so Dora-like:

I was in the carrier's cart when I heard her calling to me. I looked out, and she stood at the garden-gate alone, holding her baby up in her arms for me to see. It was cold, still weather; and not a hair of her head, or a fold of her dress was stirred, as she looked intently at me, holding up her child.
 So I lost her. So I saw her afterwards, in my sleep at school - a silent presence near my bed - looking at me with the same intent face - holding up her baby in her arms.

3. Sassoon began the First World War with these words:

And they are fortunate, who fight
 For gleaming landscapes, swept and shafted
 And crowned by cloud pavilions white;
 Hearing such harmonies as might
 Only from Heaven be downward wafted -
 Voices of victory and delight.

(France)²

and when he had been at the Front for a while he wrote these:

it was no good trying
 To stop it; for he howled and beat his chest.
 And, all because his brother had gone west,
 Raved at the bleeding war; his rampant grief
 Moaned, shouted, sobbed, and choked, while he was kneeling
 Half-naked on the floor. In my belief
 Such men have lost all patriotic feeling.

(Lamentations)

1. C. Dickens, David Copperfield, ed. T. Blount (Harmondsworth, 1976),

2. E. L. Black, ed. 1914-18 in Poetry (1975)

Why is the irony so clear to us in the second and not the first? (for irony cannot get off the ground without a sense of what is commonly regarded as true, so true that it is clear even when its opposite is spoken.) Is the second better poetry than the first? Why? And was Yeats right or wrong when he excluded Wilfred Owen (in the same context) from his 1936 edition of The Oxford Book of Modern Verse and defended the exclusion thus:

I did not know I was excluding a revered sandwich-board man of the revolution and that somebody has put his worst and most famous poem in a glass-case in the British Museum - however if I had known it I would have excluded him just the same. He is all blood, dirt and sucked sugar stick (look at the selection in Faber's Anthology - he calls poets 'bards', a girl a 'maid' and talks about 'Titanic wars').

(Letter to Dorothy Wellesley,
December 21st 1936)¹

Yeats's words are reminiscent of the virulent derision of Byron's 'Johnny' Keats's piss-a-bed poetry'² and perhaps both were objecting to the same quality. But if they are wrong (as I believe they are), why, how and in what ways are they wrong?

The last example points up a factor central to the discussions in the ensuing pages. Whilst Yeats didn't like the combination of realism and romanticism in Owen, what he seems to have objected to principally are those embarrassing bits of vocabulary: 'bards', 'maid' and 'Titanic wars'. Perhaps he was reminded uncomfortably of his earlier self. In the last twenty to thirty years of this century, critics have relied rather too happily on the assumption voiced by Yeats here, that certain kinds of vocabulary, certain poetic techniques condemn themselves prima facie. If Owen has survived along with Sassoon (both of them with, it seems to me, undeserved reluctance) it is because of the acceptable physical realism of poems such as 'Futility' and 'Dulce et Decorum Est'. An academic critic would today be troubled by a tribute to the latter poem which spoke simply of the truth it tells about war; there is a certain vulgarity (I use the term in its precise sense) about such tributes. Indeed, the academic critic

1. W.B. Yeats, Letters, ed. A. Wade (1954).

2. Letters and Journals, ed. L.A. Marchand (1977), vii, p.200.

tends to be troubled by any such literature which announces itself as being concerned not just with a general truth, but with a particular one. J.H. Johnston, in English Poetry of the First World War suggests that the War poets were writing out of an experience too close to them to produce the best poetry, and concludes that 'neither pity nor self-pity in themselves can inspire great poetry',¹ an echo of Yeats's even more authoritarian 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry',². Doubtless such critics are worried that poetic quality will be submerged in a tide of sincere feeling, as though the one were exclusive of the other. But a further mistake is to think that if the two are not mutually exclusive, they must be logically connected.

In the following chapters I seek to consider the wealth of cases which lie somewhere between these two positions. Truth in literature, and its effect on criticism, is at the heart of my enquiry; but in attempting to consider the range of truth, I must also consider cases which lie beyond it, poems and plays and novels where truth does not enter into question, but which remain valuable poems and plays and novels. If the distinctions I make sometimes lead to conclusions which seem self-evident to the careful critic, I can only say that they are distinctions I have not seen or heard argued fully elsewhere; and that in criticism, it is not enough that justice is done, it must be seen to be done. Too often today, anyway, it is not done because it is not seen to be done. My starting point, and my finishing point, is Arnold's statement about literature, also implicitly a statement about criticism:

1. J.H. Johnston, English Poetry of the First World War (Princeton, 1964), p.184

2. Introduction to The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935 (1936), p.xxxiv.

Long ago, in speaking of Homer, I said that the noble and profound application of ideas to life is the most essential part of poetic greatness. I said that a great poet receives his distinctive character of superiority from his application, under the conditions immutably fixed by the laws of poetic beauty and poetic truth, from his application, I say, to his subject, whatever it may be, of the ideas

'On man, on nature, and on human life,'

which he has acquired for himself. The line quoted is Wordsworth's own; and his superiority arises from his powerful use, in his best pieces, his powerful application to his subject, of ideas 'on man, on nature, and on human life.'

Voltaire, with his signal acuteness, most truly remarked that 'no nation has treated in poetry moral ideas with more energy and depth than the English nation.' And he adds: 'There, it seems to me, is the great merit of the English poets.' Voltaire does not mean, by 'treating in poetry moral ideas,' the composing moral and didactic poems; - that brings us but a very little way in poetry. He means just the same thing as was meant when I spoke above 'of the noble and profound application of ideas to life'; and he means the application of these ideas under the conditions fixed for us by the laws of poetic beauty and poetic truth. If it is said that to call these ideas moral ideas is to introduce a strong and injurious limitation, I answer that it is to do nothing of the kind, because moral ideas are really so main a part of human life. The question, how to live, is itself a moral idea; and it is the question which most interests every man, and with which, in some way or other, he is perpetually occupied. A large sense is of course to be given to the term moral. Whatever bears upon the question, 'how to live,' comes under it.

'Nor live thy life, nor hate; but, what thou liv'st,
Live well; how long or short, permit to heaven.'

In those fine lines Milton utters, as every one at once perceives, a moral idea. Yes, but so too, when Keats consoles the forward-bending lover on the grecian Urn, the lover arrested and presented in immortal relief by the sculptor's hand before he can kiss, with the line,

'for ever wilt thou love, and she be fair' -

he utters a moral idea. When Shakespeare says, that:

'We are such stuff
As dreams are made of, and our little life
Is rounded with sleep,'

he utters a moral idea.

Voltaire was right in thinking that the energetic and profound treatment of moral ideas, in this large sense, is what distinguishes the English poetry. He sincerely meant praise, not dispraise or hint of limitation; and they err who suppose that poetic limitation is a necessary consequence of the fact, the fact being granted as Voltaire states it. If what distinguishes the greatest poets is their powerful and profound application of ideas to life, which surely no good critic will deny, then to prefix to the term ideas here the term moral makes hardly any difference, because human life itself is in so preponderating a degree moral.

It is important, therefore, to hold fast to this: that poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life, - to the question: how to live. Morals are often treated in a narrow and false fashion; they are bound up with systems of thought and belief which have had their day; they are fallen into the hands of pedants and professional dealers; they grow tiresome to some of us. We find attraction, at times, even in a poetry of revolt against them; in a poetry which might take for its motto Omar Kheyam's words: 'Let us make up in the tavern for the time which we have wasted in the mosque.' Or we find attractions in a poetry indifferent to them, in a poetry where the contents may be what they will, but where the form is studied and exquisite. We delude ourselves in either case; and the best cure for our delusion is to let our minds rest upon that great and inexhaustible word life, until we learn to enter into its meaning. A poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt against life; a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas is a poetry of indifference towards life.¹

I hope, by my sometimes highly detailed (nit-picking?) considerations both of literature, and of critical dealings with literature, to give current sense and critical flesh to these marvellous words, which, in spite of the fact that they may err by over-embrace, surely carry a truth which both poets and critics ignore at their peril. My disquisitions are inevitably long, complicated sometime tedious in their specificity beside the broad sweep and flair of Arnold's couple of pages. Truth is sometimes to be found in the one, and sometimes in the other - and sometimes, somewhere in-between.

1. Essays in Criticism: Second Series; ed. S. R. Littlewood (1969), pp. 83-86.

Fiction and Reality in the 'Autobiographical' Novel

When is a novel a novel? The question has been raised in an acute form for the critic in recent years, by the various elements of 'faction', autobiography, and factual or literary borrowings, all assuming the general demeanour of fiction. But it has been a central question for the critic since the first stirrings of the novel. When Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe¹ was first published it was presented as an historical account of actual events, as was his Journal of the Plague Year². It is now, and indeed quickly came to be in Defoe's lifetime, generally known that Robinson Crusoe is a work of fiction. It is much less generally known that Journal of the Plague Year also involves much fiction; it is presented to the reader as a factual account, a journal, complete with documentary evidence; and indeed the individual elements are historically accurate. But the events recounted did not occur in that particular sequence. Certainly Defoe himself was well aware of the usefulness of presenting events as matters of fact, particularly where they indeed were partially matters of fact. Undoubtedly the reason why most readers of Journal of the Plague Year think that they are reading a straightforwardly documentary, contemporary account is that they have independent evidence of the fact that what they are reading about actually happened.

Robinson Crusoe presents a more interesting case. Either Defoe hoped to convince his readers entirely that they were reading about facts, in which case their consciousness that they were reading fiction had to be sacrificed; or he hoped that the conviction they felt on reading it as fact would carry over once they knew it was fiction. In fact it was necessary for Robinson Crusoe's audience to be aware that what they were reading was not history, in order for the devices of historical reportage to give them a sense of conviction in the fiction. In the same way, contemporary readers of Pamela's epistles had to believe they were not reading real letters, in order to believe in them.

1. D. Defoe, Robinson Crusoe, ed. J. Sutherland (Boston, 1968),

2. D. Defoe, A Journal of the Plague Year, ed. L. Landa (Oxford, 1969).

For the sophisticated modern reader, the devices of historical reportage have lost much of their power as a fictional tool to procure credibility. The appearance of the omniscient narrator signalled their decline, and now features such as the epistolary style, the switching of narrators, and the journal form suggest artifice rather than realism. However, the reader now has to juggle with new forms of factual intervention in fiction.

Norman Mailer's ^{biography of} Marilyn Monroe¹ is a mixture of fact and fiction about a woman whose living presence many of its readers can still vividly recall. Mailer's defence of his use of fiction is that to some extent Monroe existed in a different form in each individual's imagination, so that the 'facts' he was given about her were often themselves fictional. He claims that he can achieve a 'truer' account of Monroe by mixing fiction and fact.

It is that notion of truth hovering importantly around such cases which is of central interest to the critic here, for the mixing of fact and fiction brings close together two separate notions of truth. One is the notion of objective literal truth, produced by an accurate account of events which actually happened; the other is the notion of 'imaginative' truth, which may have its own internal consistency and justification, quite independently of accuracy to actual events.

Thom Gunn says, in a chatty but serious essay, 'My Life up to Now', in The Occasions of Poetry

It is a strange fact that almost everything that figures importantly in my life, an event, an idea, even a series of dreams, finds its way sooner or later into poetry.

Writing poetry has in fact become a certain stage in my coping with the world, or in the way I try to understand what happens to me and inside me. Perhaps I could say that my poetry is an attempt to grasp, with grasp meaning both to take hold of in a first bid at possession, and also to understand.²

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1. N. Mailer, Marilyn: a biography (1975).
 2. T. Gunn, The Occasions of Poetry (1982), pp. 185-6.

But in a postscript to this essay he adds:

The danger of biography, and especially of auto-biography is that it can muddy poetry by confusing it with its sources. James's words for the source of a work, its 'germ', is wonderfully suggestive because the source bears the same relation to the finished work as the seed does to the tree - nothing is the same, all has developed, the historical truth of the germ is superseded by the derived but completely different artistic truth of the fiction. (p.187)

And discussing a poem, 'From an Asian Tent', which he sees as the poem in which he was finally able to write about his father, he regrets what this personal admission will lead to in others' interpretation of the poem:

What is autobiographical about the poem, what I am drawing upon is a secret source of feeling that might really be half-imagined, some Oedipal jealousy for my father combined with a barely remembered but equally strong incestuous desire for him. And I am drawing upon the autobiographical without scruple, freed by the myth subject matter of the poem from any attempt to be fair or honest about my father.
(pp. 187-8)

What Gunn has to say here is particularly interesting because he is himself a writer and he is bringing his thought to bear precisely on that relationship between what he calls 'historical truth' and 'the completely different artistic truth of the fiction'. He is also aware of the difficulty for the reader of making the simple distinction which he can see and apply. For it is often difficult for the reader to discount or forget the 'historical truth' from which the 'artistic truth' derives. The difference between the two may be clear-cut where the genre is clear-cut: the author of a history has an obligation to reproduce at the very least the spirit of actual events, and usually we expect accuracy to their content; an author's decision to write a work of fiction frees him from that obligation, even if his fiction, coincidentally or otherwise, has a factual counterpart.

But here is where the difficulty arises. Factual counterparts do exist for much fiction. In a sense they exist for all fiction in that it makes reference, through comprehensible language, to the real world. For the majority of fiction they exist in a much broader sense in that most fiction attempts an accurate representation of some aspects of the real world (exceptions would be science fiction, and surrealist fiction). And for a smaller section of fiction factual counterparts exist in a much stronger, more particular sense, in that there is a close correspondence, sometimes a complete one, between actual events and a fictional account. A familiar case of this last sort is what we often call the autobiographical novel, where the author draws on his own experience for the material for a fictional work. We know the context in which to regard the work, in that it does not attempt to embrace both fact and fiction as the Mailer does; so that we know that by presenting his work as fiction the author is asking us to judge it as we would judge fictional works lacking a precise factual counterpart.

A less familiar case of this sort, but one which has been brought to the forefront by two highly successful examples of the genre, D.M. Thomas's The White Hotel¹ and Thomas Keneally's Schindler's Ark,² is the novel which embodies within it, posing, as it were, as part of the fiction, historical accounts of actual events (i.e. accounts written not by the novelist, and, in their original form and context, history, not fiction).

The difficulty with all novels with factual counterparts is that, if we are familiar with factual accounts of the same material, or if we are informed of the factual element (as it has been difficult not to be for a reader of The White Hotel and Schindler's Ark), we may be unable to forget the presence of the factual counterpart when reading the novel. Some passages may be verbally indistinguishable from actual documents (the author's own letters, for example, or the historical accounts of others about the same material). Even if we have not read the factual accounts, it will be difficult to restrain

1. (1981)

2. (1982)

the interest and curiosity aroused by the novel which prompts us to do so.

The central question which emerges here is, what attitude should we take to this surrounding material?. Are such novels different in kind from other novels, and should we apply different criteria to them? Should these criteria be closer to those we apply to factual works? When we come to look at what critics say in these areas, we see both considerable confusion and conflation of 'truth to reality' and 'imaginative truth', and at the same time an immense certainty about the distinction between them. A brief look at the kind of remark made by critics about truth in Lawrence's Sons and Lovers will be revealing:

Lawrence's gift as a writer, the living quality of his scenes, enable him almost to get away with his intention ans to write off the father and the sweetheart. But he did not altogether succeed in doing so. And the novel shows the novelist to be not only a dribbling liar but in some respects, and in spite of his magnificent capacity to see, almost altogether blind. In Sons and Lovers Lawrence's intention and the ~~intention~~ of the novel are disparate.¹

[Lawrence was] a vividly exact liar.²

It is essential to grasp as clearly as we can the subtle human tragedy of the affair with Miriam. It was the tragedy of Lawrence's entry into sexual life, and it haunted him all his days. In Sons and Lovers he conceals the truth. He cannot endure really to face it in consciousness.³

The one constant factor here is that all of these critics make some reference, either explicitly or implicitly, to external information in judging the truthfulness of the novel. At the other end of the spectrum, D.M. Thomas was criticised repeatedly in the reviews of his startling novel for allowing the use of actual reportage within the novel to cloud the 'imaginative truth'

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1. E. Vivas, D.H. Lawrence: The Failure and Triumph of Art (1960)
 2. J.C.F. Littlewood, 'Son and Lover', The Cambridge Quarterly, Vol. 4.
 3. J. M. Murry, Son of Woman (1931).

of his work. True, his semi-concealment of the reportage in the flow of fictional narrative incurred a sense of being deceived in the critics. But their central objection was to the blurring of the distinction between actual and imaginative truth.

The confusion surrounding fiction which has an evident historical counterpart, and the related uncertainty about the relationship of truth in life and truth in fiction, is therefore of great importance to criticism. An account of these relationships is what I seek to move closer to in this chapter, by focussing on critical approaches to the autobiographical novel. My principal example will be Lawrence's Sons and Lovers.¹

Let us consider first the various justifications a critic might give for making reference to external information in judging Sons and Lovers and novels of similar provenance. I shall, for convenience, term this critic the biographical critic.

The most extreme line the biographical critic might take is that in reading Sons and Lovers the reader can't escape the overall closeness of events in the novel to events which actually happened, so that the reader cannot avoid interpreting it as being 'about' what actually happened. Such a critic would therefore expect an accuracy to crucial events; and passages of pure invention which departed from actual events, in such a way as to alter the perspective on those events recorded which did happen, would cause this critic concern.

Such a critic does exist in relation to Sons and Lovers:

J.C.F. Littlewood, quoted above, who is unable to see any justification for Lawrence's departure from actual events or from their spirit. Littlewood is gripped by Jessie Chambers's explanation of Lawrence's 'dishonesty', that he had to hand the 'laurels of victory' to his mother; and against the standard of Lawrence's own struggles with the conflicting demands of mother and sweetheart he judges Lawrence's fictional account of the fictional Paul Morel's similar struggles. Thus when he argues that the relationship between Paul and Miriam is

1. D.H. Lawrence, Sons and Lovers (Harmondsworth, 1948).

never shown as a rich and strong one, he is implicitly measuring it against the actual relationship between Lawrence and Jessie Chambers, rather than against the internal demands of the novel. This leads him in turn to have a distorted view of any differentiation between the chapter on the early growth of the Paul/Miriam relationship ('Lad-and-Girl Love') and that on its later development and first stages of its breakdown ('Strife in Love'). In so claiming, he argues that there are only two places in the former chapter where Lawrence gives any indication that the relationship is a mutually satisfying one: where Miriam shows Paul the rose-bush (Sons and Lovers pp. 197-8; this and all future references to D.H. Lawrence, Sons and Lovers, Penguin edition, 1948); and where the two go up to the communion rail in the church at Alfretton (p.207). In fact, not only is it false to suggest that these are the only two indications of a mutually satisfying relationship in this chapter, but they seem to have been selected for their weakness as well as their strength. Both chosen incidents highlight a quality of the relationship which^{is} later to become part of its down fall, Miriam's intense spiritual religiosity; yet Littlewood ignores far more convincing examples of the mutual richness of the relationship. Whilst he discusses the communion-rail incident, he amazingly chooses to ignore the account of the rest of that outing, which forms a substantial part of this chapter, and which is replete with the sense of Paul's and Miriam's supreme happiness in each other's company. Paul's singling out of Miriam as his companion on the walk round Wingfield Manor, and his quiet signs to her of his tenderness, convince us of his deep feeling for her more than does anything else in this chapter:

They continued to mount the winding staircase. A high wind, blowing through the loopholes, went rushing up the shaft, and filled the girl's skirts like a balloon, so that she was ashamed, until he took the hem of her dress and held it down for her. He did it perfectly simply, as he would have picked up her glove. She remembered this always.

Round the broken top of the tower the ivy bushed out, old and handsome. Also, there were a few chill gillivers, in pale cold bud. Miriam wanted to lean over for some ivy,

but he would not let her. Instead she had to wait behind him, and take from each spray as he gathered it, and held it to her, each one separately, in the purest manner of chivalry. The tower seemed to rock in the wind. They looked over miles and miles of wooded country, and country with gleams of pasture.

The crypt underneath the manor was beautiful, and in perfect preservation. Paul made a drawing; Miriam stayed with him ...

They set off again gaily, looking round on their beloved manor that stood so clean and big on its hill.

"Supposing you could have that farm", said Paul to Miriam. "Yes!"

They were now in the country of stone walls, which he loved, and which, though only ten miles from home, seemed so foreign to Miriam. The party was straggling. As they were crossing a large meadow that sloped away from the sun, along a path embedded with innumerable tiny glittering points, Paul, walking alongside, laced his fingers in the strings of the bag Miriam was carrying, and instantly she felt Annie behind, watchful and jealous. But the meadow was bathed in a glory of sunshine, and the path was jewelled, and it was seldom among that he gave her any sign. She held her fingers very still among the strings of the bag, his fingers touching; and the place was golden as a vision ...

Paul was now pale with weariness. He had been responsible for the party all day, and now he was done. Miriam understood and kept close to him, and he left himself in her hands. (pp 207-210)

It seems that Littlewood leaves this example out of account because it is inconvenient for his overall thesis, that the Paul/Miriam relationship is never shown as a fully, mutually satisfying one, a thesis which he derives from the constant comparison of the Paul/Miriam relationship with the Lawrence/Jessie Chambers one, and from the consequent judgement that the novel gives the lie to that originally rich and satisfying relationship.

There are two central difficulties with Littlewood's position (and that of any biographical critic). One is that, while we may find

it difficult to forget or ignore the factual counterparts of fictional works, and it may even be improper to do so, on what basis do we judge the accuracy, the truth, of an account of the factual counterpart? Littlewood uses as his yardstick Jessie Chambers' account, written under the pseudonym of 'E.T.', D.H. Lawrence: A Personal Record (1935). Yet it would be a miracle if this were an impartial account, for her bitterness about Lawrence's treatment of her, and about Mrs Lawrence's hostility to her¹ inevitably colour her view of past events. Her account is striking in its sincerity, and what we know of Lawrence's later dealings with women leads us to sympathise with Jessie Chambers's analysis; nonetheless, a doubt about its complete accuracy remains, and this is likely to be a difficulty in any similar case.

The second difficulty lies with the very presentation of the work as fiction. The author may have chosen to use some autobiographical or historical material for a host of reasons: he may wish to convey certain insights and ideas which he has understood through his own experience, and may feel that the most successful way to do this is to draw on the material of that experience; he may wish to write about an experience different from, but closely related in certain ways to, his own, so that some of the material familiar to him may be of use; or it may simply be a matter of convenience to use personal experience as the basis of his story, because it saves him the necessity of invention. In the case of material which is historical but not personal (as in The White Hotel) he may feel that at certain points the narrative quality of history may be more likely to capture 'the truth' than that of fiction. But the fact remains that as long as the author presents his work as fiction, we accept it and read it as such, and not as history. We can see this factor at work even in the criticism of Littlewood. Even though he clearly and determinedly announces his biographical interest and even though he often makes reference to external historical accounts of similar material as a yardstick, nonetheless when he talks about Sons and Lovers he talks about it as a novel. He does not confuse it with, mistake it for, an historical account; that is precisely the point - his judgements of it are

¹ See her comments about Mrs Lawrence, ibid pp. 33,54,58, and 127.

critical judgements of it as a novel. It is only the criteria he uses which are historical. When Littlewood rhetorically inquires, 'Doesn't the truth stop flowing as soon as the writing involves Lawrence in an intimate response to any other person, particularly to a woman?', he is involved in a double confusion. He speaks as though Lawrence and Paul were the same person, which, of course, they cannot be, because Paul is no person at all. (He cannot mean Lawrence the novelist's relationship which his characters, for what would it mean to speak of a novelist's 'intimate response' to his characters? And in any case the examples he gives in support here make it clear that the critic here identifies Lawrence completely with Paul Morel.) But the more interesting confusion lies in Littlewood's use of the term 'truth'. For again it is clear from the way in which he supports this statement, and others, by examination and analysis of the text, that here Littlewood means something other than historical truth. He does not, for example, demand that the events of the novel should be very closely modelled on actual events; he does not object to the change in names; he does not say 'this is not what happened' he says 'this is not how it was.' The depiction of the truth of 'how it was' he would be quite happy to remain in the fictional domain; and this is clear from his discussion of the balance of incidents which contributes to the reader's view of the value of the Paul/Miriam relationship. Here his objection is that Lawrence's depiction of the relationship is unfair to his actual relationship with Jessie Chambers, because he presents the fictional relationship as less rich and satisfying; but he would be quite happy in the use of fictional methods (e.g. a good structural balance of happy and less happy incidents, a view of the relationship through Miriam's eyes as well as through Paul's, and so on), provided these produced the more balanced (according to reality) picture.

Is it reasonable for the critic to operate with two different sets of criteria when considering 'autobiographical' fiction? Well, he might argue that it is as reasonable as it is for the novelist to move from fact to fiction and back again. But again it must be stressed that everything within a novel, just because it is in a

novel, is fiction, i.e. it has no reality except the conceptual one which the words produce. At the same time, however, it is clear that we incorrigibly want to speak of truth in the novel, whether we are readers or simply critics, and perhaps especially if we are novelists; and that how the novel conveys its truths will have some connection with the reality of the external world, but it is not a simple connection. 'For the authentical truth of either persons or actions, who ... will expect it in a poem, who subject is not truth but things like truth?' asked Chapman¹. And here is the difficulty. When, as critics, we speak of truth in literature, it is the truth about what? Certainly not about truth in reality, because fiction does not depict reality. The truth, then, about the fictional situation? But then we have a contradiction in terms. No; fiction deals rather with 'things like truth' about things like reality; neither can fully be the thing itself.

But of course, as I have said, reality enters in, and it enters in different ways in different works. Mrs Gaskell's Cranford gives us a painstakingly detailed reproduction of a similar situation in life; Waiting for Godot shows us the lives of two tramps, yet we know it is 'really' about the futility and absurdity of human life, and if we were to object that tramps don't really behave like that, it is we who would be guilty of absurdity. But how do we know the difference? How do we know that the truths Cranford can tell are to do with the nature of the society and way of life it depicts, and the measure of success it achieves in revealing those truths is directly related to the level of accuracy with which it depicts a society very similar to one which might have been found in provincial early 19th Century England? And how do we know that the truths revealed by Waiting for Godot are far more allegorically connected with its surface subject matter than that? Again it has much to do with how much importance the author seems to place upon the level of verisimilitude he achieves; it quickly becomes apparent that Mrs Gaskell considers it to be very important, whereas Beckett is always ready to sacrifice it to some other effect, indeed it is his

¹ Chapman, Dedication to The Revenge of Bussy d'Ambois, in The Plays of George Chapman ed. T. M. Parrott, (New York, 1961), p.77.

very clear departure from reality (as it is in more clearly allegorical or satirical works such as those by Swift and Orwell) which alerts us to look for the subterranean truth.

In either case, however, in deciding how far the work has been successful in conveying truths, we do not and cannot simply compare the situation presented with a similar situation in life. Indeed, sometimes we would be unqualified to, because what we learn may have to do with experiences which are outside our own actual experience. We can for example, judge that Dickens's treatment of the death of Dora, in David Copperfield is sentimental (i.e. not truthful), even though we may have had no experience of the death of a young wife, or a young woman, or indeed of anyone close to us at all. Just as we can feel for someone else in life who suffers an anguish we ourselves have not known, and just as we can judge another's reactions to be insincere or dissembled, so we can react to literature. In extreme cases, our being human may be the only external point of reference we bring to works of literature in judging their truthfulness. The circumstances in which we accept the truths proffered, and those in which we suspect them, I will endeavour to explore further in both this and the following chapter.

What Littlewood might say in relation to my uncertainty about his employing both historical and fictional criteria in judging Sons and Lovers (and as he is unaware of any difficulty himself he does not actually say anything about it) might have something to do with the author's own intention. He might suggest - as might a less overtly and dogmatically biographical critic - that we can infer from the closeness of the novel to the external factual material that Lawrence intended to write a novel about the sort of relationship which his relationship with Jessie Chambers typified. It might be argued that the best and simplest way to fulfil this intention would be to change as little as possible in recounting it, albeit in fictional form. This argument places the problem of the autobiographical novel firmly in the province of the metacritical debate on intention; which is perhaps where it belongs in any case,

for, as Professor Cioffi has shown, intention is a convenient label applied to the problem of external information of all kinds:¹ information about the author, about his stated intention, about the time at which a work was written, about the language of that time, and so on. Cioffi has also argued cogently that there are cases, perhaps many cases, in which such information cannot be ruled out of account in our interpretation of a work; once known it ineluctably affects that interpretation. He has an even stronger thesis, which seems to lend support to our biographical critic, and this is that a biographical remark can be simply another kind of critical remark: 'If a critical remark fails to confirm or consolidate or transform a reader's interpretation of a work it will then become for him, not evidence of something or other, perhaps the critic's obtuseness. Biographical remarks are no more prone to this fate than any others'. He further argues that the distinction, made by Wimsatt and Beardsley, between internal and external evidence is a 'misconceived' one which can't be preserved. One only has to look at some examples to see the force of this view. Uninformed readers of Herbert's poem 'I got me flowers', from whom the anthology title 'Easter' has been withheld, consistently interpret the poem as a love poem (I and others have frequently performed the experiment on students of literature - who, though they may be uninformed, are not uneducated). A more experienced reader who knows much of Herbert's oeuvre, or a less experienced one given the clue of the title, will immediately see the religious interpretation. What is centrally influential here is our knowledge of Herbert's characteristically religious subject matter, which is a matter external to this particular poem. But what makes a switch in interpretations possible - what makes both interpretations both available and consistent within themselves, - is Herbert's Metaphysical habit of expressing his religious love in the same terms as a contemporary might express passionate sexual love. The test of both interpretations is internal; but the crucial factor which pushes us in one direction rather than the other is external.

¹ F. Cioffi, 'Intention and Interpretation in criticism', Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society (1963-4) pp. 85-106, reprinted in Collected Papers on Aesthetics ed. C. Barrett (Oxford, 1966).

The examples can be complicated to show a range of power in the influence of external knowledge. But in each case, whether the external knowledge 'works' on us is determined by how it works in the actual reading of the poem. If it doesn't, if we don't feel its influence as we re-read, if it doesn't help us to pick up the cues already there in the work, it is of no use or relevance. It is significant that in almost all of the cases where external information transforms our reading this leads to a fuller reading of the work. Cioffi mentions only one where it does not (Housman's '1887'), and perhaps this is a special case, for irony is peculiar in that we must believe it to be intended for it to affect us; irony cannot be naive. For other cases where the external information does not lead to a fuller interpretation, Cioffi neatly suggests that we take the work as better evidence of the author's intention than any external evidence of it which we have. Keats's 'Ode to Autumn', for example, is clearly concerned with far more than painting a picture of the stubble plains which first occasioned the idea for the poem.¹ Yet even such a straightforward case as this has its complexities in relation to the question of intention. When I first read Keats's casual introduction to this poem in his letter to Reynolds, I dismissed Keats's mention of the sun-touched stubble plains as merely the first germ of the idea of this great poem, akin to thinking of the first line of a poem; this seemed to be reinforced by the way in which the stubble plains appear only in the thin edged (indeed stubbly) last verse. It was not until I visited Hampshire at the end of a warm August, remembered that Keats wrote the poem in Winchester, and saw the nature of the landscape there, with the vast mellow stretches of cornfields just reaped amidst banks of every variety of tree at the ripe end of their summer plumage, that I fully understood Keats's stubble plains and the way in which they inhabited the poem - a poem far more about late summer looking forward to its ripening end than I had hitherto realised. I am not here making a vulgar point about visiting the place of origin of poems; but rather pointing out that even writer's remarks about their intentions have their own

¹ Letter to Reynolds, Letters of John Keats, 1814 - 1821, ed. H.E. Rollins, (Cambridge, Mass. 1958), p.167.

etiology which may need to be understood if the intention is to be fully understood; and that these in turn still stand or fall in their importance according to how we feel when we re-read the work.

The question, then, here is whether the information about Lawrence's life is on a par with biographical information of the sort I have been discussing above in relation to poetry. Is it irresistible in its influence on our interpretation as we read the work? The novel provides difficulties which the poem does not, I believe, in settling this question. The fact that it is narrative brings it closer to life, and thus renders the risks of distortion greater. Whereas our knowledge of Herbert or Keats gives us a piece of information which enables us to 'see an aspect' of the poem which was always there, and then to react to that aspect in its own right, our knowledge of Lawrence will tend to keep leading us back to a comparison with the minutiae of the original reality, and so away from the work. In addition, the fact that Lawrence made use of a basic situation and set of characters with which he had been familiar in life does not so clearly suggest that it was his intention to write about precisely that kind of situation, or characters of that sort, throughout his novel. The narrative may begin by sticking closely to the original, but then, being narrative, may take on its own life - just as Lawrence and Jessie might perhaps have in life developed in different directions than those they actually took. In addition, there are structural demands on the novelist which may lead him to alter and adapt material to produce a powerful climax, or an interwoven structure, or whatever; his narrative is never going to be exactly reproductive of the events of life (if it were, the main task of literary critics might be to wonder why people in novels never need to go to the lavatory).

The novelist has many good reasons then, for departing from the circumstances and events in life. What, then, of the 'spirit' of the truth, which seems to be what Littlewood is asking for in

Sons and Lovers? Here we return to the difficulty of ascertaining, from material outside the novel, what is the spirit of the truth. Littlewood sees it, through Jessie Chambers's eyes as it were, as having to do with the richness at the heart of the relationship between Lawrence and Jessie Chambers, a richness which he has underplayed in the novel in order to give his mother 'the laurels of victory'. Thus in the novel he has not kept to the spirit of the truth of the actual relationships. But at this point we see the integral connection between those structural, literary demands which lead even the biographical critic to accept the strictures of selectivity of events, changing of names, manner of description, etc. upon verisimilitude, and the imaginative truth which may be found in a novel. It may simply have been impossible for Lawrence to write the kind of novel he wanted Sons and Lovers to be, and stick to the spirit of the truth in the actual relationship he had with Jessie Chambers. We can see this more clearly if we try to imagine the same criticisms made of Sons and Lovers being made of, say, The Rainbow or Women in Love (e.g. the criticism that Lady Ottoline Morrell deplored violence, so that the scene where Hermione strikes Birkin is 'untruthful').. We would see such criticisms as irrelevant to those novels, because the truths they are attempting to convey have little to do with how people behave, more to do with how they be. Sons and Lovers does have much more to do with how people behave, but it too has to do with their internal being. What we must ask ourselves, then, in relation to the question about the spirit of the truth, is what truth does the novel within itself seem to seek to convey, and how? And how does truth to the spirit of external actual events fit in with this?

In order to answer these questions, we must look at the novel as being based on a dramatic rather than a narrative structure, on the interweaving of relationships rather than the development of events. Paul is the constant feature, and the structure is built up around him, around the relationships in which he becomes involved. At the centre of the novel is his relationship with his mother, and at either side come Clara and Miriam, and the lesser characters are also interwoven into the structure. Since Paul's relationships are

so important structurally as well as dramatically, it is particularly necessary for them to be very different from each other. Each one answers to different needs within Paul himself, as these needs assert themselves, so he swings from one woman to another, and even his mother's influence, though it is ever-present, waxes and wanes. In this pattern, Miriam answers to Paul's need for intellectual stimulation and spiritual inspiration. She is a girl who has developed her spiritual awareness to such a point that she exudes a sort of spiritual intensity, so that even in her most relaxed states she has an air of dreaminess, as though the outside world were not quite real to her. It is this which attracts Paul, and she is the perfect person with whom to share his aspirations and his inner experiences. Their relationship is founded on this basis, and through ^{it} they do achieve a rare harmony, until Paul begins to feel the need for an outlet for his passion. It is at this point that Miriam 'fails' him, for she cannot answer his passion, but can only sacrifice herself to it. This is, I think, a development consistent with the Miriam we have been shown. We have been told that it could never be mentioned that the mare was in foal (201) amongst the Leivers womenfolk, and that Miriam had been taught by her mother that the physical side of marriage 'is always dreadful, but you have to bear it.' (355) Miriam having been bred in this kind of atmosphere, has become refined beyond existence. This is exactly why she has been able to give Paul so much up to this point, and also why it is almost impossible that she can also answer his desires for physical love. Thus we come to the other side of the scales and move from Miriam's spirituality to Clara's passion. The two women represent the forces which are dominant in Paul's life, which make up his personality, and which he must struggle to unite in order to live. This balance of relationships with Paul's relationship for his mother constantly at the centre of the scales, provides the essential dramatic and structural basis of the novel. But it is a delicate balance because the characters are subtle, complex studies, they are not caricatures. Miriam is not just

'spirituality', she is a woman with a complex make-up. We remember Clara's statement to Paul about Miriam, 'she wants you' (p. 339), Miriam's vitality and excitement whilst watching Paul pick cherries, and these aspects combine with her intensity and her religiosity to make her a convincing character. She is portrayed with consistency, without crudeness, and this is the strongest argument in Lawrence's favour. If we had known nothing about Jessie Chambers, we would have found the treatment of Miriam thoroughly convincing, and we still do find it so, even in the face of the red herring which Jessie provides.

Now, why and how she is convincing, how we can feel that fiction is truthful, is a large and very difficult question. But it is not one that would be any more simply answered when we deal with 'auto-biographical' novels by saying that the novel accords with the actual truth. There is certainly no guarantee, had Lawrence tried to present the spirit of the truth of actual events, i.e. had he presented Miriam, and the Paul/Miriam relationship, in a better light, that he would have succeeded, in doing so, in convincing the reader of the truthfulness of what was presented. Had he actually stuck to the letter of actual events it is indeed unlikely rather than likely that he would have thus succeeded. And, most importantly, in each case the criteria readers and critics would use are the criteria they would use in judging the truthfulness of any novel; the external information would be just another factor entering in. Hence the ~~terms of Littlewood's~~ analysis of the lack of satisfaction in the Paul/Miriam relationship, which are structural (the lack of differentiation between early and late relationship) and literary (the way in which the selection and description of incident in the communion-rail scene focusses attention on Miriam's satisfaction, not on Paul's). As with poetry, we are still, always and inevitably, left with the work and our response to it.

This means, of course, that we may disagree, and it is in cases of disagreement that the way in which we judge a novel to be truthful becomes particularly important. I have already suggested some ways

in which we tend to judge truthfulness of characterisation, in my brief account of the drawing of Miriam's character: complexity, consistency, showing rather than telling, combined with some quality in the character which enables us to recognise her - not as a type, but as having qualities which we comprehend as going together to make a certain kind of human being. We may have met someone of the same kind; or we may not - in which case it may be no more than 'the broad fact of being struggling, erring human creatures',¹ which enables us 'to imagine and to feel the pain and the joys' of fictional characters who differ from us in every respect except the fact that they represent such creatures themselves. The real mystery lies in the fact that, of course, such characters are actually everything but 'human creatures'; but this does not seem to have prevented countless novel readers through the ages from seeing them as such.²

Let us then, for the moment, forget Jessie Chambers and all that lies outside the novel, and consider how far the novel achieves an internal truthfulness in its own terms (i.e. those I have outlined in suggesting the dramatic structure of the novel). Now, within these terms it might still be possible to feel a sense of unease with the Paul/Miriam relationship, to do with the way it breaks down. It might be felt that the blame for the breakdown of the relationship rests unfairly on Miriam's shoulders (and I mean Miriam, not Jessie). What would it mean to speak of unfairness to a character in a fictional work? What are we measuring the unfairness against? After all, all our information about the character comes from within the novel, is given to us by the author. If we feel that Lawrence is unfair to Miriam, mustn't we be basing this judgement on information he has given us elsewhere, e.g. about Paul - so how can we judge him unfair? He has provided us with the means of making the judgement; and in so doing has nullified it.

1 George Eliot to Charles Bray, The George Eliot Letters, (1954-78) ed. G.S. Haight, Vol III, p. 111.

2 For a full exploration of this, see Colin Radford, 'How can we be moved by the fate of Anna Karenina?', Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume (1975)

But of course as readers we bring ourselves to the work; that is a bit of extraneous material which can't be expunged. Take the case of Leontes in The Winter's Tale¹ (where there is no external point of reference) except that which we bring from our own experience. Might we say that Shakespeare treats Leontes unfairly by thrusting his jealous rage upon him? We have no forewarning that he is a jealous man; more importantly, neither do those characters closest to him in the play, who suffer directly from the sudden onset of his jealousy. If we describe this as a case of unfairness, we may be using one of two criteria. We may be making reference outside the work, to the sort of character Leontes most closely resembles; for we are implicitly asking the question, "Is this how a person, of roughly the sort we know Leontes so far to be, might behave?" In this, our approach differs very little from the way we try to piece together people's behaviour in life. If, in the case of Leontes, the answer is no, we might begin to think that the character is being treated unfairly - though we would be more likely to say that we find the character unconvincing. The second, different criterion we might employ would be that of internal consistency (though even here we must, I think, be making reference to our own experience): does Leontes behave with consistency in the terms of the play? Now here we would meet a difficulty, because the play is about inconsistency, it is about that kind of jealousy which strikes reasonlessly, like a thunderbolt. In these terms, Leontes behaves with consistent inconsistency - and only becomes inconsistently consistent when he seems to regain some measure of rationality and humanity at the end of the play. And how do we judge the convincingness of an inconsistent piece of behaviour? With great difficulty, because the more extraordinarily unpredictable it is, the more powerfully inconsistent it will be. Perhaps this is why Leontes' jealousy is in some ways more acceptable in the brutality of its actions than Othello's: Shakespeare tries to give some rational basis to Othello's jealousy, he gives none at all to Leontes'. Yet even in this case, we can make some small moves. We know, from our experience in life, that some emotions are more sudden and baseless than others; jealousy is one such,

1. W. Shakespeare, The Winter's Tale, ed. J. H. P. Pafford (1963).

for it grows and lives in the imagination, and thrives on imaginary images - it is a projection of fear, and an inversion of love. If Leontes' unpredictable emotion had been something other than jealousy, we might have been less prepared to accept it. (Similarly, by far the most important factor in our understanding Othello's jealousy is not the tissue of rationality which Iago cunningly provides, but is the power of Othello's love which precedes its onset, and which has been converted into jealousy of a similar power and passion - for jealousy is meaningless without love.)

Examples of this difficult sort aside, the characteristic behaviour one might expect from the character the author has created (on which our experience of characteristic behaviour in life will certainly have some influence) seems to be an important factor in judging how fairly the author is treating, or how convincingly he is portraying, his characters. The author must have some respect for that characteristic behaviour; disrespect would be shown by making the character behave 'out of character'. As the terms suggest, a certain amount of doublethink is necessary to sustain this notion of authorial fairness. But, though the author appears to have autonomy over his creations, he can only make them do whatever he wishes at the risk of losing his readers' belief, and making them more aware of him as a manipulator. We are back to the literary skill of the writer, for one writer might get away with far more than another in this direction; there would be no difference in the degree of manipulation, only in the extent to which it is apparent. George Eliot is often criticised for her straightforward manipulations of the reader's response in her novels; but perhaps she is more honest than a 20th Century novelist who has learnt the fine and subtle arts of hidden manipulation. To talk of fairness here may seem irrelevant. At the same time, however, fiction has a power and life of its own which we must be careful not to ignore. Eliot's very manipulations may lead the reader to a compensating balance (as with poor Hetty in Adam Bede); and in Sons and Lovers itself I have met a great deal of reader sympathy with Morel, just because he is given such short shrift by Lawrence.

Such compensation is less simple in the case of Miriam, because she is given a more complex treatment. Is Lawrence unfair to her? Firstly, are the cards stacked against her, either in the sort of character she is given, or in the nature of her relationship with Paul? No: for as we have already shown her character is coherently and convincingly created, and she typifies a kind of person with whom we are familiar in life. Furthermore, her relationship with Paul is not only convincing, it is precisely the sort of relationship we might expect someone in Paul's position to seek - a relationship which is in many ways doomed to failure. For, given his relationship with his mother, it is not a successful relationship that he seeks. At the same time, Miriam answers to precisely that need in him which his mother, for all her importance, cannot satisfy, his need for spiritual and intellectual stimulus. His mother can give him encouragement, affection, a passionate commitment, love of the strongest sort which is indeed near to a physical passion; but Miriam can complement what she gives:

He was conscious only when stimulated. A sketch finished, he always wanted to take it to Miriam. Then he was stimulated into knowledge of the work he has produced unconsciously. In contact with Miriam he gained insight, his vision went deeper. From his mother he drew the life-warmth, the strength to produce; Miriam urged this warmth into intensity like a white light (p. 196).

So Miriam herself and her relationship with Paul are convincing. But what of the presentation of the breakdown of the relationship? Is our response here manipulated so that we unfairly attribute blame to Miriam? There is, I feel more cause for unease here; indeed I believe it may be this sense of unease which leads Littlewood to his distorted explanation of the novel's 'failure'. However, the breakdown of the relationship is not laid entirely at Miriam's door. There is a good deal of realisation, which many critics are not prepared to admit, of the part Mrs Morel plays in it, and of the danger of her influence here. There is one very important scene of this kind, where Paul has burnt the bread and his mother blames this on his absorption in Miriam (pp 260-62).

The scene develops into an exploration of the excessiveness and the destructive quality of Paul's relationship with his mother, though it renders, too, the dominance of his feeling for her, which makes Paul realise that he cannot give as much to Miriam. The dangers of the relationship spring from its very strength.

Certainly, Miriam is shown as being partly to blame too, for if she had been able to give Paul physical as well as spiritual satisfaction she might have been able to break his mother's hold over him. As I have said, that she is unable to do so is presented consistently and convincingly. Perhaps, however, Lawrence makes us almost too aware of the seeds of this eventuality in the early stages of the relationship. He prepares us almost too well for later lack of sexual responsiveness, in passages such as these:

All the life of Miriam's body was in her eyes, which were usually dark as a dark church, but could flame with light like a conflagration. Her face scarcely ever altered from its look of brooding. She might have been one of the women who went with Mary when Jesus was dead. Her body was not flexible and living. She walked with a swing, rather heavily, her head bowed forward, pondering. She was not clumsy yet none of her movements seemed quite the movement ...

She rarely varied from her swinging, forward, intense walk. Occasionally she ran with Paul down the fields. Then her eyes blazed naked in a kind of ecstasy that frightened him.

(190-91)

Although it is clear in this passage that Paul is attracted by Miriam's intensity and the strongly religious aura which surrounds her, at the same time we sense the hint of repulsion which accompanies this attraction. 'Her body was not flexible ... none of her movements seemed quite the movement': it is the lack of spontaneity, the inability to relax, which goes with the intense spirituality, that

Paul is reacting against here, the same elements in her personality which he will finally react against so strongly that the relationship will break down. It might be argued here that Lawrence is already thinking of the ending as he writes the beginning, and therefore describing Miriam less positively, and thus in an unbalanced way, in the early chapters. However, Lawrence might be defended on two grounds here. Firstly, if he had stressed only the attractions of Miriam's spirituality at the beginning, and had Paul discovering its disadvantages only as the relationship began to break down, this would have resulted in a cruder and less realistic picture than that which we are given. Secondly, we are shown Paul's faults in a similar way; and significantly, we are shown that he too is partly to blame for the breakdown of the relationship because of his very reluctance to accept those elements of passion which Miriam does reveal. In the passage just quoted Paul is actually frightened when she relaxes the physical barriers, because the feeling that is then released is so powerful; he has the same sort of revulsion when he sees Miriam pouring out her love demonstratively over little Hubert. It is perhaps not so much her repression of feeling against which he reacts, but rather the force of her feeling when it is not repressed; Paul may in reality be afraid of the very love he pretends to desire. And this would be entirely consistent: Miriam's release of feeling is as spiritually ecstatic as her suppression of it, and at heart it is the ravaging demands of that ecstasy which he fears; Clara is naturally passionate, but undemanding in comparison with Miriam, and is in all ways an easy option. This in turn is consistent with the centrality of Paul's mother in his life and in the novel. Again, Paul does not really want the relationship with Miriam to succeed.

What then has been shown about the interpretation of Sons and Lovers we ought to accept in the light of its autobiographical basis? We have seen that there is some external evidence for thinking that Lawrence may have intended to write about the sort of relationship which he had with Jessie. If this were his intention, which we cannot know, he may have failed, in that he may have given an unfair account of Jessie's part in that relationship. But again

we cannot know this because we do not know exactly what his relationship with Jessie was like. To set against this view of the novel, based entirely on its factual derivation, which leads to the view that the novel is a failure, we have an interpretation which sees the novel as presenting a coherent, convincing account of a set of relationships, which may or may not be drawn from Lawrence's own experience, but which certainly are relationships which we recognise and which are interesting. This account gives us an imaginative insight into that sort of set of relationships. This novel is very far from being a failure, apart from small faults in the treatment of Miriam I have pointed out.

If we choose the former of these two interpretations, we are judging the novelist to have failed to do something which we are not even sure he was trying to do. We are committing ourselves to preferring the criterion of external information to the internal evidence of the work, where that internal evidence is neither puzzling nor faulty to the point of difficulty, when that external criterion leads us to condemn the novel whilst the internal criterion leads us to see it as a success. Apart from the obvious perversity, there are two dangers in this position. If we work from the external evidence to the work, we are likely to see the work from a predisposed viewpoint, and this may lead us to distort or misinterpret features of the work which in fact have an important part to play in terms of the novel's internal justification. If we demote the internal evidence in this way, we are in danger of disregarding what is essential to a work of fiction, the fact that it deals in imaginative truths, whose connection with reality in being convincing, persuasive etc., is important but certainly not simple or direct. Of course, the autobiographical novel presents a particular problem, that of disengaging the internal and external evidence. But in this case I believe, indeed I know, that it is possible to interpret the novel coherently as having its own internal justification, even in the light of the biographical evidence; and I believe it is not only possible to interpret it in this way, but as critics we have a duty

to do so unless there are flaws in the novel itself which lead us to look for further evidence, and unless the external evidence makes it an extremely tenuous position to hold. In this case I believe it is rather the biographical critic's position which is tenuous, as I hope I have shown.

Why do the biographical critics maintain the strong position they do in relation to novels such as Sons and Lovers? Why has that novel attracted terms of abuse such as 'dribbling liar'¹ (Vivas) and 'vividly exact liar' (Littlewood) to its author? Perhaps a clue lies in Middleton Murry's claim that in the novel Lawrence 'conceals the truth'. These critics are not simply guilty of a confusion between man and novelist; they are passing a moral judgement on the man, and taking the novel as evidence. They are suggesting that Lawrence has not written the novel he should have done, because he is too weak to face the truth about his own life. And this is a judgement they might maintain even if they were to concede that the novel which exists is a good enough novel in its own terms. They might well be right; Lawrence might never have faced up to the truth of his early relationships. But it is grossly unfair to take a novel which is both successful and truthful in its own terms as evidence of the author's moral failure, just because it departs at certain points from the understanding others have of the nature of his early life and relationships. To compound the error by turning the moral judgement of the man into a critical judgement of the work is not simply unfair but improper unless there are good grounds for criticism within the novel itself. I have sought to show that there are not. However, it is the autobiographical overlap which leads to these confusions, and which certainly raises in a pressing form questions about the relationship of fiction to reality. The extra danger of confusion lies in these cases; but they are questions which are there in a less obvious form whenever we give our critical attention to fiction.

It may seem from this examination of a particular case that I am myself committed to a purist, anti-biographical line on this issue. This is far from being so. Rather I have been concerned

1. True, the term is Lawrence's own, but Vivas means it straight.

to point out that there are more pitfalls for the critic taking a biographical approach in the narrative framework of the novel than there are in poetry. I have also been concerned to demonstrate the importance of testing any judgement based on external evidence against the work itself. This does not mean that there are not some cases where one's interpretation will be altered by knowledge of external information, and properly so. It is also my feeling that external evidence which detracts from the value of a work should be approached with more caution than that which can enhance it (again, as always, provided the enhancement remains as we read and respond to the work). In this context, external evidence may be of great help in opening up a reader's understanding and appreciation of a work.

I would like to give an example from this end of the spectrum of cases, by considering very briefly another 'autobiographical' novel, Villette.¹ It is only fairly recently that we have discovered the full details of Charlotte Brontë's life in Brussels, and her emotional attachment to M. Heger. In any case, much of the novel is pure invention; and it works perfectly well without our knowledge of its closeness, in parts, to Charlotte's own life. But the closeness is there; we have interesting evidence of it in the form of letters from Charlotte Brontë to M. Heger, and I would suggest that these can be used to enhance the reader's understanding of and appreciation of the novel. For, though Villette is to my mind a great novel - better than the much more feted Jane Eyre - it is an under-appreciated one. This has much to do, I think, with the central portrait of Lucy Snowe. The whole point about Lucy is of course that she is self-effacing; and it is a neat little trick of Charlotte Brontë's that she makes her so self-effacing in the early chapters of the novel that, even though she is the first-person narrator, the reader does not notice her, thus powerfully demonstrating just what Lucy's problem is. A self-effacing heroine is not the easiest heroine to create; that Charlotte Brontë succeeds in doing so is what, for me, makes the novel great. But one of the dangers in the portrait of Lucy Snowe is that in her very stoicism and self-

1 Charlotte Brontë, Villette, ed P. Bentley (1953).

effacement we feel an element of self-dramatisation and self-righteousness. This element may endanger our sympathy with her, it is as though she is too unfortunate, and yet too sensible in the face of misfortune, to be true. Yet the essence of the power of the novel is the honesty with which the author explores the position of her narrator. Consider these two passages:

To begin with: Feeling and I turned Reason out of doors, drew against her bar and bolt, then we sat down, spread out paper, dipped in the ink an eager pen, and, with deep enjoyment, poured out our sincere heart. When we had done - when two sheets were covered with the language of a strongly adherent affection, a rooted and active gratitude /.../ - when, then, I had given expression to a closely clinging and deeply-honoured attachment - an attachment that wanted to attract to itself and take to its own lot all that was painful in the destiny of its object ... then, just at that moment, the doors of my heart would 'shake, bolt and bar would yield, Reason would leap in vigorous and revengeful, snatch the full sheets, read, sneer, erase, tear up, rewrite, fold seal and direct, and send a terse, curt missive of a page. She did right. (pp250-1)

When I had said my prayers, and when I was undressed and laid down, I felt that I still had friends. Friends, not professing vehement attachment, not offering the tender solace of well-matched and congenial relationship; on whom, therefore, but moderate demand of affection was to be made, of whom but moderate expectation formed; but towards whom my heart softened instinctively, and yearned with an importunate gratitude which I entreated Reason betimes to check.

"Do not let me think of them too often, too much, too fondly", I implored. "Let me be content with a temperate draught of this living stream; let me not run athirst, and apply passionately to its welcome waters. Let me not imagine in them a sweeter taste than earth's fountains know. Oh! would to God I might be enabled to feel enough sustained by an occasional, amicable intercourse, rare, brief, unengrossing and tranquil: quite tranquil!"
(p.179)

If a reader's response to this were to find Lucy's stoical moderation in the face of unhappiness slightly implausible, and perhaps irritating, it would be reasonable to fill in the picture by considering the difficulties of a young single woman trying

to earn her own living in a foreign country, surrounded by people of a different religion, superficially plain but inwardly intensely feeling. Who better to illustrate the position than Charlotte Bronte herself? By looking at Charlotte's letters to M. Heger we can see the same stoicism and self deprecation attempting to mask the same intensity of feeling. Charlotte did, it seems, write in the passionate style Lucy allows herself at first, but she was rebuffed; M. Heger told her to write with greater restraint, and at longer intervals, (and indeed even wrote a shopping list on one of her letters; thankfully we know here what she did not). Her 'restrained' letters make painful reading:

Ah! Monsieur! I once wrote you a letter that was less than reasonable because sorrow was at my heart; but I shall do so no more. I shall try to be selfish no longer; and even while I look upon your letters as one of the greatest felicities known to me, I shall await the receipt of them in patience until it pleases you and suits you to send me any. Meanwhile, I may well send you a little letter¹ from time to time - you have authorised me to do so.

And if we see this as over self-sacrificial on Charlotte's own part, we know her to have the same self-awareness and honesty about her own predicament as that shown by Lucy.

In another letter she writes:

It indeed is humiliating - to be unable to control one's own thoughts, to be the slave of a regret, of a memory, the slave of a fixed and dominant idea which lords it over the mind. Why cannot I have just as much friendship for you, as you for me - neither more nor less? Then should I be so tranquil, so free - I could keep silence then for years without effort.²

Charlotte's letters can help to reveal the need for retreat into stoicism and self-chastisement in someone who has great funds of love to give but characteristically does not have it

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1. The Brontes : Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence,
Vol 2, ed. T.J. Wise and J.A. Symington (Oxford, 1980), p.12
 2. ibid, p. 70

returned. The knowledge that the author suffered in much the same way as the heroine she creates is not sufficient to make her heroine plausible or sympathetic. Knowing about Charlotte's life will not improve The Professor, for example, because that novel is not sufficiently well realised or developed. But in the case of Villette, the knowledge may open up a line of understanding and appreciation, and help to counter doubts about over self-dramatisation in the narrator.

There is a danger here that we may substitute our response to the heroine with our response to the author, and so confuse life and literature in the same way as the critics who attack Sons and Lovers. Certainly we may be particularly moved by the quoted novel passages after having read Charlotte Bronte's letters, because we can see what the honesty of those passages must have cost her. Perhaps this response is akin to being particularly moved by passages in Keats's poetry concerned with mortality. In either case, the knowledge of the biographical information is not sufficient, nor is it necessary, for our being moved by the work; but it informs and intensifies, and perhaps in certain cases releases, that response to the work. In addition, in talking about Villette we constantly refer to its honesty in creating an unconventionally unobtrusive heroine, in rebutting Romantic and Gothic devices for sensationalism, and in its lack of sentimentalisation. Is it improper to recognise the specific nature of this honesty?

This brief examination of Villette reveals something of what can be gained by looking at a work in the light of external biographical material related to it; in the discussion of Sons and Lovers we saw the dangers of looking at a work in these terms. The distinction is a vital one, but in practice not at all easy to make. As critics, whenever we consider a work of this kind we should remember Cioffi's

warning:

A reader's response to a work will vary with what he knows; one of the things which he knows and with which his responses will vary is what the author has in mind, or what he intended When is a remark a critical remark about the poem and when a biographical one about the author? The difficulty in obeying the injunction to ignore the biographical facts and cultivate the critical ones is that you can't know which is which until after you have read the work in the light of them.

1. Cioffi op. cit. p. 171

The importance of being earnest

'To be thoroughly earnest is everything, and to be anything short of it is nothing'. George Eliot? Tolstoy? Hardy, even? No - Dickens on his own art. And we are surprised at that, I believe, partly because the 19th Century produced so many more plausible claimants to the quality of thorough earnestness, partly because earnestness seems by definition to rule out humour, a quality which does seem to be essential to Dickens. Here, however, I shall argue that there is a sort of earnestness which is a requirement of a novelist, and which is not necessarily threatened by the presence of humour; a seriousness in attitude towards the characters he creates. I shall argue, too, that whatever Dickens's general claims to the quality of earnestness, he lacks it in this crucial area; he does not take his characters seriously.

But what does it mean for a novelist to take his characters seriously? And why is it a sine qua non? Is this not an attitude we reserve for our relationships with real rather than fictional people? The answer lies precisely in the fictional nature, the non-existence, of characters in a novel. Any character in a novel is the author's creation, and all the actions of that character are significant insofar as they help form the reader's attitude to the character or to the novel as a whole (and of course this is so even if the actions are deliberately insignificant, for the point is that they are deliberately so.) The author may also employ various other devices to mould the reader's attitude: narrator's opinion and information, the opinions of other characters, etc. Now this manipulation of the reader is a serious matter, for our appreciation of fiction depends on the preservation of a delicate balance between our awareness of the manipulative structure of novels and our suspension of that awareness. We never forget the manipulation, indeed it forms part of our enjoyment ("what a marvellous feeling for dialogue"). But we do expect certain standards of what we might call fairness from the author, a combination of consistency and sensitivity which is careful not to offend our intelligence. If the author is too crude in directing his puppets, if he pays insufficient attention to the relationship

between his 'reality' and reality itself, we are liable to lose faith in the logic of the world he creates and its already tenuous connection with inner truth will collapse.¹

The author's treatment of his characters is the key factor in preserving the balance, perhaps because the reader is most vulnerable to disillusionment through the characters, with whom he feels a close connection. However, it is not merely a matter of protecting the reader from the sense of being manipulated himself; the reader also has certain feelings on behalf of the characters. He supposes that the author will create a character with a certain amount of consistency, will treat him 'fairly', present him honestly; and while these pre-suppositions do not properly belong to the fictional world (a character can't be inconsistent when there is no self to be consistent to), while a reader may realise this, nonetheless the pre-suppositions are strongly held and influence the reader's response strongly unless he is given some good reason, within the novel, for abandoning them. An author cannot prey on the connection between fiction and reality to move his reader or reveal truths to him, and then deny the connection when it becomes inconvenient, and rule his reader's consequent resentment out of court. So that when we speak of unfairness, or lack of seriousness or respect on the part of the author towards his characters, we are speaking of a real relationship of responsibility, the betrayal of which has been a betrayal to the character as well as to ourselves.

Our moral terms must, of course, be cashed into critical substance. What in a work produces a sense of unfairness, of lack respect, to the characters? Most commonly, I suggest, it is some form of inconsistency: making a character behave 'out of character' (one of Agatha Christie's favourite ways of stopping

¹ Now of course there is an irony here which certain authors have tried to exploit. Surely, they argue, once the reader accepts manipulation normal rules are suspended, and if they are not this only reveals the essential absurdity of the belief that fiction can reveal truths. Yet the sniping at conventions of authors like Fielding, Nabokov, Robbe-Grillet itself becomes part of the fictional structure; it is interesting only because it has a significance beyond itself, a significance created just by its being within a work of fiction. No author has yet exploded the delicate balance, each effort has rather been incorporated into it.

her readers from guessing the murder~~er~~); giving contradictory evidence of the moral status of a character (Phyllotson, the dry schoolmaster of Jude the Obscure, is painted as morally narrow, yet we are expected to accept his liberal broadmindedness in freeing Sue of her marital obligations to him); making the mode of presentation of a character inconsistent with the genre or style of the work (though if the character concerned is painted convincingly enough we find the reverse effect, with doubt cast on all the other characters - an effect we find commonly in Shakespeare's dark comedies through characters such as Malvolio, Jaques, Feste). More rarely the inconsistency will be produced by the projection of compensatory feelings on to the novel by the reader, as a result of oversimplification by the author. The character of Morel in Sons and Lovers or of Hetty Sorel in Adam Bede may produce this effect; pushed by the author singlemindedly in the direction of disapproval, the reader may react counter-suggestively and sympathise with the character. Although this is a projected response, the fault is still with the author, either because there is a contradiction between the balanced view given to other characters and the unbalanced view of the character in question (Morel), or a contradiction between the seriousness of the moral response required of the reader and the sparseness of the detail given to support a serious response (Hetty). In these various ways, contradictory indications are given; they lead the reader in two directions at once, so that he loses his cues, and the character who is the focus of contradiction begins to crumble. Not only can the reader see the guiding hand at work, he can see it moving in contradictory directions!

Such contra-indications, as I shall call them, are not per se destructive of a character's plausibility or of the balance of a novel. Sometimes an author will build apparently contradictory indications into his portrait of a character in order to maintain the ambiguity of the character. In the novels of Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald, for example, there is characteristically a central female character who rouses an ambivalent moral response -

though she is usually placed firmly on the side of right or wrong in the end¹. This is perfectly justifiable: morally ambiguous characters do exist in life, and in any case in the detective genre this can properly be used as a device for generating suspense. But the controlling justification here is that the world which both Chandler and Macdonald explore is itself morally opaque; the ambiguous woman is a personification of that world. Again, in first-person narrator novels we sometimes find a gap opening between the indications given by the author, so that we are both able to feel with the one, and observe that feeling with the other. The Catcher in the Rye exploits this technique cleverly, though the success of the device depends heavily on the tact of the author. So strongly do we feel for Holden Caulfield that if Salinger were too overtly mocking of him the balance would be upset; as it is Salinger's occasional wryness corrects any tendency to sentimentalisation. A writer of Tolstoy's calibre can produce this tension almost within the same breath, by the nuances of his presentation (e.g. the description of Anna at the ball); whilst others use a motley of narrators for the same effect. The most extreme form of this disparity is irony, where the contradiction of what is ostensibly endorsed is not even voiced, but the author depends for his effect on a proper awareness of his values by his readers. Thus he depends on our awareness of the very enormity of what is said to create its opposite sense. Swift's Modest Proposal is a perfect example. (The irony with contra-indications in irony is that, if the reader gets the point, there can be no mistake in what response the author intends, so that there is no real conflict - and if the reader does not get the point, there is no conflict either because he is simply unaware of the unstated contra-indication.)

Clearly, then, the presence of contra-indications, particularly of moral attitude, is not sufficient to undermine the plausibility of a character or break down the balance of a novel; but where they do occur there needs to be strong internal justification for them and furthermore a great sensitivity

¹ Indeed this has become almost a convention of the detective genre, assumed by by other media, cf. the movie Chinatown

on the part of the author in handling the balance. Here I shall argue that in many of Dickens's novels there are contra-indications in the characterisation of such a sort that the reader receives two 'sets' of impressions which are mutually incompatible, and for which there is no internal justification: an official desired set of impressions, and an underground set which runs counter to the first and seems to provide a release for Dickens's own feelings of ridicule for the character. The breakdown is most often a moral one, where the conflict comes between Dickens's surface endorsement of, or condemnation of, a character, and his sub-surface reversal of these judgements - though of course in locating the point of breakdown I shall be concerned with matters of technique. There is no difficulty here. In a novel where, as I have argued, a failure in technique may be a failure in responsibility because of the relationship a novelist has with his characters, the critical judgement contains a moral element. And in the case of a novelist who is himself clearly concerned with moral issues, the relevant moral element in the critical judgement is correspondingly stronger. The difficulty arises rather in distinguishing what I see as Dickens's improper use of contra-indications, and the proper uses I have mentioned, and therefore I shall consider possible justifications for his use as I proceed.

At first sight Dickens's characters look most unlikely to attract a charge of inconsistency¹. But in fact it is the very larger-than-life, one-tone, one image quality of their characterisation which produces moral contra-indications for the reader. Consider Dickens's full-scale villains. They are so dripping with evil that we, like Johnson in the face of the savagery of King Lear, retreat into incredulity. The exaggeration of the features which is there to ensure disapproval carries with it an over-simplification, a cartoon

¹ It was Orwell who first pointed out the error critics tend to make here. He identified the inconsistency as springing from 'setting into action characters who ought to have been purely static ... They start off as magic-lantern slides and they end by getting mixed up in a third-rate movie'.
'Charles Dickens' in Decline of the English Murder, (Hammondsworth, 1965), p. 133.

quality which dispels anything so serious as disapproval. Take, for example, two villains in David Copperfield, Murdstone and Creakle. Both are sadists - and two sadists in one novel doesn't enhance credibility; both are painted with a concern for dark sensational outlines rather than psychological subtleties. Murdstone is all sinister blackness, from his 'shallow black eye',¹ and 'dotted indication of the strong black beard he shaved close every day, [which] reminded me of the waxwork' (71) to the dog which like some familiar is 'deep-mouthed and black-haired'. Creakle's character prop is of a different kind; it is his favourite appendage, the cane:

'Was it a sharp tooth, hey? Was it a double tooth, hey? Did it bite, hey? Had it a deep prong, hey? Did it bite? At every question he gave me a fleshy cut with it that made me writhe ... A large majority of the boys were visited with similar instances of notice, as Mr Creakle made his round of the schoolroom. Half of the establishment was writhing and crying before the day's work began; and how much of it had writhed and cried before the day's work was over, I am really afraid to recollect, lest I should seem to exaggerate. (141)

Creakle enjoys his own monstrosity, cracking a joke before caning a boy, popping buttered toast into his mouth as his kindlier wife tells David of his mother's death. Both he and Murdstone are without moral sensitivity, or rather they inject into their cruelty a misplaced moral fervour which makes it particularly unpalatable. With both characters Dickens is concerned with the psychological roots of sadism, the relationship between beater and beaten; yet the interesting question of why the vulnerable Claras of the world are drawn to the harsh Murdstones is never posed, let alone answered. Dickens's facility with dramatic images leads him away from the intricacies of these ideas, and the dark spectre of sadism without the complexities which flesh it out in life is dangerously close to a Disney cartoon image - the shadow of the Sorcerer, the angular features and black eyes of the wicked Stepmother.

¹ This and future references to the Penguin edition of David Copperfield, ed. J. Blount (Harmondsworth, 1976). References will be included in the text.

Now the power of such images might be sufficient to justify the loss of subtlety in certain cases. It is not easy to forget the sinister tenderness of Murdstone to his wife, nor the consequent pathos of the ill-treated Clara holding up her baby to David as the last visible sign of herself. Such exaggeration of image can also be used to deflate as well as to strengthen, as in the caricature of the Beadle in Oliver Twist, whose pomposity and hypocrisy are bloated to render them absurd. Even here, however, there is a danger of laughing ourselves out of care, and this danger is very much greater where behaviour is not absurd but fearful, as with Murdstone and Creakle. To expand their wrongs to the point of caricature only allows us a bolthole from fearfulness; the absurdity of the image conflicts with and so detracts from the seriousness of our moral response.

There are two important factors in producing the sense of absurdity which undercuts the seriousness of these sadists. One is a quality of facetiousness in the language which Dickens uses, and the other is the attachment of the resulting comicality to the victim, which detracts even further from seriousness than if it had been attached to the villain. Both factors are illustrated when Murdstone sets David the impossible sum about the cheeses, at which Miss Murdstone is 'secretly overjoyed' (104):

I pore over the cheeses without any result or enlightenment until dinnertime, when, having made a mulatto of myself by getting the dirt of the slate into the pores of my skin, I have a slice of bread to help me out with the cheeses ...

The initial observation of Miss Murdstone's delight at the difficulty of the sum is marvellously acute, and reveals the awful power of suffering the pair have over David. But this is spoilt by the imaginative decoration of the subsequent observation, which Dickens can't resist. What really captures the eye here - and it is the eye and not the heart - is that image of the mulatto David (what a clever idea) rounded off by the ingenious surrealism of the real slice of bread supplementing the hypothetical cheese of the mental arithmetic. The amusement we feel at these undeniably clever embroideries does not, however lead us into

the agonies of mind suffered by the young boy, rather it leads us deliberately away from them. Could it be in deliberate restraint? Could Dickens be hinting at the agonies without a full-blodied demonstration of them? This could just survive as a justification, if there were a hint of unhappiness on David's behalf in the scene; but instead the amusement we feel is directed, by the nature of the images, at David himself, indeed directed there by David himself. The episode becomes a matter for wry laughter, its cruelties quite submerged. There is no powerful ironic effect in the comic grotesquerie, for it is not that the cruelty is exaggerated and thus criticised by wit; instead the witty detail is an embellishment on the cruelty and thus acts merely as a distraction. If we contrast this with a truly more restrained passage which does not collapse into cartoonery, we see that Dickens can occasionally reveal the chill of cruelty:

"David", he said, making his lips thin, by pressing them together, "if I do have an obstinate horse or dog to deal with what do you think I do?"

"I don't know"

"I beat him"

I had answered in a kind of breathless whisper, but I felt, in my silence, that my breath was shorter now.

"I make him wince, and smart. I say to myself, 'I'll conquer that fellow'; and if it were to cost him all the blood he had, I should do it." (95-6)

The very containment of this exchange, with the violence below the surface, the blood only notional, the dog or horse the subject rather than David himself, makes it all the more effective, for David knows that Murdstone is declaring his intentions towards him.

Naturalism and restraint of this sort is the exception rather than the rule, and I cannot find one example of it in the portrait of the relationship between the other sadist, Creakle, and his chosen victim, Traddles. What might have been a powerfully suggestive cameo is interfered with once again by fatal facetiousness:

I should think there never can have been a man who enjoyed his profession more than Mr Creakle did. He had a delight in cutting at the boys, which was like the satisfaction of a craving appetite. I am confident he couldn't resist a chubby boy, especially; that there was a fascination in such a subject, which made him restless in his mind, until he had scored and marked him for the day. (141)

Though Dickens avoids any complexities, there is a clear and effective suggestion here of the sexual appetite behind Creakle's caning, reinforced by the merest hint that chubby flesh is food for this appetite; that is, the plump succulent flesh reminds us irresistibly of edible meat. But Dickens can't resist the temptation of carrying a good thing to far, by embroidering on the suggestion in the description of Traddles: 'In a tight sky-blue suit that made his arms and legs like German sausages, or roly-poly puddings, he was the merriest and most miserable of all the boys.' The suggestion of food is serious; the outright indentification of it to the point of specifying German sausage and roly-poly pudding is simply facetious. And what is deadly here is that, again, the facetiousness is directed at the victim, Traddles, not at Creakle. There is something inescapably absurd about a boy who looks like sausages and puddings; can we really be surprised that Creakle wants to eat him up? Thus evaporates the apprehension that Creakle is satisfying his sexual appetite in a peculiarly horrible way, by caning the plumpest boy he can find. A final touch of comicality is added by Traddles' ironic obsession with skeletons. They mightwell represent Traddles' poor preyed-on spirit struggling to escape the fatal plumpness and reveal itself for sympathy, stripped bare by Creakle's treatment. But the skeletons are dwelt on to such an extent that they become a mere catch-phrase for Traddles, just another feature of his absurdity like his plump propensity to be caned.

It is in relation to the skeletons that David adds his own demystifying comment, indeed reducing possible sympathy for the victim just as he did in the description of himself as a mulatto. The role David plays in increasing the comicality of certain figures is sufficiently strong to be itself regarded as a factor in producing contra-indications to the serious moral response ostensibly expected of the reader. It is he who deliberately divests Traddles'

skeletons of potential symbolic significance, by suggesting that he drew them only because 'they were easy and didn't want any features'. In this way, in one sense, Dickens has his cake and eats it; he uses the skeletons as a prop image for Traddles, and he scores the easy point against symbol-peddlers. In another sense, however, the cat gets the cake: Traddles fails as a real figure, and it is a significant failure for the greater part of the novel. David's response remains petrified throughout the novel for the same reason: 'I never think of that boy but with a strange disposition to laugh, with tears in my eyes' (146). Precisely the same disposition to laugh is present in his descriptions of Peggotty: 'I felt towards her something I have never felt for any other human being. It was a sort of comical affection too, and yet if she had died I cannot think what I should have done' (111). We feel the weight of David's sentiment, but the truth of his comical affection comes out in the stock images which are used to summarise Peggotty. There is the continual darning of stockings, the apparently absent-minded pricking of her needle into her red cheeks, which never seems to be painful, the throwing of her apron over head, the popping of buttons in extremis. The gestures have been exaggerated to encapsulate the woman, as of course they might have been in the mind of a child; but Peggotty as an individual has been sacrificed, so that when, later in the novel, she marries it is somehow a ridiculous process. As with Traddles, perhaps more so for Traddles is a weak character, we are in no doubt of Peggotty's moral worth and place in David's affections; yet like Traddles she remains a comic figure, and thus incomplete. Our response is likewise incomplete.

Here again, then, we have contra-indications of response to a character, closely connected with the difficulties of cartoon representation, but this time with David himself acting as agent for both the mainstream and subterranean indications. And here I stop short: are all the criticisms I have made so far of Dickens the author in fact attributable to his narrator David? - and thus not proper criticisms at all, for, of course, David is no novelist (not in the real world anyway.)

The problem for the critic is then twofold; to distinguish between Dickens the author and David the narrator; and to further distinguish between David the child and young man (the innocent) and the older David looking back at his younger self. The latter distinction is particularly difficult in that the narrator slips almost imperceptibly, unconsciously from mature man to child to younger man, the one sometimes informing or colouring the other; it is both a strength and a subtlety of the narration. But where then is Dickens the author in all this? Controlling all, of course. But how far can we hold him responsible for the views and language of the narrator he creates? It might be argued, for example, that young David's tendency to be impressed by the comicality of those he loves is a carefully introduced feature of David's character, the complement perhaps of his tendency to be over-impressed by the characters of those who are not so lovable, the Steerforths of his world. However, in general where the young David betrays a fault or weakness of this sort (his very naiveté is almost a weakness in this way), there is some indication of disapproval or at least awareness of culpability on the older David's part. This may be no more than a wry sadness, as when he looks back at his love for Dora (no fault, but a lack of self-knowledge); it may be a painful self-enquiry, as when he looks back to the revelation of Steerforth's exploitation and to a weakness from which he is not yet nor will ever be quite free; or it may be a strong and bitter denunciation of himself: 'Miserable little propitiators of a remorseless idol, how abject we were to him (Creakle)! what a launch in life I think it now, on looking back, to be so mean and servile to a man of such parts and pretensions!' (142) But there is no such indication of disapproval in looking back at his attitude to Traddles and Peggotty; indeed his attitude remains the same, perhaps because it is basically a warm and affectionate one and he sees no fault in it. He recognises his propensity to laugh at both quite freely as we have seen above (in both cases it is clearly the older David speaking). The tendency to patronise through facetiousness is not then seen as a fault by the older David, and

there is no indication that Dickens himself sees it as a fault. Moreover Dickens is surely indulging himself in some of the embroideries and stark-lined images which contribute to the combined effect of comicality and reduced credibility. The strong images of Peggotty are perhaps of the sort which a child would remember and cherish; but the constitution of those images is determined by the author - that thoughtful pricking of the red face is pure Dickens, of a piece with a similar whimsy of birds pecking those red cheeks in mistake for apples. Dickens's, too, is both the awareness of sexuality and the suppression of it in the roly poly puddings of Traddles's arms (and, incidentally, in David's witty picture of himself as a mulatto helping down the mathematical cheese with bread - the humorous detachment from that scene doesn't belong to a child who went through its horrors or even to the man the child fathered). And even if these extremities were attributable to closer characterisation of David, Dickens could not abdicate his responsibility to his other characters; if we are to see everyone through David's eyes and thus fully appreciate his character, the author should ensure that any limitations of vision do not seriously limit our apprehension of other characters. He makes no real attempt to provide any view of Peggotty or of Traddles which is not coloured by David's original view, indeed our first sight of each sticks with us and powerfully controls our developing experience of them in echo to David's strong childhood impressions which control a great deal of his later life. It would be a masterful parallel, if it were not detrimental to the deeper seriousness of the novel. Dickens cannot, I think, escape blame by abdicating the narratorship, though at times he comes suspiciously close to using David as protective cover. We remember from an earlier quotation David's 'I am really afraid to recollect lest I exaggerate', and his sloughing off of any significance in Traddles's skeletons is in the same line of business; David's opinions are being used as an excuse for Dickens's behaviour as novelist which is close to an admission that that behaviour needs excuse.

I have already mentioned one of the frequently-used justifications of Dickens's fancy for embellished images at the expense of psychological subtlety, that they are symbolically powerful; but, as I have argued, it is a mistake to see the facetious embellishment as being all of a piece with the symbolic exaggeration, for it in fact undermines the power of the images. The images begin to feed upon themselves, to eat away the symbolic substance, sometimes to the point of self-destruction. The other justification is that they relate to the centrality of humour in Dickens's art. However, the moral inconsistency, the contra-indications which concern us reveal themselves in a further way which cannot be explained by Dickens's predilection for humour. A defence of Creakle and Murdstone might be that it is difficult to draw villains with light and shade; in one of his novels Dickens does just that. Little Dorrit¹ is a highly moral novel in which Dickens bitterly attacks hypocrisy and moral blindness, but also those circumstances and institutions which help to breed those qualities. His prize portrait here is that of Dorrit himself, whose mixture of self-righteousness and self-deception Dickens builds up gradually and mildly; cumulatively however the attack is a savage one, culminating in Dorrit's rejecting all those who helped him formerly on the grounds of his finer feelings, almost to the extent of rejecting Little Dorrit herself. Dickens also makes a strong claim for extenuating circumstances, showing the corrupting effect of the constant restriction, poverty and hopelessness of being held in the Marshalsea. While no doubt there was taint there to start with, to produce the situation which put him in prison, the picture Dickens paints is of a man whose small moral failings and irresponsibilities have been fed and strengthened by the prison life until they form the core of his character. The peculiar form of his moral weakness is best portrayed where he stands on his 'morality'. For example, when Arthur's refusal to give Tip a 'loan' deeply offends Fanny and Tip, Tip, Fanny and Dorrit remonstrate with each other about the propriety of acknowledging a man who has refused a loan for which they have begged. It is characteristic that their concern is

¹ All references to the penguin edition of Little Dorrit, ed. J. Holloway (Harmondsworth, 1975).

with the social propriety of their position, which they also infect with a moral tone; both social standing and honour - which for them have a profound relationship, just as they do in the higher society of the Merdles and the Tite-Barnacles - are at stake. When Dorrit begins to protest at his son's objection, we think at first that he is going to defend Clennam on the grounds that Tip is in no position to object, having importuned in the first place. Gradually however we realise that Dorrit is worried about the 'general principle involved here, which rises above considerations of hospitality' (427-8); as he has been refused by Clennam himself (at Little Dorrit's request, we remember) but has still been willing to accept Clennam's society, is not Tip casting doubt on his father's sense of honour by objecting to that society on no greater grounds? And we find a further 'moral' principle lurking behind this one; is it not his very duty to keep Clennam's society, and thus afford himself the opportunity of requesting a loan again?

This academic moral discussion is carried on in such terms that it is difficult to recall that these principles surround the begging of a loan by those already imprisoned for debt; the occasion for the discussion destroys its ethical basis and Dorrit is not oblivious to this, though he affects to be; rather his consciousness of it increases the need for assuming a dignified moral position. This is the root of his hypocrisy, that his concern with the manifestations of his own moral position increases in direct ratio to his own moral weakness, and it is a greater hypocrisy even than Tip's, for Dorrit is more truly aware of his moral weakness, more prepared to sacrifice his personal dignity, yet more adept at finding ostensibly moral reasons for his behaviour. Tip has little moral awareness and less self knowledge, and thus his self-deception is not so great. He and Fanny are in a curious way moral innocents; they cannot recognise corruption, and find Amy's mild remonstrances incomp- rehensible, indeed silly. Their moral duty is to themselves, and to disregard opportunities to help themselves is to fail in that duty; that is as close as they get to a moral understanding.

Dorrit is no caricature, and his faults are allowed gradually to reveal themselves. But there is one feature of the scene just discussed which is at odds with its moral effectiveness; Little Dorrit and Clennam the moral hero and heroine of the novel stand by and meekly say nothing in their defence. Now we can find reasons for this in this instance: Little Dorrit's tender compassion for her father which hampers her criticism even though she is well aware of his faults, Clennam's tenderness in turn for Little Dorrit which silences his criticism. But this is not an isolated instance; at several points in the novel Little Dorrit and Clennam are superhumanly careless of their own situation in an attempt to protect others far less sensitive, and with far less right to be protected, than themselves. Arthur shows precisely the same self-denial and indeed abnegation of his usual moral standards in his dealings with Gowan, because of his feelings for Pet, and over and over again in his dealings with Dorrit and Tip. Little Dorrit is even more long-suffering of her brother's and sister's rebukes, her father's absurd sense of honour, after they have been freed from prison and have taken up life in society than she is within the walls of the Marshalsea, though in each case the same hypocrisy and lack of gratitude operate against her. The rebukes she receives, the guilt which her father and family try to heap on her, when she appears at the Marshalsea gate on the arm of the old pensioner Nandy are an exact parallel to their remonstrances, supported this time by the odious Mrs General, when she finds it difficult to fit into high society. In each case it is Little Dorrit's simple, direct approach which treats everything upon its merit, with a great deal of generosity thrown in besides, which upsets her family, obsessed as they are with keeping up appearances. In the Marshalsea in order to keep face one may patronise someone poorer than oneself, but one must not regard him as an equal - to do so would be to drag oneself down. Much the same principle applies outside the Marshalsea, except of course that there are a great many more of the Dorrits. The parallel underlines the emptiness of social position in each case in real human terms; Dorrit's position in high society, built purely on money, is as meaningless as his

assumed position in the Marchalsea, built on length of stay. His criminal irresponsibility lies at the heart of both. It is a point which Dickens accents with the demise of Merdle and the consequent ruin of so many people in high social position. There is no doubt that Little Dorrit is right in these terms. Yet she behaves towards her family as though somehow she has wronged them. When they reprimand her for her behaviour with Nandy she is in an agony of guilt and remorse:

"Father!" cried Little Dorrit, pale and trembling.
 "I am very sorry. Pray forgive me. Tell me how it is, that I may not do it again!" ... "I don't justify myself for having wounded your dear heart - no! Heaven knows I don't!" She clasped her hands in quite an agony of distress. "I do nothing but beg and pray you to be comforted and overlook it, but if I had not known that you were kind to the old man yourself and took much notice of him, and were always glad to see him, I would not have come here with him, Father, I would not indeed. What I have been so unhappy as to do, I have done in mistake. I would not wilfully bring a tear to your eyes, dear love!" said Little Dorrit, her heart well nigh broken, "for anything the world could give me, or anything it would take away" (419-20)

This is not someone standing by with tacit disapproval, withholding its expression in order to spare another; Little Dorrit is using the language of morality, but against herself. Yet she is perfectly aware that she is not truly at fault; her father, sister and brother are at fault in their standards, the more deeply so for burdening her with the guilt that should be theirs.

Sometimes Little Dorrit also 'admits' her fault, as when she apologises for her inability to fit into high society, or is defensive about her relationship with Mrs Gowan; at other times she does stand by silently, but without any other indication of disapproval. Indeed silence is perhaps her most frequent response to accusations against her, though it takes the reader some time to realise that she is there but not speaking, for Fanny and the rest make free with her name and behaviour as though she were not present at all, not addressing her directly but talking to each other about her. They do the same thing when they discuss

Clennam's behaviour in his presence; and he too remains silent. Now this silence on both Little Dorrit's and Clennam's part is difficult for the critic to interpret. The most likely explanation for it is that it is preserved to protect, in this case, Dorrit (and by Clennam to protect, correspondingly, Little Dorrit by protecting her father). Voice is given when her father has rebuked her for her inability to fit into the ways of high society.

She felt that, in what he had just now said to her and in his whole bearing towards her, there was the well-known shadow of the Marshalsea wall. It took new shape, but it was the old sad shadow. She began with sorrowful unwillingness to acknowledge to herself that she was not strong enough to keep off the fear that no space in the life of man could overcome that quarter of a century behind the prison bars. She had no blame to bestow upon him therefore; nothing to reproach him with, no emotion in her faithful heart but great compassion and unbounded tenderness. (530)

It is a moving justification, for she knows the nature of his fault and the root of it, but her great love and compassion lead her to excuse him entirely - because she feels that the fault is circumstantial, a consequence of his prison life - and thus not to express reproach in return. It is true that Dorrit's abhorrence of even the memory of his prison life is so great that perhaps we can begin to understand his dislike even of Little Dorrit's innocent reminders of that life, and to forgive it (we are aware of the same horror when young John comes to visit him). It is not mere social hauteur which leads him to drive John away, to class Clennam as beneath his notice, to condemn Little Dorrit's unease in society; it is cold fear at the feeling that he can never escape the shades of the prison cell. But the manner in which it is expressed, the excuse, the cover Dorrit finds for his feelings, is of exactly the same sort as the continual self-deception he practises

when he is still in prison. In prison his self-deception is characterised by his talking of his standing, his honour, his 'Spirit' as though some genuine morality were at issue, whereas in fact he has forfeited any moral status he might have once had, not so much by getting himself into the debtor's prison, in the first place, but by blinding himself, once there, to its implications for his own view of himself. He comes to rely upon the appearances of status and superiority, for if he examined their reality too closely he would come face to face with his own dishonesty and irresponsibility, and beyond that learns to justify all his behaviour, and particularly his financial dependence on others, in terms of those false appearances, until the truth of his existence is inverted and he sees his dependence as natural superiority, his reliance on Little Dorrit as the bestowing of a favour upon her, his imprisonment as martyrdom, and his fear as 'Spirit'. This inversion Little Dorrit rightly sees as the shadow of the Marshalsea which remains with Dorrit even when he is free from its walls forever, for he is never again able to distinguish the substance from the surface (it is no accident that he is so taken with the great varnisher, Mrs General).

But though Little Dorrit's compassion for her father is perfectly understandable, her refusal to blame him or to see him as having any responsibility for his tendency to deceive and protect himself begins after a while to seem like a moral defect in her - or at least a moral blankness right at the centre of what is most of the time a determinedly moral novel. This is the dire consequence of Dickens's exaggeration of Little Dorrit's goodness to the point of extremity where it turns round upon itself and becomes its own opposite. Should anyone feel that it is an exaggeration in itself to call Little Dorrit's behaviour bad or defective, let me demonstrate some of the ways in which it clearly is so. Firstly, she reveals the same self-effacing and self-abnegating quality where there is far less justification for her being careful of others' feelings than in the case of her father. In particular, she displays this

quality in relation to Fanny and Tip who are both outrageously insensitive to the feelings of others and extremely thick-skinned. Little Dorrit's self-effacement in their presence soon begins to seem like a response to their more strong-willed characters rather than a sympathetic moral response. They treat her as the weak sibling, they browbeat her, they pour disapproval upon her, and her reply is characteristically silence, or a very mild self-defence. Now this moral prostration or self-repression of Little Dorrit's, though less defensible in relation to Fanny and Tip, would still not be a worrying weakness, could be passed off as a comprehensible excess of sympathy or consideration on Little Dorrit's part, if it were not for the moral consequences for others. The effect on those to whom Little Dorrit shows greatest consideration is correspondingly disastrous for them because it has a reinforcing effect on their behaviour. Thus when Fanny and Tip take a high moral tone about Clennam's refusal of the loan, and Little Dorrit says nothing, they are allowed to see their attitude as permissible, even as right, so that the next time the question of Clennam arises, they can be even more high-handed and by the time they are released from the Marshalsea they have cultivated a sense that Clennam is a wrongdoer who has somehow robbed them. In fact they have successfully inverted the truth to suit their own view of themselves: '(He) must be a low-minded thief, you know, or he could never have conducted himself as he did' (506) says Tip, while Fanny feels that Clennam snubbed them originally 'for the delight he took in exposing us' (507). They have wiped from their minds the considerable help Clennam gave them, his enabling Tip to be freed from his debts, because it is too clear a reminder that at one time they were in need of that help, indeed had asked for it. And what is to interfere with their perversion of the truth, if even Little Dorrit, who sees it so clearly, does not reveal it to them? Dorrit suffers in exactly the same way, except that there is a suggestion that his preying upon Little Dorrit's good nature is more calculated, his downward spiral into a deeper and deeper blindness more wilful.

Certainly he makes use of a moral blackmail which Tip and Fanny do not use. Fanny and Tip simply berate Little Dorrit and overwhelm her with their 'Spirit'. Dorrit rather professes himself a broken man, shows himself to be deeply wounded by Little Dorrit's inconsiderate treatment, makes manful efforts not to show his pain, wonders how his daughter can repay his efforts on her behalf with such ingratitude. There is in fact a much more subtle attack on the gentle Little Dorrit, for she cannot bear to see her father suffer; to feel that she has made him suffer is an anguish to her. And even though much of the time she can see through his actions, she still suffers from a second-order pain, at the realisation that his circumstances have caused this decline in his moral status. Little Dorrit is trapped between the two responses, and Dorrit plays upon them skilfully enough - particularly the former, the latter he finds more difficult and more painful to admit - to suggest that he is doing it with cunning and calculation. We see a full display of his histrionics (419-422) in the Nandy incident, moving from despair (he 'buried his face in his hands and uttered a groan') to half-forgiving sorrow (he 'sobbed out, raising his face and shaking his melancholy head at his younger daughter, "Amy, I know you are innocent of intention, but you have cut me to the quick".') to a struggle between reproach and resignation (reflected in the spasmodic clutching and unclutching of the handkerchief) to forgiveness in the face of the ultimate humiliation ('hysterical cheerfulness') and finally to forgetting the humiliation altogether under the stimulus of a small testimonial from Clennam. "There, there, Amy!" said the father, when Young John had closed the door "let us say no more about." The last few minutes had improved his spirits remarkably, and he was quite lightsome. "Where is my old pensioner all this while?" Thus we see the full circle of response, with Dorrit finally restored to his original patronage of Nandy, if anything his belief in the appropriateness of that kind of relationship between them and the inappropriateness of any other strengthened and confirmed. Dickens handles the scene with masterly tact, allowing Dorrit to reveal the spuriousness of his feelings by the very speed and skill with which he runs through them, adding just

the odd hint by a juxtaposition of gestures or attitudes, a just too controlled balance of despair and forgiveness, that Dorrit's feelings are not spontaneous. As soon as he sees he has made a sufficient impression with his grief he is able to shame Little Dorrit all the more by assuming a dignified resignation, allowing despair to break through the control occasionally just to remind her of her original sin and to show how difficult it is for him to keep it under control (thus making the control all the more impressive). He is even sufficiently detached from the situation to see the opportunity to bring his efforts and sacrifices in the past, until even the reader begins to be drawn in by the sad tale and to feel that Little Dorrit really has been wrong in her behaviour. It is not until the final, and only spontaneous, response of the series that his full hypocrisy is revealed; as soon as the money arrives he cheers visibly and the whole incident is forgotten, because the humiliation was never real, except for the handiness of Nandy to demonstrate his generosity and to put the icing on the cake by showing his quickness to forgive. The real sufferer in the scene is Little Dorrit who cannot slough off her feelings, her anguish which has been deliberately created by her father for his own self-aggrandisement and self-reassurance. Certainly Little Dorrit is not aware of that dimension of her father's behaviour; she would have to be superhumanly detached herself to be so. Nonetheless by acting in collusion with Dorrit, by allowing him to think he is right in scolding her, by not speaking up in defence of her own behaviour, she reinforces his hypocrisy and self-deception so that it is increasingly difficult for it to be revealed to him. Thus when later in the novel she is saddened to see the shadow of Marshalsea over him even when he is far beyond its gates, to see the self-deception and unwarranted resentment which lead him to accuse her, and gives him the smallest of reproaches through her wordless touch upon his arm, she is partly responsible for that over-reaching shadow, for his inability to respond truthfully to the reproach. Yet even at that late stage the fact that she

does at least acknowledge a reproach is enough to make him drop at least some of the protective cover he has built up; instead of referring in vague terms to her insensitivity and lack of delicacy in reminding him of the hateful past - a general cover which enables him to mention the evil without thinking too closely about it, and at the same time to put Amy in the blameful position instead of himself - he attempts to explain why he feels so strongly about this, why he finds her unwitting reminders so painful: 'I was there all those years - I have suffered - if I can put that aside, if I can eradicate the marks of which I have endured, and can emerge before the world - a - ha - gentleman unspoiled, unspotted - is it a great deal to expect - I say again is it a great deal to expect - that my children should - hum - do the same and sweep that accursed experience off the face of the earth?' (531-2) Nonetheless he still maintains the fiction of himself as a man who has found a poor return for his achievements, and not until he breaks down under that still touch do we feel that he comes face to face with that fiction. 'He has been running down by jerks, during his last speech, like an ill-adjusted alarm. The touch was still upon his arm. He fell silent ... He began to whimper, just as he had done that night in prison ... exclaimed that he was a poor ruin and a poor wretch in the midst of his wealth; and clasped her in his arms.' (583) Now in this case it is true that it is Little Dorrit's very silence, her forgiveness, her constant compassion which breaks Dorrit down until he faces his own truth; but it takes that first touch of reproach, which we are told would have been eradicated if Little Dorrit had known it would communicate itself, to start the process; and very soon he is back to his old self, being high with his valet to restore his self-respect after the scene. Surely if Little Dorrit had been a little more reproachful earlier, a little less forgiving, Dorrit would have been brought face to face with the truth more often, and reality would finally have been closer at hand. He might even have escaped the shades of the prison house altogether. One can sympathise with the tender Little Dorrit here however; the moral blackmail her father uses is of an unusually potent sort, breeding upon compassion and generosity. We must blame her father for her failing him here; but failing it is, as we have seen more clearly in its application to Tip and Fanny.

Failing it is for a further and perhaps stronger reason; it leads Little Dorrit, in the extremity of her loyalty and compassion with her family, to be disloyal and lacking in compassion towards those who deserve it more. Arthur Clennam is the greatest sufferer here, perhaps just because - an added irony - his nature is very similar to Little Dorrit's and he has this same failing, and thus is prepared to put up with its consequences from one with whom he feels so much sympathy. Little Dorrit, in spite of her profound feeling for Arthur, lets him down continually in her dealings with her family. She fails to protect him or defend him against the baseless accusations of Tip and Fanny in the prison, though she has an armoury of weapons (Clennam's great help to them, spiritually and financially, her own request to him not to give Tip any loans, Tip's own responsibility for the situation which leads to his needing the loan) to use against them. She remonstrates mildly with Tip when he first ignores Arthur, but for the rest of the scene and indeed the rest of the chapter she says nothing more; the only mention of her is of her trying to calm her father whose excitement is caused by the fear that his son's behaviour is making him look insufficiently sensitive! She clearly is upset - perhaps her very silence shows how much - and she apologises afterwards to Clennam; but to those committing the injury to him she has nothing to say. We see exactly the same behaviour when her family attack Clennam 'behind his back' when they are out of the Marshalsea, and Dorrit ordains that it is quite indelicate of Clennam to try to keep up his acquaintance with Little Dorrit; the only word of defence which Little Dorrit speaks is to insist that Clennam has revealed nothing of their past to the Gowans - a defence, that is, in their hypocritical terms, not an absolute defence of Clennam's right to keep her friendship. She allows their criticisms to go by default in both cases and thus their assumptions about the rightness of their own 'moral' position might well go unquestioned (in fact they don't, but we will return to this). Certainly they go unquestioned by the individual with most right to attack, most to lose by their position, and with most chance of their

listening and taking some notice of her criticisms. As a result Arthur continues to suffer at their hand, and to the very end Tip and Fanny continue to think of him as less than a gentleman (though of course there they both are at the end of the novel depending on the good couple to care for them and their children). If Arthur were himself less uncomplaining he could well utter his dissatisfaction at Little Dorrit's apparent lack of care for him, and would to some extent be justified in doing so.

I have suggested that the hypocrisy of the Dorrit family does not go entirely unremarked; on one notable occasion Little Dorrit's Uncle Frederick protests on her behalf:

"To the wind with family credit!" cried the old man with great scorn and indignation. "Brother, I protest against pride, I protest against ingratitude. I protest against anyone of us here who have known what we have known, and have seen what we have seen setting up any pretension that puts Amy at a moment's disadvantage, or to the cost of a moment's pain. We may know that it is a base pretension by its having that effect ..." (538)

This is after the particularly prolonged niggling at Little Dorrit over her relationship with the Gowans and with Clennam, though it is very clearly the accumulated feeling of a long period of resentment of the family's treatment of Little Dorrit. Frederick Dorrit has precisely identified the root of the hypocrisy which leads to the niggling at Amy; the concern with family credit and pride, the concern with appearances, at the cost of profound values. We must note two important features of the attack; first it is so unexpected of the normally weak, shuffling Frederick, and as such shakes the dreadful Fanny and Tip out of their usual complacency. Tip says nothing but he is left 'perplexed and doubtful' (540); at least he does not shrug it off in his customary way. Fanny attempts to do so by complaining about the cruelty of Uncle, but is sufficiently affected to realise that she has wronged Amy in some way, and spends the rest of the day attempting to make up to her for it, though in a characteristically self-indulgent way. Dorrit too is deeply affected by his brother's outburst, though,

I would venture to say, for different reasons. When Frederick loses his temper we see for the first time in the novel the spark of the man he must have once been. 'His eyes became bright, his grey hair rose on his head, markings of purpose on his brow and his face which had faded from them for five-and-twenty years, started out again, and there was an energy in his hand that made its action nervous once more.' (538) His brother is not unaware of the reminder of Frederick's former spirit; when he asks Fanny to forebear from her criticisms because her uncle is not fit to answer for his actions, he is certainly aware of his own part in his decline though of course he phrases his remark so that it suggests the very opposite. "'Fanny", returned Mr Dorrit in a deeply fraternal tone, "You know, with his innumerable good points, what a - hum - wreck your uncle is; and I entreat you by the fondness that I have for him, and by the fidelity that I have always shown him, to - ha - to draw your own conclusions, and to spare my brotherly feelings".' (539) Whenever Dorrit becomes modest about his own role one should be suspicious; where this is combined with the hums and ha's which suggest that even he is embarrassed by what he is saying, one can be certain that he has something to hide. In this case he has once again directly inverted the truth, suggesting that Frederick's weakness is self-generated and that he himself has done everything possible to help him in his wretchedness. The truth of course is that Dorrit's downfall and imprisonment for debt had led to his brother's lowness in spirit and gradual decline; Dorrit was the Marshalsea inhabitant, Frederick never was. At heart Dorrit knows his responsibility and Dickens tells us that he knows by two small but significant touches; Dickens tells us that Dorrit is 'utterly discomfited' and 'unusually pale' (539) and he stresses Dorrit's eagerness not to inform Amy of her Uncle's defence of her. With a man displaying such a gulf between his outer expressions and his inner state as Dorrit, one must look for manifestations beyond his control, and the paleness is one. His seizing on Fanny's suggestion that Amy should not be told is an attempt to turn it into a sign of his own self-sacrificing generosity; but he is over-eager, and it is likely

that he feels Amy should not be told because she will immediately see the truth and justice of her uncle's words. And he is certainly right; but Little Dorrit will not speak out where her uncle will. For the sake of family feeling, loyalty, compassion, for her father, she dams up the vital truth. The same considerations are present in Frederick's mind; but he feels, rightly, that certain situations demand that he ignore those considerations in favour of other more important ones: "'Brother! ... I protest against it! I love you, you know I love you dearly. In these many years I have never been untrue to you in single thought. Weak as I am, I would at any time have struck any man that spoke ill of you. But brother, brother, brother, I protest against it!'" (538) We are strongly reminded of Little Dorrit's earlier protestations of loyalty and protectiveness to her father; but Frederick has a better balanced sense of priorities.

This speaking out in defence of Little Dorrit paradoxically casts doubt on her own preserved silence; the vociferous and positive quality of Frederick's speech is lacking from Little Dorrit's moral contribution to the novel. I have already remarked on the silence which is her most frequent contribution to scenes of moral discomfiture or confusion, and this, together with the douceness and gentleness which are undoubtedly good qualities, yet combine to produce a curiously blank negative moral centre to the novel. Now this is undoubtedly intended to some extent by Dickens, in that he is recommending and endorsing precisely that quality of self-effacing generosity and compassion which does tend to find expression in an apparently passive rather than an active way (I use the terms in a morally neutral way and of course do not mean to suggest that Little Dorrit does not vigorously prosecute her feelings of charity; I want rather to capture her demeanour in doing so). However, I would argue that the blankness is a result not of the characteristic nature of the quality which Dickens is endorsing, which may be positive while unobtrusive, but of the exaggerated version of that quality which he presents through Little Dorrit where self-effacement is carried to a fault which then acts against the virtue he is attempting to present. Yet again, then we have contra-indications about how we

should feel about a character; do we approve of her loyalty to one set of characters or disapprove of her disloyalty to Arthur, approve of her compassion for her father and her family or disapprove of the lack of moral guidance she gives them? At certain key points we are being asked by Dickens to approve while at the same time he is by his insistence and exaggeration transforming the quality we should approve into one which in most circumstances we would disapprove. It is particularly unfortunate that this inconsistency characterises the two characters who stand as the moral focus of the novel; Little Dorrit and in a lesser way Arthur, so that there is a moral contradiction in the novel. I do not suggest that we feel this as a positive contradiction or that we are genuinely puzzled about what we are supposed to feel towards Little Dorrit and Arthur; as with all his good but over-exaggerated characters it is quite clear that we are intended to approve (except where Dickens directly specifies). What we find instead is, as I have argued above, a lack of moral direction, a negativity which is at odds with the strong moral tone of the novel. By over-insistence Dickens ends in understatement.

That Arthur is an echo of Little Dorrit in this respect is important in forming this general impression; their parallel passivity and resignation echo and reinforce each other to produce a profound silence. For every instance I have given where Little Dorrit's silence has had a bad effect there is a similar instance of Arthur's behaviour, indeed sometimes they are one and the same instance as with his deference to Fanny, Tip and Dorrit for Little Dorrit's sake. He shows that same deference to Gowan purely for the sake of his love for Pet when speaking out to the unpleasant and hypocritical man might in the end have done her more good; and there is an uncanny mirror-image of Dorrit's behaviour with Amy, where Gowan plays on Arthur's good feeling deliberately and uses his restraint for his own ends. Again for the sake of his loyalty to Pet, Arthur is disloyal to her father in a situation where that gentleman needs his help in facing Gowan's mother, whose haughty unpleasantness out-reaches even her son's. Mr Meagles is struggling manfully against Mrs Gowan's repeated suggestions that he encouraged the match between Pet and her son for his personal

gain, and in so doing appeals to Arthur, who is also present. Arthur is at first silent, and speaks only when Mrs Gowan also appeals to him:

'I am very unwilling ', said Clennam, looked to by all parties, 'to take any share in this discussion ... Mrs Gowan attributed certain views of furthering the marriage to my friend here, in conversation with me before it took place; and I endeavoured to undeceive her. I represented that I knew him (as I did and do) to be strenuously opposed to it, both in opinion and action'. (579)

It is a denial, certainly, but a laboured and reluctant one, to the letter of the truth and no further. One can almost forgive Mrs Gowan for proclaiming triumphantly on its basis:

'You see?' said Mrs Gowan, turning the palms of her hands towards Mr Meagles, as if she were Justice itself, representing to him that he had better confess, for he had not a leg to stand on. (579)

The generous and trusting Meagles deserves a better turn from Clennam.

There are two possible justifications for this exaggeration of the 'good' qualities of the central hero and heroine to the point of their own self-destruction. One is that it further accentuates the bad qualities of the 'bad' characters: Little Dorrit's propensity to forgive her father everything leads to his greater abuse of her innocence, and thus his hypocrisy is underlined, while Arthur performs the same function with the Gowan. If this is indeed the reason, the advantage gained is far outweighed by what is lost in each case in realism and moral weight. The other possible justification is that Dickens is attempting moral complexity rather than simplicity, by showing the way in which good qualities can be exaggerated to a fault. However, in those few places where Dickens does attempt moral complexity he takes great pains to make it clear to the reader that he is doing so, for example when he points out Little Dorrit's one small taint from Marshalsea. He signals it unequivocally, with a page-title, 'One little prison stain upon her', and expands the idea in the text, where the unavoidable implication is that this is Little Dorrit's only fault. Indeed Dickens is rarely at ease with ambiguity, and as we see here where he wants to dig below the surface he does it unambiguously. Where he is forced into different pattern by the demands of the narrative, or the need for suspense, as in the case of Steerforth, he cannot resist larding the supposedly innocent picture

of Steerforth with dark omens and heavy suggestions, and is much happier when the sheep's clothing can be cast off. The result is in fact far less interesting than it would have been had he tried to convey the genuinely divided nature of Steerforth's impulses; as it is we get only a touching glimpse through David's wretched yet still loving response.

We seem to have here, demonstrated from two different novels where it manifests itself in two different ways, a quality in Dickens's characterisation which relates directly to the exaggeration for which so many critics have tried to provide a convincing justification; but this quality we can isolate and consider in terms not related to any particular critical thesis, in terms, that is, of the underlying requirements of fiction itself. In those terms, I have argued, Dickens betrays one of the novelist's basic responsibilities, by creating contradictory indications of response to a character without any justification for this within the novel. The effect of this can be to trivialise the character, for we inevitably become aware of the author's manipulations of the character and of his own lack of respect for the internal consistency of the character; this in turn can lead to an undermining of the moral weight of a character or to a confusing conflict. It is in this way detrimental to the seriousness of the novel, and to the effectiveness of the characterisation, even where there is a compensating strengthening effect through power of image and language. Indeed sometimes these suggested compensations are themselves eroded by the very effects of their exaggeration. In any case there can be no real compensation for a defect which strikes at the very basis of the novel.

Orwell, in mentioning the inconsistency between cartoon image and action¹ says, 'Sometimes one can put one's finger on a single sentence in which the original illusion is destroyed', and he quotes as an example David's warning to Traddles which destroys the illusion of Micawber. What I have sought to show is that the contra-indications Orwell points out as explicit in the portrait of Micawber are implicit in much of Dickens's characterisation.

¹ See p.36 above

It is their underground nature in many of the novels, the fact that the reader can't pin down the sentence in which the illusion is destroyed because the illusion is constantly, quietly destroying itself, that is such an insidious quality in Dickens's characterisation.

Did Dickens himself realise it? On one, explicit occasion, in David Copperfield, it seems that he did. In the description of the schizophrenic Miss Mowcher, the character who underwent a moral revolution mid-novel at the behest of her original in life, he puts these words into her mouth, when David has expressed himself surprised to see her 'so distressed and serious':

'Yes, it is always so!' she said. 'They are all surprised, these inconsiderate young people, fairly and full-grown, to see any natural feeling in a thing like me! They make a plaything of me, use me for their amusement, throw me away when they are tired, and wonder that I feel more than a toy horse or a wooden soldier! ... If there are people so unreflecting or so cruel as to make a jest of me, what is left to do but to make a jest of myself, them, and everything?' (523)

She speaks here about the effects of her dwarfishness on people's expectations of her, but in fact Dickens is using this as a cover for the change in her actual behaviour and character. Our first view of Miss Mowcher is of a woman stunted in character as well as growth; in our next view she has matured. Her words are surely an attempt to explain a contradiction created by the novelist, and Dickens stands very accurately accused by his own words. He cannot then complain if the reader does not take such characters seriously; he does not take them seriously himself.

Language and Thought in Antony and Cleopatra

In the previous two chapters I have been concerned with problems of judgements about truth as they are raised in fiction for the critic. In both the Lawrence and the Dickens examples, questions are raised about the truth of the portrayal of character, either by the contrast between the literary text and its surrounding history, or by a conflict within the text itself. The Dickens examples illustrate the centrality of the authorial voice more powerfully than the Lawrence; but in both cases the problems – and the solutions – for the critic centre on the authorial voice and its placing of the truth. It is the novelist who takes responsibility for his characters.

I would like to go on to consider similar problems to do with truth as they are raised in a more acute form by plays. It is a characteristic feature of plays that they lack the dimension which in novels is (characteristically) provided by the omniscient author's being privy to and reporting the thoughts, deeds, etc of other characters.¹ There is no authorial voice, in the clear sense that one is provided by the narrator in fiction, in plays.

At first sight, this might seem to suggest that plays are the more naturalistic medium; in life too, after all, we can come to understand a man's thoughts only through his words and actions. But in life, our knowledge of a man's past behaviour and his values, his tone of voice and facial expression, and not least what others say and think about him, provide a context, even for the most oblique or opaque manifestation of a man's thoughts, which often helps us to understand what he means – or even to know what inner thoughts he is hiding. When we read a play, however, the words and actions and their context are the same thing; it is left to us to provide the facial expressions and tones of voice.²

¹ Of course there are plays which have narrators and novels which do not; I am here talking of characteristic, not constitutive, features.

² Keats summed up the difference nicely: 'Writing has this disadvantage of speaking. One cannot write a wink, or a nod, or a grin, or a purse of the lips, or a smile – O Law! O my friends you loose the action – and attitude is everything as Fusili said when he took up his leg like a musket to shoot a swallow just darting behind his shoulder' (The Letters of John Keats, 1814 – 21, ed. H.E. Rollins, II, 229.)

And when we see a play performed, that problem disappears only in so far as we are convinced by the solution provided by the actors. It is an even more curious thing here that in performance we may be convinced in parts - literally; a recent Royal Shakespeare Company Henry IV had a most powerful, human and humane Falstaff, while the Hal was - I felt - miserably unconvincing. Yet though the two are in close conjunction, especially in Part I, the one did not really seem to affect the other.

Plays, then, raise interpretative problems even more acutely than novels, because in a sense they deliberately shelter us from the voice, the view, of the author. Can we then speak of truth in relation to plays in the same way as we can in relation to novels? I believe that we can speak of truth - though not exactly as we speak of it in fiction, as the above remarks suggest. The very attempt which the drama makes, as the fiction does not, to render itself three-dimensional certainly suggests that playwrights themselves consider truth to be in the offing. And do we ever hear Shakespeare mentioned without the word 'truth' being close behind?

What plays perhaps attempt is to give an accurate portrayal of the rather shifting, ambiguous truth that we find in life, precisely by keeping the author's view in the background. But in presenting us with that ambiguity in a three-dimensional form they raise the question of judgement more powerfully than the novel, by resting it more firmly upon the audience.

Shakespeare, as we might expect, exploits this balance of ambiguity and judgement more thoroughly than most playwrights, and in some of his plays it seems almost to be the central subject matter of the play. In this chapter I shall look principally at Antony and Cleopatra, which seems to me to be one such case.

Until comparatively recently this play was seen as presenting two clear-cut conflicting views of a situation, one of which the reader must choose as 'the truth'. Now the prevailing critical view is perhaps closest to that presented by J.F. Danby, originally as a corrective.¹

1. "Antony and Cleopatra: A Shakespearian Adjustment", in Poets on Fortune's Hill. (1952).

To have any judgement at all is to choose, apparently, either the judgement of the soldiers at the beginning of the scene or the lovers' own self-assessment that immediately follows it ... To entertain either judgement, however, is not enough. The deliquescent truth is neither in them nor between them, but contains both. Antony and Cleopatra is Shakespeare's critique of judgement.

I should like to put a somewhat different emphasis on this view than does Danby. The play is a critique of judgement, in that it reveals the impossibility of grasping more than a partial truth in judging certain complex situations, as well as the tendency of most people to make a simple crude judgement which transforms even that partial truth into a parody of itself. Our pre-judgements of Antony and Cleopatra of legend redound on us as we read Philo's first speech. But as we read the play we can maintain the balance between the conflicting views only up to a certain point. We can balance the values, though we may be temperamentally disposed to prefer one set to the other; we can balance the varying reports of Antony and Cleopatra, because we understand their genesis. But when we come to Antony and Cleopatra themselves, we have come to the focus of the play's ambiguities, the reality of which everything else is a report or an evaluation. When Antony says that a tear of Cleopatra's rates 'all that is won and lost',¹ when Cleopatra says, on Antony's death that 'There is nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon',² whilst at other points in the play they each do and say things which seem at odds with these statements, it is not enough to cry 'deliquescent reality!' and shelve the questions of what these statements mean, whether they are sincere, whether they truly reflect Antony and Cleopatra's inner states. To do so is not to suspend judgement, it is to prejudge. Thus, we may not accept Antony and Cleopatra's self-assessment, but we do need to examine it, just as we need to examine all that they say and do as the only evidence available to us of their inner thoughts and feelings. We know that the process of judgement from such evidence is imperfect, yet judgement - interpretative judgement anyway - is necessary.

f III, xi, 69-70, Antony and Cleopatra, Arden edition, ed. M.R. Ridley (1954).
All future references are to this edition

2. IV, xv, 67-8

It is the contradictions inherent within both Antony's and Cleopatra's statements which make prejudgement attractive. It would be much easier in this play to shelve the question of judgement, because it is extremely difficult to distinguish sincerity from insincerity in the statements made by the leading protagonists. Of course, it must be difficult: it is precisely the difficulty they have with each other. But if it is difficult for two lovers in real life to know whether each is sincere in his statements of love to the other, so it is more difficult for two 'grand' lovers, playing out their love in public, to know this; even more difficult again for onlookers to know; and in the play this situation is placed at one remove again to the audience. If we add to this Shakespeare's own interest in the shiftiness of truth in such a case - or anyway in the shiftiness of judgement - interpreting exactly where the truth lies becomes almost impossible.

The language is the key to the problem. But what kind of Key? Antony and Cleopatra speak to each other almost always in the full consciousness of the presence of an audience - not us, the theatre audience, but their own small cast of followers, messengers etc. They are used to living out their lives in public. We the theatre audience only add an extra dimension to the publicity. As usual Shakespeare does not pass up this opportunity to explore and exploit the tensions and ambiguities thus created. His variation of language within the play points up the gradations of Romantic rhetoric in all their moral diversification. The problem for the audience, as for the players is making the distinctions.

Consider for example, one of Antony's earliest speeches to Cleopatra:

Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch
Of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space,
Kingdoms are clay: our dungy earth alike
Feeds beast as man; the nobleness of life
Is to do thus: when such a mutual pair,
And such a twain can do't, in which I bind,
On pain of punishment, the world to weet
We stand up peerless.

(I,i, 33-39)

We notice first the declamatory quality of Antony's lines, created by the rolling rhythms, the sustained enjambements, the inflated language ('the nobleness of life', 'we stand up peerless'), and the sense of a considered proclamation in the opening lines. In no more effective a way could Antony have gained everyone's attention, and particularly his Egyptian queen's, than by suggesting such an Egyptian fate for the Rome whose stern qualities he still somewhat represents. The consciousness of an audience here is almost matter-of-fact, but beyond that there is a strong sense of the effect his words and actions have on others as well as himself and Cleopatra. This sense, in both Antony and Cleopatra, is not illusory, for they do have enormous personal and political power; but it is sometimes over-developed, so that it sometimes dictates what they do and say on a purely personal level. Indeed, their difficulty is that very little that they do and say is purely personal. This leads them to make the large symbolic gesture rather than to act spontaneously, to make the grand speech rather than to converse intimately, to overstress form and appearance at the cost of substance. Public and private overflow into each other. Thus, in this speech, Antony's awareness of the public impact of what he says (because it is a denial and rejection of Rome) and, perhaps more importantly, his awareness of Cleopatra's appreciation of that public impact, leads him to over-simplify, to present a one faceted view of himself, and of Cleopatra.

Nurturing a public image is, of course, not new to Antony. He has been, until his affair with Cleopatra, a figure of superhuman strength and prowess to his followers. This image has a substantial basis, but it has been inflated by adulation. However, in committing himself to Cleopatra, Antony has sacrificed the adulation. As a result, his inflated image has been punctured, cf. Philo's first speech I.i. 11-13, describing Antony as 'The triple pillar of the world transform'd Into a strumpet's fool', full of the bitter disillusionment of one who has previously been able to see no wrong in his hero. It is not surprising then that Antony should seek to replace the old public image with a new one worthy to replace it, and worthy of the resulting loss of the old one. the new image is grandly embodied in the lines previously quoted: 'the nobleness of life is to do thus'.

The loss of his old Roman heroic image is transformed into a deliberate, a glorious sacrifice (and note that sacrifice is a characteristic part of the Roman ethic). 'Kingdoms are clay' - for what are mere kingdoms, even 'the ranged empire', beside the love of Cleopatra? Antony, through his rhetoric, manages to render them no more than 'dungy earth', a poor, materialistic concern beside the spiritual heights of his love for Cleopatra.

In his eagerness to create as convincing a picture of the truth of that statement as he can Antony's speech becomes more like a public oration than an intimate profession of love. He even speaks of himself and Cleopatra in the third person ('such a mutual pair and such a twain') making himself a part of his audience, admiring this 'Peerless pair' from a distance. The grammatical distance suggests the remoteness of his own inner state from that picture. We sense the same distanced self-admiration in the very tone of the renunciation in the first four lines. Notice, for example, the carefully balanced rhythms: the rolling enjambement of the first line and a half, in which he rejects Rome and its concepts of territorial power, places emphasis on that rejection, endowing it with grandeur, while the terseness of 'here is my space, Kingdoms are clay' echoes the simplicity of what Antony is taking up in Rome's stead. The rhetorical antithesis has a two-way effect which Antony manipulates beautifully, suggesting both the nobility of his sacrifice, and the value in its very simplicity, of what he is making the sacrifice for. But the self-consciousness of the manipulation undermines our faith in what Antony says.

This feeling is reinforced by the extreme terms he uses, for another effect of his over awareness of public attention is his tendency to fall back on the readily available rhetorical gesture rather than to search for a more modified but perhaps more accurate expression of his true feelings.

But what are Antony's true feelings? Would it be so easy to make the foregoing judgements on an analysis of the manipulatory language of this speech, if we were not presented with a clear-cut contradiction of its sentiments in the very next scene? For there Antony shows by both

word and action that he is very concerned about the kingdoms and the empire which he has just verbally condemned to ruin; he is still fully aware of his responsibility to Rome, and prepared to leave Cleopatra, temporarily at least, to fulfil that responsibility. In this context, 'here is my space' is an empty statement; the whole speech is emptied of substance by his subsequent actions.

However, can we safely say therefore that it was meaningless when it was pronounced? For there are a number of ways in which we could interpret the rhetoric of the speech. One might be in terms of Danby's 'deliquescent reality'; Antony is one thing in one scene, and another in another - the parts make up the whole. A second is that the hyperbolic language expresses the intensity of passion he feels, even though his actions may for the moment be unable to go along with his feelings. Thus when he says 'Let Rome in Tiber melt', he is expressing his desire for an uncomplicated situation in which he could happily prosecute his feelings for Cleopatra. That he is for the moment unable to follow that desire in his actions does not negate it. Perhaps the speech, coming early as it does in the play, is a way of painting the backcloth of feeling, as it were, against which Antony's subsequent actions are to be seen, for the benefit not only of ourselves, but of the smaller audience of followers, and, of course, of Cleopatra herself. Yet the really interesting thing about the speech is that Cleopatra too knows its limitations - to put it mildly. 'Excellent falsehood!' she exclaims; she admires and enjoys the speech, but she does not believe it (though perhaps this is fortuitous, as it seems habitual for her to question any profession of love from Antony). Ironically, Antony's profession here would be much more convincing to her if it were more ambivalent; she is quick to see that this is not a man speaking from the heart.

For we are forced to feel that ambivalence is at Antony's heart by the very contradictions we see within his speech and behaviour. The suppression of the conflict in particular speeches

does not lead to its disappearance. Antony's insistence on suppression by denial, by committing himself in speech to a more extreme position than he can maintain in fact, makes it likely that he knows what he is hiding on specific occasions. The declamatory speech is a way of attempting to whip himself into a full acceptance of what he says; yet as he speaks he knows the attempt will fail.

We can see this more clearly if we look at another, rather different, speech of Antony's voicing the opposite sentiment to that of 'Let Rome in Tiber melt': his speech to Cleopatra on discovering her with Thidias:

You were half blasted ere I knew you. Ha!
 Have I my pillow left unpressed in Rome,
 Forborne the getting of a lawful race,
 And by a gem of women, to be abused
 By one that looks on feeders? ...

You have been a boggler ever:
 But when we in our viciousness grow hard
 (O misery on't!) the wise gods seel our eyes,
 In our own filth drop our clear judgements, make us
 Adore our errors, laugh at's while we strut
 To our confusion ...

I found you as a morsel cold upon
 Dead Caesar's trencher: nay, you were a fragment
 Of Gneius Pompey's, besides what hotter hours,
 Unregist'ed in vulgar fame, you have
 Luxuriously picked out. For I am sure,
 Though you can guess what temperance should be,
 You know not what it is.

(III, xiii, 105 - 122).

Here again we find the familiar exaggerated language: Cleopatra is described as a 'boggler', 'a morsel', 'a fragment', 'half-blasted', beside whom Octavia is a 'gem of women'. Here evidently, however, the rhetoric is moving in precisely the opposite direction from that of the first example - away from Cleopatra and towards Octavia, away from Egypt towards Rome, away from love towards duty - or anyway from appetite to disgust. But while the extremity of passion has a clear and available

rhetoric, that of disgust does not, and inevitably the speech has a more personal and immediate feel, not least because it is an immediate and not a considered reaction. The terms Antony uses do recall those which the stout critics of his behaviour, Philo and Agrippa, use of Cleopatra, but this may be more because they spring from a similar conflict in each case rather than from a similarly monolithic feeling. What Agrippa hides with his crudity is his fear of the charms Cleopatra presents:

She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed;
He plowed her and she cropped. (II,ii 233-4)

He tries to break forcibly through the enchantment of Enobarbus's description of her, so dangerous, like Cleopatra herself, to the strict values of Rome.

Antony too hides fear, but of a more personal sort, for it is surely jealousy which lies behind his fury here. The sight of Cleopatra apparently flirting with Thidias awakes his disgust and makes him aware of the strength of his appetite for what he sees, temporarily, as worthless; and for which he has sacrificed so much ('Authority melts from me'). The metaphor of food is perfect in the circumstances, reducing the expression of love through sexuality to mere appetite, Cleopatra herself to the level of food. The image of her as 'a morsel cold upon Dead Caesar's trencher' brilliantly transforms the common notion of other men's leavings. Congealing food is the least appetising of meals;¹ here it is juxtaposed with the image of a congealing body - the trencher becomes the bed - death and congealing sexual appetite are brought together in a particularly disgusting way. We feel Antony's nausea. But his nausea of disgust is much more for himself than it is for Cleopatra; and this is surely because he knows that his appetite for Cleopatra is still alive, it is precisely that which the jealous rage springs from, we scarcely need the brief and telling question at the very end of the speech ('Cold-hearted toward me?') to reveal Antony's fear that he has lost Cleopatra's love, fear that not simply underlies but feeds the contempt in his tirade.

¹ James Joyce renews the same metaphor for a similar purpose in his Dubliners story of sexual entrapment 'The Boarding House', Dubliners (Harmondsworth, 1956).

Thus though this speech is ostensibly a reverse image of the 'Let Rome in Tiber melt' speech, and shares some of its qualities (the sense of whipping itself into a specific attitude, the simple extremities, the theatricality) it differs in this crucial respect, that within the language we find the clues to Antony's internal conflict which we cannot find in the earlier speech. This has the paradoxical effect of rendering the rage more credible; and the turnaround at the end, instead of threatening its plausibility, actually reinforces it, because we have been aware of the emotions which lead to that turnaround below the surface of the rage.

How is this achieved? Principally through the language itself. As I have suggested, there is a lack of ready rhetoric available to Antony in this situation; furthermore, he is more immediately moved, and so his emotions are closer to the surface, and closer to the form of their expression, while 'Let Rome in Tiber melt' was rather a formalised expression of emotions felt, but not felt immediately. Also, we know more of Antony, and of Cleopatra, by this stage, and we must not underestimate the importance of that knowledge. Nonetheless, even without it I believe the language would work more subtly than the earlier rhetoric. The food imagery is again the key to this. Degrading though it is, and is meant to be, it also emphasises that Cleopatra is at least 'a breather' (in comparison with the Messenger's description of Octavia: 'She shows a body rather than a life, A statue than a breather'. III,iii,23-4.) Antony's vaunted admiration of Octavia rings cold beside it: 'a gem of women', a beauty characteristically hard and pure, to be valued but scarcely to be loved. We recall Octavius's comment:

the piece of virtue which is set betwixt us is as the cement of our love. . . . (III ii 28-29)

If Cleopatra had the choice it seems certain she would rather be blamed for her 'hotter hours ... Luxuriously picked out' than praised for such chilly virtues - and it is clearly what Antony prefers. Taste lies behind the distaste of the food metaphors,¹ as it does perhaps even Agrippa's

¹ We remember Enobarbus's perceptive comment on Antony's politic marriage to Octavia: 'But you shall find the band that seems to tie their friendship together will be the very stangler of their amity: Octavia is of a holy, cold and still conversation' When Menas questions 'Who would not have his wife so?' Enobarbus presciently replies 'Not he that himself is not so', which is Mark Antony, 'He will to his Egyptian dish again'. (II vi.117-123)

image, fertile in spite of its intended brutality. The force of Antony's rage, too, is a measure of how much he cares for Cleopatra. We cannot imagine him in such a passion of jealousy for Octavia, concerning whom the only mention of sexual relationship he makes is of his 'unpressed pillow', and of the positively litigious 'getting of a lawful race'.

In this speech, then, we the audience are well aware of the ambiguity behind the fierce rhetoric, but Antony is less well aware than in the earlier speech. It is interesting that in this speech Antony and Cleopatra are without their normal audience - with the exception of Enobarbus - and it seems correspondingly spontaneous. Cleopatra herself is worried ('O, is't come to this?'). But from the re-entrance of Thidias, the servant, the rage is transposed into a formal hostile message to Caesar via Thidias and Antony's penultimate remark is only a token recalling of his rage.¹

Cleopatra's interlocutions ('Have you done yet', 1.153, and 'I must stay his time', 1.155) suggest that she too has seen the change, that the display of rage is now more display than rage, and soon afterwards comes Antony's 'Cold-hearted toward me?'.

Antony's conflict stems from his love for Cleopatra, but it is also heightened by the demands she makes for public show of his affection. In the end he can satisfy that demand only in a way which is more than mere show, and which is finally fatal to him, his leaving the battle in pursuit of Cleopatra's sails. But while at times Cleopatra's demands are mere fabrications of emotion, of the sort she thinks most likely to keep Antony with her, at other times there is a much more direct fit between her emotions and her expression of them than there is with Antony, and this remains the case even where - indeed particularly where - she uses exaggerated rhetoric. Let us turn from Antony's rhetoric to that of Cleopatra, to see what light that casts on the expressive status of Romantic rhetoric in the play. Take first her assumed emotions, used to create a particular response in Antony. When Antony is to leave Cleopatra temporarily to visit Octavius, Cleopatra, I think, feels as

¹To flatter Caesar, would you mingle eyes with one that ties his points?

yet no extreme threat, but she intends to make Antony suffer for what he is doing. She bids Charmian 'If you find him sad, say I am dancing; If in mirth, report that I am sudden sick'; and when she finally confronts him, she makes to faint. But all these responses are, clearly and admittedly, pretended, determined solely by their desired effect, and at a further remove, because deliberate, from the feelings in Cleopatra herself. She seeks him; then, when he approaches, leaves with a childish 'We will not look on him'; and after chiding him for caring too much for Fulvia, on hearing of Fulvia's death chides him for caring too little. The fear which these pretences and petulant inconsistencies reveal is real; but Cleopatra's behaviour itself is a mere fabrication of despair. Indeed at this point Cleopatra seems scarcely capable of feeling anything as deep as despair - and certainly the situation does not warrant it. These qualities in Cleopatra's behaviour, which are most apparent at the beginning of the play, make her strangely disappointing on first acquaintance. Where is the great figure of legend, of such power and fascination? Cleopatra comes across in those first scenes more as a Scarlett O'Hara, with her sulks and pouts, than as a great Egyptian queen.¹ Partly, no doubt, Shakespeare seeks thus to demonstrate the gap between legend and truth. But perhaps he is also making a subtler point about the relationship between the reality of Cleopatra and her reputation. She is at her most 'natural', her most 'Cleopatra' - like, in situations which demand her grand style, which in relation to Antony are those times when she is either dominating him completely, or bereft of him. Both situations allow her to strike an attitude which she understands, the triumphant lover, or the lover tragically abandoned. The consequence is that at such times she is not in fact striking an attitude consciously, but is behaving naturally, so far as that term can be applied to her. It is the points in between which leave her at a loss, so that she has to cast around for appropriate behaviour; at those points we are aware of her striking an attitude, because she is aware of it herself; Antony's temporary departure is one such point; if Cleopatra were seriously worried about losing him at this point, her behaviour would be more naturally dramatic; as it is, she can

¹ Vivien Leigh has been criticised for her Scarlett O'Hara-ish rendering of Cleopatra - perhaps unjustly.

produce only play-acting. What most clearly reveals this is a moment in the midst of the play-acting when she creates a word-picture of herself and Antony as they once were:

Eternity was in our lips and eyes,
Bliss in our brows bent, none our parts so poor
But was a race of heaven ...

(I. iii. 35-7)

Here Cleopatra's rhetoric returns to her in all its power, for this is an image in which she believes. It is characteristic, though I think not necessarily reductive of her feelings, that she renders the substance of their passion in terms of outward appearance: 'lips', 'eyes', 'brows', 'parts'. For Cleopatra, seeming is very close to being; she is unconscious of the irony of believing that 'Eternity was in our lips and eyes', when she is so quick to believe that their love affair is ended. Antony may still love her; but if he does something which will make it seem as though he does not, the love will lose its substance. We are reminded of Caesar's more self-conscious and cold-blooded statement to Octavia, complaining that she should have come to Rome in style:

But you are come
A market-maid to Rome, and have prevented
The ostentation of our love; which, left unshown,
Is often left unloved.

(III. vi. 50-3)

Certainly we could never imagine Cleopatra going as market-maid - unless she thought it would have some desirable effect as a gesture. While Caesar's words are a rather crude and cold threat, for Cleopatra they represent a natural truth: what is left unshown is left unfelt. At her most spontaneous, there is still usually some element of the ostentatious in her behaviour. Rhetoric is her natural language; it can scarcely be called falsifying, even though it places all the emphasis on the externals of emotion, because it does not conceal anything. One might almost say that the manner of external expression determines her inner state.

This intermingling of the real and artificial is caught beautifully in Enobarbus's description of Cleopatra:

I will tell you.
 The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne,
 Burn'd on the water: the poop was beaten gold;
 Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
 The winds were love-sick with them; the oars were silver,
 Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke and made
 The water which they beat to follow faster,
 As amorous of their strokes for her own person,
 It beggar'd all description: she did lie
 In her position, cloth-of-gold of tissue,
 O'er picturing that Venus where we see
 The fancy out-work nature: on each side her
 Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
 With divers-coloured fans, whose wind did seem
 To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
 And what they undid did ...
 Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides,
 So many mermaids, tended her; the eyes,
 And made their bends adornings: at the helm
 A seeming mermaid steers: the silken tackle
 Swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands,
 That yarely frame the office, from the barge
 A strange invisible perfume hits the sense
 Of the adjacent wharfs.

(II ii 190 ...213)

This speech is in its tone a conscious story-telling, playing up to the interest of Maecenas and Agrippa, and in its language creates a vision rich and strange, but it is nonetheless presented as an accurate account. Enobarbus's 'I will tell you' is double-edged; it has the relish of a man given the opportunity to spin a wonderful tale, but it also has the authority of a man who knows the truth because he has seen it - and happily the truth just happens also to be a wonderful tale. In keeping with this, the Cleopatra Enobarbus describes is both an immortal enchantress, calling Venus to mind, and at the same time a highly desirable woman. The supernatural quality is in the seemingly magical movement of the barge, the strange invisible perfume it exudes, and the extraordinary beauty of Cleopatra. In a nice conceit, Cleopatra is not simply (as in Plutarch)¹ like a picture of Venus, but 'o'er pictures' Venus, outstripping a work of art which itself is said to be too beautiful to be natural. The same

1. 'Apparelled and attired like the goddess Venus, commonly drawn in picture', Plutarch's *Lives of Noble Grecians and Romans*, in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, Vol. V, ed. G. Bullough, (1964), p.274.

conceit runs through Enobarbus's own description; before he launches his wonderful re-creation (in fact, of course, a creation he disclaims its power by comparison with the original, for Cleopatra 'beggar'd all description'. Thus the imaginative power of his account is neatly allowed its force, whilst being subsumed under the greater power of the original. His description, like the portrait of Venus, is too beautiful to be natural, yet is outstripped by Cleopatra herself - who nonetheless remains natural. Her cheeks flush even whilst they are cooled, in a highly erotic combination of delicacy and sensuality which is carried through in 'the silken tackle' which 'swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands'. Here Cleopatra is most herself, for she is most the legend of herself. Small wonder that Antony is left 'whistling to th'air'; his enthronement in the market-place is calculated spectacle, Cleopatra's display is the natural enactment of the legend she believes herself to be.

The difference between the rhetoric of Antony and that of Cleopatra stems from this essential difference between them. For Cleopatra there is no real disparity between outer and inner state, because the latter is conditioned by the former. Her feelings are simple, and involve no genuine conflict between the demands of his love and the demands of Rome, and he is aware of this. So that whenever he makes a simple rhetorical statement, it to some extent falsifies his inner state - and he knows this. It is surely not true of Antony when Enobarbus says

I see men's judgements are
A parcel of their fortunes, and things outward
Do draw the inward quality after them
To suffer all alike ...

III. xii. 31-4

Antony's 'inward quality' is never truly or fully drawn into his 'things outward'; in a sense, that is his tragedy. But Enobarbus's remark is true of Cleopatra. Her beauty and her sense of drama have helped to make her great, and in so doing they have become the staple part of her life.

That is why her action in leaving the sea-battle is in a sense innocent; Antony cannot be innocent in the same way, and his following her is deliberate, tragic, and finally fatal to him. His 'inward quality' follows Cleopatra's 'things outward'; but he is always conscious of the fact. Certainly, her emphasis on the external pushes him further in this fatal direction; and perhaps that is another reason why his passages of simple rhetoric ring less true than hers, because he is striving to please her. Let me attempt to demonstrate by further analysis of the language why I feel this distinction between the two rhetorics to be evident. Consider Cleopatra's speech after the Thidias scene, in which she sets out to convince Antony of her love. Apparently this speech corresponds to Antony's 'Let Rome in Tiber melt' speech, in both intent and composition. In fact it differs crucially from that speech.

While Antony actually renounced Rome, and condemned it to a specifically Egyptian fate, Cleopatra does not actually renounce Egypt, though she may appear to. She in fact speaks conditionally, setting her oath of love on the condition of a terrible fate should she break it. While Cleopatra's sacrifice will not be required, Antony's all too clearly will. So, Cleopatra is required to renounce Egypt only if she forgoes her love; Antony must renounce Rome in order to gain his love. And even should Cleopatra's oath be 'cashed' the fate she has set out for herself is expressly Egyptian in nature: the hail will 'dissolve' her; her gravelessness is to be brought about by the 'discandying' (again the melting) of the storm; and 'the flies and gnats of Nile' will feed on her body and on those of her followers, thus ensuring that at least in some form, life - and the life of the Nile - will go on. So Cleopatra's grand statement is, in these senses, hedged with conditions, while Antony's was not; Cleopatra's is contingent, Antony's absolute. Yet instead of this rendering Antony's the stronger and more convincing declaration of passion, does it not render Cleopatra's more convincing? She knows her limitations, and takes them into account, without reducing the feeling itself, perhaps even without really being conscious of what she is doing. Antony doesn't take his limitations into account

an extra edge of desperation in the language - 'I will fight maliciously', 'I'll set my teeth And send to darkness all that stop me', 'I'll make death love me, for I will contend Even with his pestilent scythe' - for if Antony loses this battle his previous failure ('I have fled myself') will be confirmed, and the conflict at the heart of his life shown finally to be irresolvable. Yet it is as though he already knows it is lost. His gaiety is shot through with the same desperation: 'my sad captains', 'I'll force the wine peep through their scars'. His captains are sad and scarred because of him. Yet Antony's gaiety is also real; he is making one last agonised attempt to fulfil the love of both soldiers and mistress before the conflict between them causes the loss of both. His 'Come on, my queen, There's sap in't yet' is no papering over the cracks; it is full of the tender consideration of one who sees his doom to one innocent of that doom.¹ This speech is indeed Antony's forcing wine peep through his own scars, and it comes closest to an honest and brave expression of his intolerable state of mind.

Cleopatra too has her moments where rhetoric is tempered with something quieter, though in her case it is less straightforward to call these moments truth, given the foregoing analysis. But they do seem to be moments where her public is not at the forefront of her mind. In one case this seems to lead to loss of speech entirely (I.iii, 'Sir, you and I ...'); in another to a more personal rendering of feeling than is usual for her. Perhaps not surprisingly, this latter moment comes just after Antony's death, though it is not her immediate response to that (which reads more like a kind of funeral oration). It comes, significantly, after she is recovering from a faint - a real one this time - and is barely conscious, so has perhaps not yet assumed the mantle of the great queen:

No more but even a woman, and commanded
By such poor passion as the maid that milks
And does the meanest chares. It were for me
To throw my sceptre at the injurious gods,

¹ Cleopatra's mention to her birthday is naively touching, Antony's response to it more fully and achingly so.

To tell them that this world did equal theirs,
 Till they has stol'n our jewel. All's but naught.
 Patience is sottish, and impatience does
 Become a dog that's mad: then is it sin
 To rush into the secret house of death
 Ere death dare come to us? How do you, women?
 What, what, good cheer! Why, how now, Charmian?
 My noble girls! Ah, women, women, look,
 Our lamp is spent, it's out. Good sirs, take heart ...
 (IV, xv 73-85)

The tone here is uncharacteristically reflective, as though Cleopatra were talking to herself (as she certainly is when she asks 'then is it sin?'). She is not rhetorically throwing her sceptre at the gods, only reflecting that that is what she should do, perhaps what is expected of her; and her 'all's but naught' reflects her weariness of and at those expectations. For once, Cleopatra is self-aware - not in that playacting silly way, not even in the third-person manner of her retrospective account of herself and Antony ('Eternity was in ...'), neither of which had the distance of true self-appraisal, but much more in Antony's way perhaps because for the first time in the play she feels a conflict within herself, between the public and the private Cleopatra. There is a deep conflict, too, in her feelings about life. Her question to herself, 'then is it sin To rush into the secret house of death?', is her first doubting of the sacredness of life, hitherto unquestionable to Cleopatra. She turns then from this inward thought in recollection of those around, almost as though hauling herself back to the outside world, to life; turns to them as fellow human beings for whom she feels concern, again without the faintest hint of playing to her public. It is the concern itself which recalls to her her position, and her speech reverts to a more characteristically public tone ('This case of that huge spirit now is cold') - but one movingly informed by this preceding reflectiveness.

Now, while it is clear that there are marked differences in tone between this speech and many earlier ones of Cleopatra, to the point where we can scarcely call this rhetoric at all, it is also the case that the evaluative distinction I am making is delicate. For it would be possible to see even this speech as just another form of self-dramatisation, with Cleopatra presenting herself consciously as a figure of common pathos. Similarly it could be argued that

Antony's 'I will be treble-sinewed' is no more honest and accurate than other of his speeches, indeed Enobarbus suggests as much with his 'Now he'll outstare the lightning' (In my view a characteristically perceptive comment about Antony's character, but inappropriate to this particular occasion).

How can we be sure that we are interpreting correctly, when we adjudge that in one place the rhetoric is empty, in another meaningful, in another expressive of conflict? The critical problem is one which extends far beyond this particular case, for it is raised at some level by all Romantic language. It is, after all, the central function of Romantic rhetoric to express extreme and intense states of mind and emotions for which simpler language is inadequate.¹

The language itself must therefore be correspondingly rich and intense. The difficulty arises when the language is heightened beyond the level of the emotional substance it seeks to express, thus creating a gap between substance and expression. Because the language is all we have to judge by, how can we know when this gap is opening up and when it is not? The excess of the language is not sufficient guide in itself - because excess is required by its expressive function. It is the requirement for this nicety of judgement which leads Shakespeare to explore the very problem through Romantic rhetoric. In Antony and Cleopatra he can use the rhetoric to express truth in one place and distance from truth in another, and thus examine both the propensity in Antony and Cleopatra to retreat from reality through exaggerated expression of feeling, and the difficulty of judging from the outside whether an expression of extreme emotion is honest or not.

¹ If any reader may at this point be raising his eyebrows at the use of the term 'Romantic' in relation to Shakespeare, I would remind him that that classificatory term is one imposed retrospectively by critics. While the historical boundaries and the exclusive groupings marked by this and another terms have their uses, they can also be deeply misleading. To lump Blake, Byron and Keats together as the same kind of poet is in certain ways far more suspect and challengeable than describing some of Shakespeare's (or Donne's or Crabbe's) language as Romantic, in the sense I have defined it above.

I have tried to show in the preceding analysis some of the cues which we use as critics in such circumstance: our knowledge of the characters as revealed by both their actions and a comparison of one speech with another; the context and situation in which they are speaking; the judgements of others (though these can, in Antony and Cleopatra, be unreliable in much the same way as the main protagonists' words can be); and minute but evident distinctions between vocabulary, sentence structure and imagery from one speech to another. I shall try to demonstrate further the importance of these cues by a brief examination of a very different exploration of Romantic rhetoric by Shakespeare, in Romeo and Juliet.¹

Romeo and Juliet are lovers, but there their resemblance to Antony and Cleopatra ends. Yet it seems to me that Shakespeare is testing out the worth of Romantic expression in this play in a rather similar way as that I have analysed above, contrasting different rhetorics in an exploration of their comparative sincerity.

Here is Juliet:

My bounty is as boundless as the sea
 My love as deep. The more I give to thee
 The more I have, for both are infinite. (II ii 133-5)

The expression is direct, the vocabulary straightforward, but what these set out to present is a profound sentiment. The language is not convoluted, but it is heavy with meaning. The senses of 'boundless', 'deep' and 'infinite' are reinforced by the assonant long vowel sounds ('bounty', 'boundless', 'sea', 'deep', 'thee' - further reinforced by the end rhyme). There is a reverberating pun on 'bounty', carrying within it both what is given and what is gained (which prefigures the idea of regenerable gift and reward in the second and third lines), and also looking forward in breadth to 'sea', (note the same embracing pun in 'deep'). The deliberate lack of moderation in the vocabulary, its intensification through assonance and pun, and the extremity of the feelings and ideas expressed combine to render this what we would classify as Romantic rhetoric. This is reinforced by the circumstances of the lines. This is Juliet's second meeting with Romeo, and hitherto she has been cautious and clear

1. All references to the Arden edition (1980) ed. B. Gibbons

headed in her approach to him, but these lines are in the nature of a sudden understanding of her own feelings, in direct contrast to her own words a few lines earlier:

although I joy in thee,
I have no joy in this contract tonight:
It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden.
(II, ii, 116-118)

Yet, perhaps because of the air of self-discovery, perhaps because of the inherent directness of the statement, we do not doubt Juliet's sincerity here, and indeed it is never belied by her later statements or actions. By comparison Romeo's pronouncements in this meeting, likewise rhetorical but in a different form, seem all form and no substance. How, then, do we make the distinction in this case?

Well, Romeo's rhetoric is, as I have indicated, in a different form from Juliet's. It springs much more obviously from the literary courtly love tradition, distancing the speaker from the object of his love, rather than bringing him closer to it. Consider Romeo's speech at the beginning of the balcony scene:

But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun!
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
Who is already sick and pale with grief,
That thou her maid art far more fair than she ...
It is my lady; O, it is my love!
O, that she knew she were! ...
Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven,
Having some business, do intreat her eyes
To twinkle in their spheres till they return.
What if her eyes were there, they in her head?
The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars,
As daylight doth a lamp; her eyes in heaven
Would through the airy region stream so bright
That birds would sing and think it were not night.
See how she leans her cheek upon her hand!
O, that I were a glove upon that hand,
That I might touch that cheek!

(II, ii, 2-25)

This is clearly different from Juliet's simple intensity, yet it might be justified on the same grounds, for both are aimed at the expression of extreme feeling. Yet Romeo's planetary comparisons

lead us away from Juliet rather than towards her, unlike the figure in Juliet's speech which, in describing the nature of her feeling for Romeo, leads us into that feeling. This movement away in Romeo's rhetoric reaches its climax when Romeo wishes to be a glove upon Juliet's hand so that he might touch her cheek; so caught up is he in the conceit that it does not occur to him that he might much more easily touch her cheek with his own hand in physical and direct expression of his love. His language is literary, and at this stage we feel that the images he weaves are more real to him than the emotions they supposedly express.

We feel this the more strongly because of the contrast with Juliet's sincerity. When Romeo later swears by the moon, he again shows his reliance in a literary convention; the realistic Juliet, however, interrupts, protesting that to swear by the moon is to swear by inconstancy. Only as the scene progresses, and Romeo comes into closer contact with Juliet's more realistic approach, and with his own feelings, does his real emotion break through, and the artificial rhetoric retreat.

But even here, in making this judgement, we are aided very considerably by the context in which Romeo has already been placed prior to this scene. We know that he is given to infatuations, pining as he is for Rosalind at the beginning of the play, and we are told clearly that in Mercutio's view he is in love with love rather than with any one woman:

Romeo! Humours! Madman! Passion! Lover!
Appear thou in the likeness of a sigh.

(II.i. 7-8).

Mercutio's is the arch-voice of reason in the play; and his suspicions are speedily corroborated when Romeo appears, complete with sighs - but now for Juliet:

It is my lady; O, it is my love!
O, that she knew she were!

(II.ii. 133-5)

Without the knowledge of such a context, would we be so ready to dismiss Romeo's first poetic statements of love for Juliet? Would Juliet's words seem to strikingly sincere had she been sighing for Tybalt before she met Romeo?

These plays of love, in which Shakespeare so fascinatingly explores the complex relationship between extreme emotion and its poetic expression, may thus provide problems of judgement and interpretation for the critic. But at least they do provide a dramatic context in which the individual speeches are set, which help us at least to rule out certain difficulties of interpretation. We may be doubtful about the true substance of some of Antony's declarations as they are spoken; but the fact remains that he does sacrifice Rome, honour, and in the end his very life, for the sake of his love of Cleopatra. Rome does eventually melt in Tiber, and the wide arch of Antony's ranged empire - and so with him one part of Rome's imperial authority - does fall. Those earlier statements are contained within Antony's own final ruin, but they add to the moving power and finality of Cleopatra's 'This case of that huge spirit now is cold', even if we do not feel that the sacrifice has been wholly worthwhile. And while we may admire Cleopatra less, her rhetorical promises are cashed too. True, she seeks some means of living first, she contemplates a compromise; but in the end she too dies for the sake of her love.

The knowledge of this outcome inevitably influences the way in which we interpret the preceding rhetoric. There is still, just as inevitably, a very large question mark over the interpretation of individual speeches, as there must be in a play where the central characters' lives are made up as much of image as of inner substance, as much of public as of private. Yet we continue to try to interpret the inner states of characters from the evidence they provide. And we do so because the power of Romantic rhetoric suggests an intensity and extremity of inner feeling which is worth making contact with. In this way Antony and Cleopatra captures for us something central to our nature as human beings: the inaccessibility of other minds which nonetheless we do, and must, continually try to reach.

Sense and truth in poetry

In the foregoing chapters I have looked at a number of different ways in which questions to do with truth are raised for the literary critic. In relation to the novel, I have explored the ways in which they are raised either by the overt or by the implicit relationship between fiction and reality (Chapter One), or by requirements for consistency of characterisation and of authorial standpoint within the novel itself (Chapter Two). With these cases I have contrasted drama (Chapter Three), and considered the particular problems of interpretation posed for the critic where there is no narrative expression of the authorial voice, and no further guide to the characters' inner lives beyond what they themselves say and do (including, of course, what they say about each other).

In all of these cases the precise nature of the truth in question is characteristically elusive. Sons and Lovers and Villette are both 'about' real events in that there is a clear and unavoidable match between events in the novels and events in the respective authors' lives and this clearly has consequences for critical approaches to the issues of realism and credibility in relation to these novels. Yet at the same time the determining factor in such approaches is that these novels are fiction, and the events which they describe are not real; but, as can be seen from almost any critical work about fiction, this by no means rules out the relevance of concepts of realism and credibility in relation to these works, concepts which themselves postulate a relationship of some sort between fiction and truth. That this relationship, though variously interpreted and understood by critics, can have crucial consequences for even the internal consistency of works of fiction can be seen from Dickens's David Copperfield and Little Dorrit. My examination of these works further shows that a lack of truthfulness, in the sense of internal consistency within a fiction, can have consequences for apparently unrelated critical difficulties with Dickens, such as his sentimentality and its place in a critical evaluation of his work.

Antony and Cleopatra is the only one of the works so far examined to refer explicitly to people who really existed, and to take these people as the basis for its central characters. It is thus about real events in a way that none of the other works is, because it is about Antony and Cleopatra. Is truth more clearly and simply at issue here than in the other cases then? In one way, yes, because the playwright, in choosing to create characters whose eponymous counterparts once lived, declares overtly his interest in reality, and so in truth. Yet the play shows us that the legendary and historical views of Antony and Cleopatra, and even their views of themselves and of each other, may be as little to be trusted to be the truth, as the fictional view put forward by the play itself. (Indeed Shakespeare, like many authors, uses historical material here, less because he is interested in the nature of historical accuracy than because he is interested in the nature of truth, of which this is merely one example).

In addition to showing some ways in which truth is at issue in literature, I have also thus tried to show some ways in which the peculiar role of truth in literature may have consequences: for the correctness of critical judgements about literature - i.e. for truth in criticism.

Again, there are many critics who have tried to claim that there is no question of truth in criticism, just as there are many (the two groups overlap) who have tried to deny the possibility of literature's revealing truths to us. In my remaining chapters, I wish to consider some of the questions I have already examined in relation to fiction and drama, as they are raised by poetry, and to show through that consideration that truth does have a central role in poetry, that it thus has consequences for critical judgements about poetry, and that, in relation to critical judgements which are concerned directly or indirectly with that dimension, we must speak not merely of the persuasiveness but of the truth - or otherwise - of those judgements.

Now poetry has a far less obvious relationship with the external

world than either fiction or drama. It need not be, and characteristically is not, narrative in the way that fiction is, and so does not imitate the chronological structure of our experiences of the real world in the way that fiction often does. Nor is it 'three-dimensional' in the way that drama is, so that, unlike drama, it does not imitate the dynamic of interpersonal experience. In terms of its structure, then, poetry is far less imitative of, and indeed corresponds very little to, the outward structure of real experience. Even more importantly, perhaps, it is characteristically not inhabited by 'characters' with whom a reader might identify, and with whose 'experience' the reader might draw parallels with his own. There are, of course, notable exceptions, such as Browning's 'My Last Duchess' or Crabbe's 'Peter Grimes', but I am speaking of what is characteristically the case. Browning is particularly unusual, in that he writes many of his poems in the persona of a character whom he has created, and to that extent his poetry comes closer to the genre of drama. But where, as is usual, there is a mediating poetic voice between the reader and the description of the poetic characters - the 'I' of the poem - it is that voice with whom the reader feels most in contact, and which is the focus of interest, through whom and with whom the other 'characters', if they appear, are experienced.¹

Yet whilst this facet of poetry - that structurally it is not imitative of the real world - would seem to move it further away from measurement and interpretation in terms of reality, and so from critical concepts such as realism, and credibility, it may at the same time bring it closer to the possibility of revealing truths. For that egocentric poetic voice is talking directly to the reader, revealing its inner concerns to the reader's 'inward' ear. In such a manner truths can be told. While the novel and the drama might tell truths through and with the support of a convincing initial

1 Cf. Wordsworth's lyrical ballads, or even the 'characters' encountered at one remove in Gray's 'Elegy'.

depiction of the real world, the truths they tell inevitably spring from that depiction, and to that extent are limited by it. But perhaps poetry, by declaring at the outset its separateness from the needs of realism, can offer truths, large and direct, unfettered by dependence on verisimilitude, for it presents itself in its relationship with the reader as an inner conversation.

But if that is the case, how do we judge these large, general truths? I have already attempted to show some ways in which we begin to judge them in drama and fiction, partly through the convincingness or otherwise of their imitative structures. Does some similar consideration come to bear in poetry, in spite of the fact that the relationship between the depiction of the external world in poetry and its actuality is an uncertain one?

The poetry I have chosen as the focus of consideration in my remaining chapters presents this difficulty in an acute form: Romantic poetry.¹ At the same time it presents the critic who would deny the possibility of literature's revealing truths with extreme difficulties. That which renders it more likely to reveal truths is what also makes the critical task of distinguishing truth from falsehood more difficult. For common to all Romantic poetry is an overwhelming preoccupation with the inner, with states of mind and feeling. Abstractions abound; but these abstractions work in two directions. They are impossible to 'test' against concrete experience, thus they are unfalsifiable, and consequently in this sense they are subjective. Yet they clearly offer themselves as truths. 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty', capable as it is of numerous interpretations at the hands of critics, is not only about truth, it is offered as truth. Our assent, or otherwise, is related to another common dimension of Romantic poetry, its expression of inner experience through an unusually rich apprehension of the external world, whether the inner experience is a response to the external world, or whether the external world is used as a metaphor for the inner experience, or both. This dimension of Romantic poetry connects it in a more familiar way with reality,

1

Here, as above, I use 'Romantic' in the broad sense, though I shall draw most of my examples from the recognised Romantic period, the early nineteenth century, or from the Victorian developments of the rhetoric established in that period, largely because it is on these areas that the critical debate on Romantic language has centred.

a way more like that explored in the foregoing discussions of fiction and drama.

So, Romantic poetry offers us truths, expressed in terms establishing some connection with the real world, and it has been argued, most forcibly and extensively by F.R. Leavis, that the power of those truths - indeed, their truth, is partly dependent upon the accuracy of the expressive verbal picture of the real world through which they are partially expressed. This close relationship between two kinds of truth is not peculiar to Romantic poetry. But what renders it of particular interest in this discussion is that in Romantic poetry it is characteristically accompanied by - expressed through - an extreme richness and intensity of the thoughts, feelings and states of mind expressed. That match is, indeed, the justification of a rhetoric which might otherwise be criticised as excessive, self-indulgent. But here a difficulty arises for the reader. For if truths are offered, truths about our innermost beings, possibly about intensity of experience, in a vocabulary which is by its nature excessive, how can the reader make evaluative distinctions about such poetry? When Keats begins Endymion with the statement, 'A thing of beauty is a joy forever', and ends 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' with the words 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty', is one statement less 'true' than another? Is there a difference between the poetic truth of each statement and its actual truth? (i.e. would we judge the comparative truth of the statements in a different manner if they occurred in the course of discussion, rather than in poetry?) And how does the truth or otherwise of the statements affect our evaluation of the poetry? It is universally agreed by critics that Endymion is a lesser work than the Odes. But why? And what is the relationship between the reasoning behind that agreement and our response to the statements in each poem? Again, the crucial difficulty has to do with the dependence in Romantic poetry on excess; for if Endymion is attacked for its self-indulgence - what Keats himself described as 'mawkishness' in the poem - may not the Odes also be so attacked?¹

¹ I will return to a full consideration of this comparison in a later chapter.

Keats solved his own dilemma with the stipulation that 'a fine excess'¹ was what was required in poetry. But this is to beg the question. the question is when an excess is fine and when it is not. This is the tricky problem posed for the critic by Romantic poetry, and it is not only an evaluative problem, but one which has bearing on whether the truths such poetry offers are to be accepted or not. Thus critical truth and poetic truth connect in a special way here.

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1. The Letters of John Keats 1814 - 1821 ed. H.E. Rollins (1958), Vol.I, p.238.

I have to some extent in the foregoing introductory remarks presupposed an acceptance of my assertion that truth enters into poetry as surely as it enters into fiction and drama, and that thus poetry, and therefore criticism of poetry, necessarily has a moral dimension. In fact, however, a number of critics have challenged this view, and the purpose of the remaining part of this chapter is to show that the position of such critics is untenable, before I move on to examine the consequences of my own view through a detailed examination of cases, both of criticism and of poetry. This examination will, I believe, flesh out in the only way possible the bones of my case, argued briefly here.

Those critics who eschew the moral dimension of criticism argue from a number of different positions. Here I propose to consider what I see as the three principal positions: those who oppose the moral dimension of criticism from a prior view about the nature of language (the structuralist critic); those who oppose the moral dimension of criticism because they believe that the meaning of poetry is secondary in importance to the poetic techniques employed, but who argue (or characterise) this position from within the traditional framework of literature and criticism (what I shall call the 'technical' critic); and those who see the moral dimension of literature as important, but so problematic as to exclude itself from any thorough consideration by the critic (the 'technical' critic, Mark II).

* * * * *

The structuralist critic

The structuralist critic (and I subsume the post-structuralist under this category, because he differs from the traditional critic in the same radical way) argues from a particular philosophy of language, which sees language as an enclosed, non-referential

system. The split between this critic and the main body of English criticism is radical. Literature is of interest because it is a perfect embodiment of the non-referential model of language, being itself more evidently non-referential and enclosed from reality. Thus literature is about language; and language is about form; so literature is about form. Criticism of literature is thus, necessarily, about form; indeed criticism of literature is not criticism of literature, it is self-criticism. For as language is self reflexive, so literature is self-reflexive, and so criticism is self-reflexive. The further the 'second-order' activity moves itself away from the first-order activity, the truer it is to the nature of language. Indeed, there is no second-order activity, for the more self-reflexive the activity becomes, the more it is a truer reflection of the nature of language.

The effect of this view of language, and so literature, on criticism is to render it either highly theoretical, and thus disconnected from the discussion of specific works (the specificity of which is of no interest in any case) and concerned rather with poetics; or highly sensitive to formal and structural features of particular texts. In either case, meaning is not simply subservient to form, it is undifferentiated and inconsequential. There is no external referent (not just for the language of literature, but for language tout court) and so truth becomes an empty concept.

Post-structuralism is even more hostile to meaning than structuralism, attacking as it does the 'logocentric' dimension of even structuralist discussions of literature. In the Derrida view, 'Il n'y a pas de hors texte', and any discussion of 'texte' immediately threatens that view.

The implications for criticism are evident. In the Saussurean view, 'the whole of literature is contained in the act of writing, and no longer in those of "thinking", "portraying", "telling"

or "feeling"¹. In the Derridan view, a reading of the text will not only challenge the role of meaning but seek to reverse it:

A deconstructive reading ... will take the metaphysical, logocentric oppositions at work in a text, reverse them, and then question them in such a way as to 'neutralize' them.²

For these critics, albeit by way of sophisticated theory, 'a poem should not mean but be'. In critical practice this leads to analyses such as M.A.K. Halliday's of Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan', and R. Jakobson's of Shakespeare's 'Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame'.³ Both analyses are concerned almost exclusively with the description of formal features. Jakobson pays particular attention to similarities of linguistic form, and grammatical groupings: the significance of these features - the reason we should be interested in them - stems entirely from parallels and patterns within those forms and groupings, and though Jakobson does eventually relate these to the sense of the lines, that relationship is, as it were, accidental. Halliday's approach is even more inimical to sense; he concentrates on describing, inter alia, the use of the definite article in a non-defining way, and the use of verbs in a non-'verbish' way. Truth does not arise, because content is rendered immaterial. Ann Jefferson, in an account sympathetic to structuralism, sums up the position thus:

By concentrating on the signifying structures of literature, the structuralist approach sets aside all questions of content. This means that the language of literature is no longer regarded as subordinated to the message supposedly carried by the text, and this emptiness of content illustrates far more powerfully than could anything else the primacy of language itself.⁴

1. R. Barthes, 'Science versus literature', in Structuralism: A Reader, ed. M. Lane (1970), p.411.

2. A. Jefferson, 'Structuralism and Post-Structuralism' in Modern Literary Theory, ed. A. Jefferson and D. Robey, (1982), p.110.

3. R. Jakobson and L.G. Jones, Shakespeare's Verbal Art in 'Th'expense of spirit' (The Hague, 1970).

4. Modern Literary Theory, p.87.

The primacy of language means, of course, the deposing of sense. I do not propose here to argue fully the case against the root philosophical position of the structuralists, in a thesis which takes as its starting point the referential nature of language, a starting point which can scarcely be seen as problematic, since the referential nature of language is the accepted view in the mainstream philosophical tradition. The question of whether the language of literature is referential or not I touch on at various points and argue that it is; but this would be irrelevant to the structuralist position, since the non-referential nature of the language of literature stems, for him, from the non-referential nature of language itself.

Now it is at this point that I would begin to question the structuralist position. For literature is seen as a 'heightened model' of the self-enclosed nature of language, and in that lies its principal interest and importance. But non-reference cannot be a matter of degree. If language is non-referential, that is the end of the matter; literature cannot somehow be more so - unless you admit of a gap between language and literary language. For the non-structuralist, that gap can be considered because the possible non-referential nature of literature stems from its very difference from referential language. Thus it is easy for the non-structuralist to see that there may be a crucial difference between the words 'Jane walked down the road', where 'Jane' refers to a real person, Jane, and 'road' refers to a real road; and the words 'Ursula and Gudrun Brangwen sat one morning in the window bay of their father's house' (the first words of Women in Love), where there is no Ursula and Gudrun, therefore no father, and no window-bay - and even no 'one morning' - in the real world. But for the structuralist, with a view of language as non-referential, there can be no distinction. At best, then, the view of literature as a heightened model of language must be a kind of metaphor; but even if it is that, it depends on a distinction which cannot strictly be made. In the same way, the interest and importance of literature disappears along with this distinction, for it is

of a piece with other language, and no more and no less interesting than that (since the structuralist opposes any content-based interest in the special nature of and importance of literature).

At the level of the work (a level which most theorists of this school studiously avoid), those structuralists and post-structuralists who do pay close attention to the work do so in a descriptive way, noting those features of the language of literature which distinguish it formally from 'other' language. Apart from the theoretical incoherence involved here (a considerable amount of doublethink is necessary for the critical practice of structuralism), the critical response is entirely undifferentiated by considerations of sense, being firmly directed towards structural and linguistic patterns which have no significance beyond themselves. Authorial intention, social and historical context (including presumably the history of language itself), anything extrinsic to the work, are all ruled out of consideration; yet the concentration on the work itself which this produces is in fact illusory. When Jakobson talks about Shakespeare's sonnet, 'Th'expense of spirit', it is not the sonnet itself he is interested in but the formal and structural patterns it presents. His remarks are immensely distant from most readers' responses to this poem, responses which, not surprisingly, have something to do with what the poem says.

Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action, and till action, lust
Is perjur'd, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust ...

An account of these lines which does not take account of the meanings of those bludgeoning body blows of words in the second couplet has little to do with the common experience of literature, an experience which is what makes literature more worth reading than, say, the back of the cornflakes packet. Jakobson would argue that he is not concerned with the conscious experience of the reader, but rather is concerned to lay bare some of the structural

workings of the poem which may be responsible for that response at a subconscious level. But in the service of what? In Jakobson's view, presumably, in the service of finding out more about the language system. But is this what we are really interested in when we read this poem? I think rather we are interested in its powerful expression of savage despair about the inescapable power of lust. If the equivalences and patterns which Jakobson charts have something to do with our response at a subconscious level, that may be of interest in two ways: as a psychological phenomenon, interesting for its very disconnection from the experience of the response itself; and as an echo or reinforcement of patterns of meaning in the work.

The structuralist would, I think, see my objections as vulgar. So be it. Our responses to literature are vulgar, in the best, the precise sense of the word. The structuralist would not, of course, be interested in its sense.

The 'technical' critic

There are also critics within the traditional mainstream of criticism who eschew the moral dimension of poetry. These critics fall into two broad categories: those who consider the meaning of poetry to be secondary in importance to technique, not from the radical position of the structuralists, but with many of the same effects; and those who agree that poetry has a moral dimension, but see this as so problematic for the critic that he does better to stick to a purely technical approach. My arguments against both positions have to do with their reductive effect on criticism (and in the former case on literature).

Let us take the harder position first. This might be exemplified by a critic such as C.S. Lewis who saw the 'music' of Milton as far more important than the sense: 'It is not in the least necessary to go to the bottom of these verse sentences as you go to the bottom of Hooker's sentences in prose'.¹

1. Preface to Paradise Lost, (1942), p.45

Although such critics would not deny the place of sense, they minimise it by giving greater priority to the overall pattern of sound and rhythm or to what Lewis calls 'the broad imaginative effects',¹ as though these were not partly created by sense, syntax, etc. Indeed it is this placing of sense and music in opposition to each other which reveals the danger of this position, for while such critics may pretend to be expressing only a preference, in fact their operation of that preference (for 'music') works to the exclusion of sense. For obviously if they consider that an awareness of sense, syntax, etc is going to actively interfere with the appreciation of the music of the poetry, they will tend to prefer poems where that problem does not arise in the first place, where there is little subtlety of sense or complexity of syntax to act as a worrying distraction from the music.

Now in fact, 'music' and 'sense' need not be in conflict with each other; even where they are apparently so this may work to the greater force in the poetry. For example, the careful use of rhythm can highlight or subtly alter the sense of words or phrases: Bishop King's 'Exequy'² is a perfect example of a poem which is musically beautiful, and whose music at the same time alerts us to nuances of feeling and thought in the lines, principally through the use of the eight syllable rhyming couplet, which is exploited both for its regularity and its irregularity. When King does break the regular rhythmic pattern, almost soothing in its flow, it is the more stunning, as in the lines

But heark! My pulse, like a soft drum
Beats my approach, tells thee I come

The break of the line with an exclamation mark after only two syllables throws out the regular pattern, though the iambic beat is preserved; then the comma after 'pulse', and the throwing of the rhythmic weight onto the first syllable, 'like', rather than the second breaks the iambic pattern; and the whole is completed by the final spondee. The effect is to imitate a sudden quickening and change of beat in the heart, which is of course precisely the

1. Ibid, p. 45

2. The Metaphysical Poets, ed. H. Gardner (1961)

sense King is after in the words. But it is the rhythm which does the work, in support that is of the sense already given to us by the words themselves; the two work in perfect conjunction, and anyone who attempted to listen to the music here at the expense of the sense would lose much of emotional weight of the line. At the same time, a full awareness of rhythm is also necessary for the full effect; reading the line out loud makes one catch one's breath.

The same interdependence of surface and sense is crucial to a proper understanding of those Shakespeare plays in which self-deception is explored. Othello's music, and Antony's rhetoric, are both beautiful in themselves, in the musical sense, but they are also used by Shakespeare to bring out particular ironies, and reveal suppressed pain, through the very contrast of the surface music with the agonies we know to exist beneath, and which occasionally break through that surface. Antony's speech, 'I will be treble-sinewed' (III, xiii, 178 -194), which I examined in the previous chapter,¹ is shot through with desperation and despair, and it is the contrast between the determined proudness of the rhetoric (I will be treble-sinewed') and the occasional, almost casual, give-away word (I'll set my teeth, 'my sad captains', 'force the wine') which produces much of this effect. The regular caesurae of the second, third, fourth and eighth lines, and the high incidence of run-on lines reinforce the sense of power and pride; but it is the irregularly placed caesurae, and the end-stopped punctuation, which help to call attention to the crucial words and sentiments. The weight and burden of the single word 'Come' in:

but now I'll set my teeth
And send to darkness all that stop me. Come,
Let's have one other gaudy night ...

(ll 181-183)

falling as the last syllable of the line, but immediately after a full stop, itself followed by a comma, gives us the sense of Antony gathering up himself and his resources, and those of all around him, after a deadly blow. We remember his 'Love, I am full

1. See pp. 78-79 above.

of lead' from two scenes previously. This is the great man trying to cast the weight of that lead. Similarly, his 'Call to me All my sad captains' carries through that weight of his sorrows. The line ending 'call to me' has eleven syllables, so 'call to me' again comes after a late caesura, drawing attention to itself thus and throwing emphasis forward to its predicate 'All my sad captains' in the next line, giving a strong sense of the inter-dependent relationship between the 'me' (Antony) and the captains. Antony is distraught by his sense of having failed his men, and through this of having failed himself; the clever transference of any explicit emotion here to his captains - note the heavily stressed monosyllables 'All my sad' - only accentuates the sense of his own sorrow. In the same way the wine which he later promises to force through their scars seems more like the blood of his own desperation.

Of central importance in the achievement of these effects is the wonderfully subtle interplay of sound and sense in these lines; it is of similar importance in certain speeches of Othello (e.g. 'Farewell the tranquil mind', III,iii, 354-63). Yet a critic reading those great speeches, listening primarily for the music and seeing complexities of sense as a possible interference, will see them as over-simple, and so miss much of the irony, and much of the pain.¹

The more realistic defence for the 'technical' critic, i.e. the critic who concerns himself with the technical rather than the moral dimension of the poetry, is that where the critic recognises that there is a moral dimension in poetry, and hence this might properly be the concern of the critic, but it is so fraught with problems that the critic does better to stick to purely technical description of poetry.²

1.C.S. Lewis again demonstrates the shortcomings of this view in 'Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem?' in *Studies in Shakespeare*, ed. P. Alexander (1967): 'The first thing is to surrender oneself to the poetry'.

2.See Allan Rodway, *The Truths of Fiction* (1958) especially pp 180-185 on 'The need for a Formal Criticism'. Also *Patterns of Literary Style*, ed. J. Strelka (1971)

This critic's position might also embrace the view that he is on safer logical ground with technical matters where, it might seem, judgements can be tested against the reader's experience in an approximately scientific way. This view recognises the importance of thought and feeling in poetry and its consequent moral substance, and so is not reductive of literature in the way that the stronger thesis (the C.S. Lewis variety) is; rather it recognises the shortcomings of criticism in the face of these elements in literature, and seeks to circumscribe criticism within the bounds of what is not problematic. At the heart of this view is the belief that 'style' and 'content' can be separated in this way quite satisfactorily (a belief which lies within the 'music over sense' view of criticism, too, but is not of central importance there, because for the reader to pay more attention to music than sense, it is not necessary for him to actively separate one from the other). Any 'good' poet with whose ideas critics find themselves uncomfortable tends to attract this critical distinction. One of the most notable cases of this sort is Shelley, as F.A. Pottle shows in his historical account of critical attitudes to Shelley¹:

(p. 372)

Our survey of Shelley's reputation has given reason to suppose that a poet can withstand a good deal of attack on the soundness of his ideas so long as a majority of the people who read him find aesthetic value of a high order in his poetry. But if a majority of the people who read him get little aesthetic value from him, his reputation is certainly going to be scaled down.

(p.372)

By 'aesthetic value' Pottle means, quoting Arnold, 'felicity and perfection of diction and manner', and even as he attempts to eschew judgement in this area himself, he shows a personal

¹ 'The Case of Shelley', revised version in English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. M.H. Abrams, (1975) 1993, pp366 - 382

acceptance of the priority of 'aesthetic value' over 'truth and seriousness of substance and matter' (Arnold's words again), and a recognition of the same priority in the history of criticism. He even subsumes Leavis's apparent corrective of this separation, in his Revaluation essay on Shelley, under this priority, seeing it simply as a different kind of answer, a 'unitarian' one, to the question of the dichotomy between Shelley's style and his subject matter. Leavis, as he sees it, has to say that there is no dichotomy - but it is through his account of the style that he says it. Thus even the recent history of Shelley criticism confirms Pottle in his view that 'Poets ... who continue to be vigorously attacked for their subject-matter will go on being great poets as long as readers in general feel and testify to the "felicity and perfection of their diction and manner"' (p.369).

It is a relatively small step from this separation of style and its placing as a critical priority, to the view that only style can be the proper concern of the critic.¹ However, if the critic confines himself to technical matters which are beyond dispute non-problematic, he will be confining himself indeed - to the counting of commas, the noting of metrical stresses, distribution of parts of speech, the remarking of the balance of vowels and consonants - indeed, to the kind of work which most researchers now have done by their computers. Yet even in this apparently safe area, the critic is not safe from implications for the moral dimension.

There are currently several different editions of Emily Dickinson's poetry, and it is no exaggeration to say that a new reader's response to her poetry might be determined by which edition that reader first meets. In Ted Hughes' paperback selection,² for example, Dickinson's favourite punctuation mark, the dash, is rendered by a bold, long dash, marked out clearly by heavy spacing; the effect is to add markedly to the dramatic qualities of the poems,

1. Most aggressively argued by the structuralist school, but also by critics who seek a scientific basis for criticism, vide Wilhelm Frick's, 'Possibilities of Exact Style Analyses', in Patterns of Literary Style pp 51-76

2. A Choice of Emily Dickinson's Verse, ed. T. Hughes (1968).

rendering each separated phrase an emotional bullet which certainly hits the reader in the solar plexus. The original editor, Mabel Loomis Todd,¹ on the other hand, eliminated the dashes altogether; she took it upon herself to 'correct' what would then have seemed either wild or uneducated, and so on either count inappropriate, and so rendered the poems far blander than in modern editions. (Indeed it may have been partly a change in taste which made it possible for a later scholar John Crowe Ransom to see the necessity for restoring the original punctuation, and in many cases the original vocabulary which had been similarly changed for the sake of greater regularity, this time in the rhyme). It is a curious, indeed a moving, experience for the reader to see facsimiles of the original manuscript poems, to see the original 'dashes' which have been so crudely represented in print. They themselves vary, of course, from poem to poem, in a way that print versions cannot; but while this might seem insignificant in the case of commas, colons, etc. whose function is clearly marked, in the case of the variable and flexible dash it seems more meaningful. In some poems, the dashes indeed seem as intense as Hughes' version suggests; in others, however, they have a tentative, fading air, and in others still seem little more than extended full stops, as though the writer has had second thoughts about a mark so definite. In the latter cases, certainly, some of the intensity and drama is lost, but is replaced by a melancholy wistfulness; these dashes are question marks rather than exclamation marks - whilst always, of course, remaining dashes. Certainly, Emily Dickinson is an unusual case, and the reader's awareness of her punctuation, is undoubtedly heightened precisely by the subsequent printed versions of it. But she is also a crucial case, for the decisions made about the rendering of her punctuation - and, in the case of Mabel Loomis Todd, of her rhymes - were made at the editorial stage, and are thus unadvertised to the reader except in a variorum edition. They could be made at this stage precisely because they were considered sufficiently technical to be non-problematic. Yet in this case they can have the most far-reaching effects on the reader's emotional and moral response to the poetry (note my terms earlier).

1. The Poems, ed. M. Loomis Todd and T. W. Higginson (1904).

Emily Dickinson also presents us with an unusual case because we can, through the alteration of punctuation, perform experiments to establish the role of a technical feature, without altering the actual words, and so the sense - so far as the words are responsible for it. Punctuation can also, of course, alter sense dramatically. But in the case of Emily Dickinson the alteration of her dashes, even by the simple rendering of them in print, however faithful that may attempt to be, alters the aura of the poetry, and so the sense.¹ It is still the sense the words which is being influenced; but the different printed versions can show the different ways in which the altered punctuation can have an influence. Generally, however, it is extremely difficult to establish that it is a technical feature which does the work - for example the relationship of vowel sounds - to the exclusion of any other factor, say the sense of the words, simply because one cannot perform an experiment and remove the vowel sounds without also altering the sense. Qualities such as musicality, melliflousness, slowness of movement, knottiness of structure, are certainly produced to some extent by, say, certain combinations of vowel sounds and consonants, or certain distributions of stress, or certain arrangements of words and grammatical structures. But we cannot ignore the role of sense in contributing to these effects; we tend to fix on technicalities to explain these effects because it is in the technicalities that they most obviously reside, but as Johnson has shown in his experiment on the Alexandrine,² it is the sense which may be crucial in determining whether these potential effects come into play.

¹ Any translation of a hand-written poem into print will have this effect to some slight degree; a printed version looks more authoritative only partly because the printed version is normally the definitive one, for even a typewritten version of a poem has this quality beside a holograph one. But here - as with other famous poets - the authority resides in the holograph version and reveals the need for greater tentativeness and flexibility than print can provide for punctuation. Of course, a certain romanticism may also be at work here in our response to the author's hand - one which Robert Graves exploited and advised others to exploit, in composing his poetry on a typewriter, but making handwritten drafts subsequently because of their greater market value!

² 'Life of Pope' in Lives of the English Poets, ed. G.B. Hill (1905) Vol III pp.230-2

If the sense of the lines runs counter to the effect of melliflousness to which the factors of sound, rhythm, etc contribute, that may be sufficient to counteract the melliflous effect, so that it never comes into play. The point is that both sound and sense are contributing factors; the balance of their contributions may vary from case to case. Furthermore, both sound and sense reside in the same physical features, as indeed do factors like rhythm, grammatical function, etc. It is partly this which makes it so difficult to test critical claims, about the contribution of specific factors to specific effects, experimentally.¹ So it is extremely difficult for the critic to satisfy himself that the technical features he is dealing with are entirely free of a moral dimension, either because the features themselves though genuinely 'technical' still may have an effect upon the moral dimension of the reader's response, or because it is impossible to establish from other features of the poetry, particularly features to do with sense, in their effects upon the reader. Indeed, poetry would be a much lesser thing if it were otherwise - as would criticism. And the area of scope left for criticism which can truly satisfy itself that any moral dimension has been ruled out is so reduced as to be uninteresting, and at best parasitic upon the existence of more complex modes of criticism for its interest.

Thus the critic who attempts to limit his concern to 'technical' matters is likely nonetheless to involve himself in larger claims, some of which have a moral dimension. The fact that the moral dimension of the critical remarks is masked or disguised in these cases makes the position of the ostensibly technical critic potentially more, rather than less, dangerous and problematic.

1 For a full consideration of this difficulty, see Colin Radford and Sally Minogue, The Nature of Criticism (Brighton, 1981), pp. 68-83.

But the task remains to clarify the nature of the relationship or web of relationships which exists between those features which are mentioned in critical remarks about a work, in which our response is located, and the moral dimension of that response. For, of course, critical judgements with a moral dimension remain critical judgements. They are articulated in terms of textual reference, and have the work as their object; their moral dimension derives its interest and importance precisely from its connection with the aesthetic qualities of the work. In this way, the judgement that Swinburne's 'The Forsaken Garden' is excessively morbid is not on all fours with, say, the judgement that Hardy's novels are bad because Hardy was unkind to his wife. For in the second judgement, the moral element in the remark has no connection with the aesthetic element: the moral element judges the man, the aesthetic element the work, and while the man wrote the work, it is a large move from that to the proposition that bad men write bad works.¹

¹ This example could be complicated until we were in some difficulty about deciding whether the moral element of the remark was relevant; one of the difficulties of recognising that it might be relevant is how to decide when it is and when it is not. I shall return to this difficulty.

The moral dimension of poetry

In this section, then, I intend to consider closely a couple of examples in order to demonstrate clearly that there is a moral dimension in poetry, that it is the concern of the critic, and to identify more precisely the relationship between it and the critical remarks in which that concern is expressed. Consider the following extracts:

How the chimney sweeper's cry
Every blackening church appals,
And the hapless soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down palace walls
(Blake: 'London')¹

The splendour falls on castle walls
And snowy summits old in story
The long light shakes across the lakes
And the wild cataract leaps in glory
(Tennyson: 'Blow Bugle Blow')²

It is impossible to deal critically with either extract without considering its moral dimension; at the same time that moral dimension is in each case embedded in, expressed through, 'technicalities'; the choice and positioning of vocabulary, the length and rhythm of the lines, the use of rhyme, and so on. This is a truism, yet from it spring some of criticism's most thorny problems. The meanings of the words are, of course, central to the moral dimension - which is precisely why that dimension is inescapably the critic's concern, unless he wants to say that meanings are not his concern. But reinforcing the meanings of the words are such technicalities as alliteration, position and juxtaposition of vocabulary, distribution of parts of speech, syllabic structure, etc. And these do not just reinforce meanings, but create the triggers which set off particular connotations or suggestions, and so may be particularly important in creating, say, a rhetorical or sentimental effect.

1. W. Blake, The Complete Poetical Works, ed. W.H. Stevenson, text by D.V. Erdman (1971).

2. The Poems of Tennyson, ed. C. Ricks (1969).

For example, in the Blake piece the inexorable intensity of the metaphors springs from the simple grammatical structure. There is no problem for Blake in moving from his literal subject, 'soldier's sigh', straight to its metaphorical predicate 'runs in blood', and back to the literal, placing, adverbial phrase 'down palace walls'. The metaphor is locked into the concrete reality Blake observes - locked in because for him it is the inescapable adjunct of the concrete reality. Indeed, one suspects he scarcely regards it as a metaphor; this is rather what he sees when he sees the hapless soldier protecting with his life a way of life which can never be his. This grammatical structure runs throughout the poem and provides it with its moral - and poetic - weight. Here then, clearly, to talk about technicalities is also to talk about morality.

The Tennyson is perhaps a more difficult case, which is why I mention it. (It is also interestingly similar to the Blake in rhythm and structure, while worlds away in attitude). It might be objected that Blake's 'London' is an overtly political poem, and therefore a special case; it announces its moral concern, which therefore becomes a relevant concern of the critic. The Tennyson is not, of course, overtly political or moral; but I would argue that it raises an important moral question for the critic, again through its very fabric. The thrust of everything in those four lines is aggrandizement and romanticisation, initially of a landscape - sunset on castle walls, snow-capped mountains in the background, lakes in the foreground. But in the poem as a whole, with this stanza as part of the atmospheric build-up, not merely the landscape is being romanticised; along with it goes a sugar-coated philosophical cliché about the relationship between life and death. The echoes duplicate even as they die - the implication is that in the midst of death there is life.

O love, they die in yon rich sky,
 They faint on hill or field or river;
 Our echoes roll from soul to soul
 And grow for ever and for ever.

Tennyson is careful not to examine his idea too closely, letting it roll richly and grandly through the poem; and this rhetorical roll itself creates a sense of significance, so that the less critical he is of the idea the more significant it seems. But, of course, the idea is full of holes. Echoes do die; so do we - and moreover when we die we are usually not so lucky as to 'die in yon rich sky' or 'faint on hill or field or river'. Tennyson deliberately washes over with rhetoric the reality of death, whilst at the same time trading on that reality, to give his poem an ostensible profundity and importance beyond what it would otherwise be, a harmless evocation of an evening landscape.

It is this trading which brings in the moral dimension, and makes it the concern of the critic, for it is the vocabulary and its placing which does most of the work here. The extra significance which I have attributed to the poem stems primarily from the overt metaphorical reference in a bugle blowing at sunset, with its overtones of the last post, reinforced by a specific ethical reference, 'our echoes roll from soul to soul And grow for ever and for ever'. Sunset completes the framework of suggestion, which is then reinforced by the rhetorical invocations; 'O hark, O hear, ...'. 'O sweet and far, 'O love they die,' 'let us hear', 'blow, *bugle*, blow', 'answer, echoes, answer'. The invocations are many and repeated, and are matched by the poetic diction. Even if we look just to those first four lines again, we see a number of examples: 'splendour', 'summits', 'cataract', 'glory', all of them special 'poetic' words. Somehow a cataract is considerably more romantic than a waterfall, as is a summit, with its sense of spiritual struggle towards a peak, than the geographical mountain top. Again 'splendour' and 'glory' have a sense of spiritual sublimity beyond the reality of a sunset and a waterfall, and these two words encapsulate the first four lines, reinforced from within by adjectives - 'snowy', 'wild', and the archaically constructed 'old in story'. The combination of poeticism, archetypal image, aristocratic landscape, and`

alliteration and internal rhyme, binds the lines into a considerable rhetorical force.

But what substance lies behind that force in the poem? Only enough to allow us to wallow happily in a vague idea of a dying fall, to be 'half in love with easeful death' (how much more aware was Keats of the dangers of his language) so that when we come to the final 'dying, dying, dying' we can indulge in the morbid glory of it all.

The lack of substance behind the rhetoric stands out more clearly if it is compared with a famous passage from 'In Memoriam' (incidentally placed beside it in The New Oxford Book of English Verse).¹

Old Yew, which graspest at the stones
That name the under-lying dead,
Thy fibres net the dreamless head,
Thy roots are wrapt about the bones.

The seasons bring the flower again,
And bring the firstling to the flock;
And in the dusk of thee, the clock
Beats out the little lives of men.

O not for thee the glow, the bloom,
Who changest not in any gale,
No branding summer suns avail
To touch thy thousand years of gloom:

And gazing on thee, sullen tree,
Sick for thy stubborn hardihood,
I seem to fail from out my blood
And grow incorporate into thee.

Here the underlying significance of the Yew's immutability against man's transitoriness is closely related to a verbal apprehension of the tree's physical substance, and there is a strong awareness in the writing of the logical relationship between the two which immensely strengthens the metaphor. It is Tennyson's horror of the 'grasping roots' drawing sustenance from his friend's now 'dreamless head' which brings home to him

1. The New Oxford Book of English Verse, ed. H. Gardner (Oxford, 1972).

his need to draw on the tree's 'stubborn hardihood', to remember that something lives and survives, though it will not be he: ; all this is there in 'I seem to fail from out my blood, and grow incorporate into thee'. He cannot find that hardihood from his own mortal self; and though the yew is finally mortal, and so corporeal, in comparison with the brevity of the human life over which it stands sentinel it has an ostensibly everlasting quality; in the combination of the two he is able to find that hardihood. Yet in doing so he must forsake his own 'glow' and 'bloom', from which his grief springs, and become incorporate, i.e. he must become fully aware of his own mortality, and realise that he too will eventually feed the Yew's roots in the same way as his friend. And is there here too a sense of finding reunion, and thus growth, with the dead friend, as both combine, the one from death and the other in a realisation of death in life, in the nourishment of that 'sullen tree'? For 'incorporate' works in two directions - man surrenders his body, but at the same time becomes part of the body of the tree, part of life itself. So while the poem is dominated by a sense of man's fleetingness - 'the clock Beats out the little lives of men' - it has also a sense of 'sullen' hope and a possibility of growth. How much more subtle and felt an understanding there is here of the relationship between life and death, reflected in the very substance and relationships of the words of this poem.

The rhetoric of the above criticism suggests no difficulty in the claims I have made. But the fact of critical life is that critics disagree, and no doubt many would disagree with much of what I have striven to demonstrate. For the primary question of this and the following chapters is: how do we make the foregoing distinctions? I have in this and the foregoing section tried to demonstrate that there is an ungainsayable moral dimension in poetry, which renders not only Blake's 'London' but also certain

sections of Tennyson's In Memoriam better than Tennyson's own 'The splendour falls'. My thesis is that Tennyson's understanding of death in the 'Old Yew' section of In Memoriam is fuller, more complex, truer than his understanding of death as expressed in 'The splendour falls', and that thus the former poem is better than the latter. But, as I have already stated, any judgement is a critical one, and I have tried to demonstrate that it is the kind of judgement of which critics must take account, for it is the kind of judgement which is often embedded, unacknowledged, in evaluative judgements which express themselves in purely technical terms.

Now what is the basis of these claims? What is the relationship between the technical analysis embodied in the discussion above and the moral dimension of the critical judgements made there? When critics speak - and they often do - of the emptiness of rhetoric, or the self-indulgence or sentimentality of a poem, or conversely of the directness or complexity of emotion, or the balance of thought and feeling in a poem, they relate these remarks often to close technical analysis of the poetry. But what precisely constitutes that relationship, and what is its logical force? Those critics who do not deny the moral dimension of criticism nonetheless do not necessarily take much account of these questions in making their judgements. In the next two chapters I shall consider the position of the critic who not only took notice of these questions but tried to give a coherent account of criticism which comprehensively answered them: F.R. Leavis.

The Inward Eye: the poetic expression of private experience

F.R. Leavis's general position

The only serious attempt which has been made to 'reconstruct' this complex web of relationships in a way which would be practically useful to the 'practical' critic has been made by F.R. Leavis. It is a product largely of his intellectual position that he has argued this case not theoretically, but in terms of examples, through his own critical work, hoping thereby to demonstrate in practice the value of certain qualities without pinning himself down unnecessarily and crudely to a set of defined criteria to be applied to any work of literature (a process which he would see as at odds with the actual practice and nature of criticism).

I did not say that the language of poetry "should not flatter the singing voice, should not be merely mellifluous", etc. I illustrated concretely by comparison and analysis the qualities indicated by those phrases, pointed to certain attendant limitations, and tried to show in terms of actual poetic history that there should be "no emotion for its own sake, no afflatus, no mere generous emotionality, no luxury in pain and joy"; but by choice, arrangement and analysis of concrete examples I give those phrases (in so far, that is, as I have achieved my purpose) a precision of meaning they couldn't have got in any other way.¹

Nonetheless, in spite of Leavis's lack of theorising his work has - as he hoped - advanced theory. And it is the way in which the theory is inherent in the actual criticism which gives his judgements in this area their peculiar authority. On both counts, then, his work must be taken into account by anyone attempting to trace the complex web of relationships between the moral dimension of critical judgements and the technical terms in which they are often voiced.

1. F.R. Leavis, 'Literary Criticism and Philosophy', Scrutiny Vol. VI 1937.
Reprinted in The Common Pursuit (1952), pp. 215-16. Future references to this essay will be to its republication in The Common Pursuit.

For Leavis attempts to demonstrate through his critical work that there is an essential connection between precision of expression, and substance of thought and feeling. He seeks to avoid the common pitfalls of moral critical judgements by rendering technical analysis an instrument of moral diagnosis. The value of the poem stands not on the moral value of the ideas it expresses, but upon the degree of objectivity, concreteness and particularity with which it gives a picture of what is described and expressed. Leavis's contention is that the presence of these qualities in a poem will itself be an indicator of the substance, the moral worth, of the ideas and feelings therein expressed. Thus he attempts to solve the dilemma of the critic who recognises the moral dimension of poetry but is reluctant to abandon his 'scientific' base in the technicalities of the poetry. To such a critic, Leavis's arguments are wonderfully tempting, and highly seductive in the critical power they offer. A poetic criticism based on Leavis's position would be tough and disciplined, strong in logical argument, and close to the text, but would at the same time recognise and embrace the humane dimension of literature which is its central strength; the value judgements it made would be thus firmly based in critical argument but would also be judgements with a moral dimension relating to the literature's humane dimension. This proffering by Leavis of a sort of synthesis of I.A. Richards and Matthew Arnold came, moreover, at a time when English criticism was in a state of some confusion. The purple prose of the Edwardian critics was something of an embarrassment, yet the hard-nosed tactics of transatlantic New Criticism seemed narrow and reductive. Leavis's body of thought, so thoroughly, knowledgeably and persuasively presented, with close, detailed reference to a whole range of literature, including that just being written, must have been marvellously appealing - and indeed it still is, except to those who wilfully blind themselves to its many strengths. It still embodies some of the best and most stimulating, and certainly the most influential and powerful, of twentieth century criticism.

My own critical analysis of Tennyson in the foregoing section certainly owes much to Leavis; his work has had a pervasive influence on criticism and critical language in the past fifty years. Even those who would deny his influence can be seen to use terms, make assumptions, conduct arguments in a way which simply would not be possible without his groundwork. Any critic condemning a work as 'sentimental' or 'over-rhetorical', or praising it as 'direct' 'honest', 'sincere', 'realistic' is making judgements which Leavis has at least argued to some degree (but which the user often has not). Consider the following remarks:

'Taking what interested him in these things gives him a kind of realism and life to his poetry that it wouldn't have had otherwise'.

(Robert Lowell of Ezra Pound .

on Pound's Fascist beliefs)¹

'The speaker has kept his eye more closely on the object'

(W.K. Wimsatt on Coleridge)²

'In this section ... there is a decided slackening in the tightness of the poem's organization, a softening and blurring of its energy and precision.'

(W. Walsh on Keats)³

'Both imagery and diction are drawn from common human life, the imagery having a homely vividness and the words themselves a concrete strength ... the words themselves have the solidity and firmness that make us call them "real"'

(H. Coombes on George Herbert)⁴

The underlined (by me) critical terms have an overt or covert moral dimension, most of them with a specific reference to the relationship between poetry and life, or reality. Furthermore, the examples I have chosen, though they may date originally from the fifties and sixties, are from works which are regularly used educationally with today's students of English literature.

Wimsatt's The Verbal Icon still appears regularly on university reading lists as representative of a certain brand of modern literary criticism (and incidentally it is interesting to note

1. Poets on Poetry, ed. J. Scully, (1966), p. 255.

2. W.K. Wimsatt, The Verbal Icon, (Lexington, 1954), p. 108

3. The Pelican Guide to English literature, rev. edition by B. Ford (Harmondsworth 1962), Vol. 5., p. 236.

4. H. Coombes, Literature and Criticism, (1953), p. 134.

that Wimsatt seems unembarrassed in his connecting of Coleridge's poetry with the real world, 'the object' on which Coleridge has closely kept 'his eye', in spite of his anti-intentionalist arguments with M. Beardsley in 'The Intentional Fallacy' in the same work.

The Pelican Guide to Literature is a cheap history of literature read by very large numbers of people - not only students - and in fact containing some important critical essays by important twentieth century critics. Coombes's work is currently a set text for 'A' level students who might easily accept its, largely unargued, asseverations about the connections between literature and life and their consequences for critical judgement, as both correct and characteristic, particularly as 'A' level examining boards do not encourage a truly questioning approach to their chosen texts.

It is perhaps particularly interesting that a highly acclaimed modern poet, Lowell, should have adopted the connections between close observation, realism, and a sense of life, and thus human value, in poetry, for the pervasive use of critical terms and assumptions exemplified above is a factor not only of twentieth century criticism, but also influential in a critical view of the qualities which are important in twentieth century poetry. Another major poet to do so is Seamus Heaney: in the position of poet-as-judge in the 1980 National Poetry competition, he remarked of a poem about a mastectomy that it showed remarkable directness and honesty in its use of language considering the painfulness of experience which may have lain behind it. He then immediately reflected on the implications of his remark and suggested that the poem might of course be a pure fiction - in which case the honesty and directness of language combined with the sense of realism were even more remarkable. The other judges, all eminent poets, nodded in agreement. Yet again these claims remain largely unargued, except by Leavis, their attractiveness and appearance of correctness - which are certainly undeniable - apparently being sufficient to warrant them.

Now Leavis's own arguing of his case, as I have already suggested, shows a considerable reluctance to theorise, or to

lay down specific criteria against which poetry might be measured - a practice of which he was considerably contemptuous, seeing it as the concern not of critics but of philosophers of whom he was also contemptuous. My summary of the connection he makes between precision of expression and moral substance in poetry is one he took pains to avoid himself; he preferred to show the way in which the one tends to 'go along with' the other. But that he sees the connection as pervasive is clear from the number and nature of examples of it which he gives throughout his work. And in "Thought" and Emotional Quality' he comes as near to making the connection as his mode of argument will allow him.

There is, then, an obvious sense in which Shelley's poetry offers feeling divorced from thought. Along with this characteristic goes Shelley's notable inability to grasp anything - to present any situation, any observed or imagined actuality, or any experience as an object existing independently in its own nature and in its own right. Correlatively there is a direct offer of emotion - emotion insistently explicit - in itself, for itself, for its own sake. We find our description merging into criticism, ... In the examination of his poetry the literary critic finds himself passing, by inevitable transitions, from describing characteristics to making adverse judgements about emotional quality; and so into a kind of discussion in which, by its proper method and in pursuit of its proper ends, literary criticism becomes the diagnosis of what, looking for an inclusive term, we can only call spiritual malady.¹

This passage shows very clearly why my consideration - indeed any consideration - of the moral dimension of critical judgements must pay very close attention to Leavis's work. It is my contention in this and the following chapters that Leavis's understanding of the connection between critical remarks and the moral dimension of poetry is mistaken. But an examination of the very errors he makes, in what is the only thoroughgoing

1. "Thought" and Emotional Quality, Scrutiny 1945. Reprinted in A Selection from Scrutiny, Vol I (Cambridge, 1968). Future references to this essay will be to its republication in A Selection from Scrutiny.

attempt by a critic this century through a range of close critical responses to the great literature of our tradition, to make sense of the moral dimension of critical judgements, will, I think, be highly revealing, and will provide a disciplined medium for the elaboration of my own views in this area.

* * * * *

It is extremely difficult to tease out the structure of Leavis's thinking, from the mass of examples and analyses he gives, but it is necessary if I am to reconstruct his general position in a usefully analytic way. The passage quoted above from his remarks on Shelley in "'Thought" and Emotional Quality' is key to our understanding, as is the following one from the same essay, where he again comes close to a theoretical statement, in talking about Lawrence's 'Piano'. Characteristically, the theory is closely attached to the example which I shall therefore give in full:

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me,
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the
 tingling strings
And pressing the small poised feet of a mother who
 smiles as she sings.

In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song
Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong
To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside,
And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.

So now it is the vain for the singer to burst into clamour
With the great black piano appassionata. The glamour
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the
past.

It is a complex whole, and its distinction, plainly, is bound up with its complexity. This complexity, to recapitulate, involves the presence of something other than directly offered emotion, or mere emotional flow - the presence of something, a specific situation, concretely grasped. The presentment of this situation involves a disinterested or 'constating' attitude, and also a critical attitude towards the emotion

evoked by the situation: here we have our licence for saying that, however strong an emotional effect the poem has, that is essentially conditioned by 'thought': the constating, relating and critical mind has its essential part in the work of sensibility. We can say further that the aspect of disinterested 'presentment' is not confined to the situation seen at the end of the 'vista of years'; the collapse upon the 'flood of remembrance' is itself, while so poignantly and inwardly conveyed, presented at the same time from outside. (p.217)

In both passages from '"Thought" and Emotional Quality', Leavis traces a direct line - in the Shelley passage, negatively, in the Lawrence passage, positively - from a 'concretely grasped' situation to a critical attitude to emotion, to the presence of thought as well as feeling (as opposed to 'emotion ... for its own sake'). I want to try to follow that line in Leavis's own work, and reconstruct the way his argument develops, principally in the three Scrutiny essays on the Judgement and Analysis of Poetry, but also in the Revaluation¹ essays. Thus I propose first to look at the background to his emphasis on the importance of a concretely grasped situation in a poem; then to look at the question of attitude to emotion, and then/^{in chapter 6} to the importance of thought and its relationship to feeling. As I go along I hope to demonstrate what Leavis saw as the connection between these qualities; and to point out - both as I go along, and more generally, in a summarising section - the difficulties with an objection to his position.

Grasp on the actual

To take first, then, the role in Leavis's argument of the 'concretely grasped' situation in poetry: this is Leavis's most obvious and oft repeated concern throughout his essays, and he has a wide variety of terms to refer to it - 'grasp on the actual' 'particularly' 'a specific situation, concretely grasped', 'a justifying situation' 'concreteness', 'precisions of concrete realisation',

I.F.R. Leavis, Revaluation: tradition and development in English Poetry (1936).

'specificities', 'convincing concreteness of a presented situation', 'immediacy'. It seems to me that this concern springs from a prior view to do with the relationship of poetry to reality, a view most clearly presented in 'Reality & Sincerity', his 1952 essay from the 'Judgement and Analysis' series in Scrutiny (reprinted in A Selection from Scrutiny Vol. 1). It is interesting that this essay postdates '"Thought" and Emotional Quality' and 'Imagery and Movement', for it demonstrates that the views expressed there were not views which he abandoned in the other two essays where he presents, in fact, a more subtly, and less clearly, stated view of the relationship between reality and poetry). At the same time, the views expressed in 'Reality and Sincerity' are clearly logically prior to the views expressed in the other two essays.

In 'Reality and Sincerity' Leavis compares Emily Brontë's 'Remembrance', with Thomas Hardy's 'After a Journey'. He finds the Hardy to be the superior of the two, and goes so far as to say that the superiority can be 'demonstrated'. What emerges as the basis of this superiority is that Hardy's poem has 'a great advantage in reality'. 'Emily Brontë's poem is a striking one, but when we go back to it from Hardy's the contrast precipitates the judgement that, in it, she is dramatising herself in a situation such as she has clearly not known in actual experience: what she offers is betrayingly less real¹. Hardy's poem, on the other hand is a poem we recognise to have come directly out of life; it could, that is, have been written only by a man who had the experience of a life to remember back through'. (p.257)

1. A Selection from Scrutiny, Vol 1 p.252. All future references to this essay are to this republication, and are embodied in the text.

Now certainly Leavis goes on to flesh out these sweeping statements in terms of the actuality of reference, vocabulary, etc. in the poetry, and in terms of the tone and rhetoric of the lines in each case. But these remarks are - or anyway are presented as being - dependent on the initial judgement about the poems' bases in reality. 'Has clearly not known in actual experience'; 'clearly' according to the poetry, Leavis would no doubt say, but it is tempting to feel here that Leavis's view is based rather on what he knows of these poets' actual lives.

Emily Bronte conceives a situation in order to have the satisfaction of a disciplined imaginative exercise; the satisfaction of dramatizing herself in a tragic role - an attitude, nobly impressive, of sternly controlled passionate desolation.

The marks of the imaginative self-projection that is insufficiently informed by experience are there in the poem . (p.252)

Leavis does not mention sublimation, but he does not fall far short of attributing the whole basis of the poem to that. Yet he has already stated that 'Remembrance' has a remarkable control of and attitude to its own emotionality; that 'something quite opposed to the luxury of "memory's rapturous pain" is being "cherished" in the poem; that a resolute strength of will, espousing the bare prose "existence", counters the run of emotion' (p.250) So he has already analysed this poem in much the same terms as earlier he analyses Lawrence's 'Piano', as a poem both expressive of emotionality and critical of it, containing a balance of both feeling and thought. Yet Lawrence is not accused of a second-order romanticisation as Emily Bronte is, a standing back from the emotion which is itself self-dramatising and so undercuts the value of the poem. Suppose that in Leavis's lifetime a dramatic discovery had been made about Emily Bronte's life, evidence that she did indeed have a long-lost lover, who was indeed 'cold in the earth' when she wrote this poem, that she had indeed had to 'check the tears of useless passion'? Would Leavis have changed his mind about the poem? No: Then,

surely, he would have spoken of the over-dramatising or sentimentalising of the experience, or the self-indulgency of stoical emotions. Where, then, would be the requirement for the 'reality' so much boasted of in the Hardy? Or the criticism of insufficient 'experience'?

The point here, of course, is that reality, the actual experience can never be there in the poem. When we read Hardy's 'After a Journey' we are not actually with him on the cliff-top; nor do we even actually experience the sense of the past which he attempts to recreate for us; we experience an imaginative illusion that those things have happened, and are now being recalled. Certainly when Leavis first uses the term 'reality' in relation to Hardy's poem, he says that this term 'of course, has to be given its due force by the analysis yet to be done - the analysis it sums up' (p.252) so he seems to be using 'reality' in a special critical sense, meaning something like 'an imaginative illusion that reality is being described'. But as his argument progresses, partly perhaps because of the use of a term which already has an established sense, partly perhaps because of the influence of the biographical knowledge, Leavis slips into using the concept without adapting it to its critical context. He begins to talk, for example, of the poem's portraying 'a situation which she has clearly not known in actual experience'; and thence in comparison to say of Hardy's poem that it is 'a poem that we recognise to have come directly out of life'. Leavis has - whether thoughtlessly or deliberately it is hard to say - slipped from the idea of the poem's being derived from ^{actual experience to the idea of its} describing actual experience. And of course the poems themselves conspire with him here, for both are in the first person, both are about a lost love, in both cases the appeal of the emotion resides largely in the personal expression of it. Similarly, the biographical facts neatly support the run of the argument.

Yet it is not only in this essay and of these poets that he seems to see real experience as a keystone in the judgement of

poetry. Speaking of Wordsworth's 'A slumber did my spirit seal' in '"Thought" and Emotional Quality' he says:

No one can doubt that Wordsworth wrote his poem because of something profoundly and involuntarily suffered - suffered as a personal calamity. (p. 212)

And in 'Imagery and Movement', of the same poet's 'Surprised by Joy', that:

...we have deeply and finely experienced emotion poetically realized, the realization being manifested in a sensitive particularity, a delicate sureness of control in complex effects, and, in sum, a fineness of organization, such as could come only¹ from the profoundly stirred sensibility in a gifted poet.

Here the locus of the argument has moved from the 'real' situation to the 'real' emotion, but the overall judgement is the same: that the value of the poem springs from the impression it gives of an account of a real experience - and further that it gives that impression because it does spring from a real experience.

But what would Leavis have thought, if he had discovered that there was no 'woman much loved', no 'nut-coloured hair, And gray eyes' in Hardy's life? Or that Wordsworth had never suffered the loss of a 'Lucy'? Obviously, he would not have abandoned his approbation of the poetry, any more than he would have abandoned his disapprobation of Bronte's poetry if a lover of hers had been (literally) unearthed. For surely what he means to say here is that Hardy's and Wordsworth's poems give the stronger illusion of describing actuality, while Bronte's gives a less convincing illusion of that. He is misled into the narrower - and dangerous - position, I think by the appropriateness of the examples to his case, and by the preconception about the poetry springing from his biographical knowledge. And even if we allow him this error, it is hard to excuse the overt and deliberate reference to real experience, whether physical or emotional. In many poems, the only evidence

1. 'Imagery and Movement', Scrutiny 1945, reprinted in A Selection from Scrutiny, Vol. I, p. 240. All future references to this essay will be to this republication.

we have of the poet's life is the poetry itself - and here a convincing illusion of actuality is not necessarily an indicator of the poet's actual experience. It would be perfectly possible for a poet to acquire the techniques of producing a convincing illusion of a description of real experience, without the experience itself. Leavis argues that it would not: 'to think effectively about experience is to think with it and in it (which is why no amount of intellectual drill in itself, however responsive and athletic the trainee, and no mere acquisition, however thorough, of technique, method and apparatus, can generate vital thinking, or are likely to conduce it' (p.231). Yet at the same time he is able - in the same essay - to speak of specious particularity, he admits that there is a kind of particularity in Tennyson's 'Tears, idle tears' - which would in other poems indicate the drawing of the poem from real experience - but the particularity 'is only speciously of the kind in question'.¹ Yet Leavis never tells us how to distinguish specious from valid particularity; for indeed, how could he? It could only be a matter of personal response, of whether the particularity did help to give a convincing illusion of an actual situation's being described. And if it did not, to knock it back to the 'suspect' nature of the particularity would be to beg the question, what renders the particularity - which Leavis is, we see, still calling 'particularity' - specious? And where there was disagreement about the effect of the particularity, what would settle it? Our knowledge of the poet's life?

Leavis's term 'sensibility', used in his praise of Wordsworth, might give a clue to the line he would take in reply to some of these objections. He might suggest that in saying that Hardy's poems 'come directly out of life' while Bronte's poem is 'insufficiently informed by experience', he means only that there is a body of emotional experience upon which Hardy, Wordsworth et al can draw, and from that can give a convincing account of emotion in a poem.

1. "'Thought" and Emotional Quality', p. 217

The specific emotions in the poem may be experienced by him only imaginatively, as it were, while he was writing the poetry. Bronte, presumably, would be seen as not having had the appropriate imaginative experience (though in certain ways, according to Leavis, she is being over imaginative).

If this is what Leavis means, he is using his terms very carelessly. For if he does mean this, why is a sense of reality's being described important at all?

That it is important, indeed crucial, to Leavis's expectations of good poetry is clear both in 'Reality and Sincerity' and in many other of his essays. Here he is on Keats:

That firm sense of the solid world, which makes Keats so different from Shelley
(Keats essay in Revaluation (1936), pp. 261-2)

The relation between the firmness of the art and the firm grasp on the outer world appears most plainly in the "Ode to Autumn" (ibid)

Just what that relation is between 'the firmness of art' and 'the firm grasp on the outer world' is also uncompromisingly stated by Leavis in his Keats essay. Commenting on a passage on death from 'Hyperion', he says:

There is no afflatus here, no generous emotionality... The facts, the objects of contemplation, absorb the poet's attention completely; he has none left for his feelings as such. As a result, his response, his attitude, seems to us to inhere in the facts, and to have itself the authenticity of fact. The strength that makes the sensuous Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" so different from the spiritual Shelley's "To a Skylark" - the grasp of the object, the firm sense of actuality, the character and critical intelligence (we have seen) in the artist's touch and his related command of total effect - now manifests itself in the field of tragic experience. His own acute and inescapable distresses, including the pain of watching helplessly the suffering of persons dear to him, he can, without feeling them the less, contemplate at the same time from (as it were) the outside, as objects, as facts; and the contemplation of the inevitable and endless human suffering to which his more immediately personal experience leads him has an impersonal strength. (ibid pp 270-1)

Leavis's remarks here fill in, in a fairly sophisticated way, the gaps left in his comparison of Hardy and Bronte, and attempt to give some account of the role of the actual in poetry. Leavis's argument involves a number of assumptions about the relationship between the individual and the external world, but leaving those aside for the moment, it seems to go something like this. Experience involves a relationship with the external world; it thus has an internal and an external dimension. He who has a strong awareness of an ability to concentrate on the external dimension - the objects and events which generate the inner experience, and also act as the objects of it - will also be the more able to look objectively at the internal dimension, and so relate the personal experience to the general one. This ability Leavis sees as necessary to a good poet provided it does not lead to a loss of personal feeling ('without feeling them the less'), and his justification for this would seem to be a moral one; the poetry thus produced will contain truths revealed with the intensity but without the limitation and self-indulgence of personal feeling.

Many questions are raised here. Is Leavis right in maintaining that a strong awareness of the external world will lead to an ability to be impersonal and objective about one's own feelings? And at this point we must remind ourselves that he is talking specifically about poetry. For surely what leads Leavis to assert so determinedly the importance and centrality of 'the grasp of the object, the sense of actuality' is that in poetry we cannot make the clear distinction (itself tentative, of course, in some epistemologies) between the internal and the external dimension of the experience, because they become one in an objective form in the words on the page.

Take Edward Thomas's 'Adlestrop', an unobtrusive poem which seems to have captured countless imaginations. Let us suppose that Thomas did indeed sit on the train in just the way he describes, and listened to the birds of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire and reflected upon

the Englishness of the scene, feeling perhaps a poignant love for the countryside and what it represented. Had you or I been sitting opposite Thomas as we sat and waited at Adlestrop, we might have had no external indication of the thoughts and feelings crossing his mind. They would have been private, unless he had made some remark upon them. For the external observer, then, there is no connection between the scene outside the train window and the privacy of Thomas's internal experience. But when we read the poem, without ever having been on the train, or stopped at Adlestrop (now impossible anyway) or even had an experience like it, we have presented to us both the 'external' and the 'internal' dimensions of the poet's experience, objectified in the words which combine a description of the event and an account of the feelings it generated. Would it be silly or vulgar to feel a little cheated, disappointed to discover that Edward Thomas had never stopped at Adlestrop? In so far as the poem trades so much upon the particular and personal, no, it would not. But neither would it be in any way improper for Thomas to have used his considerable fictional experience to convey a particular emotion or idea, and then used his considerable poetic skill to convey the impression that he was describing something which actually happened.

However, if we accept, as we must, that the validity of the poetic experience does not depend on its being drawn from an actual experience, what happens to the connection Leavis makes between a clear awareness of the actual world and a proper objectivity about internal experiences? If the illusion of an actual external event's (and thus an actual internal experience) being described is sufficient for the success of 'Adlestrop'/'After a Journey', and if the failure to create that illusion detracts from the worth of 'Remembrance'/'Tears Idle Tears' etc., are we not dealing here simply with the poet's technical abilities? Being able successfully to recreate in poetry the illusion of actuality - and thus the illusion of an actual emotional experience - may have nothing to do with the poet's grasp of the actual world; it may be

simply a matter of learning the right tricks and devices - the use of the first person, circumstantial detail, the creation of a relationship between past and present to give a three-dimensional effect, and so on. Similarly, how far the poet is successful in conveying emotion through the illusion of an actual experience may depend less on that poet's having had the emotional experience than on his ability to convey the illusion of having had it, which may again be a matter more of technique than of sensibility. The practice of an articulate person writing love letters for a less articulate one is - or was - a well-recognised one. Provided the recipient didn't discover the deception she (as it usually was - perhaps women were generally better able to write their own love letters) was presumably convinced, and made happy, and perhaps more so than she would have been by the inarticulate outpourings of her actual lover.¹

There is a reply which Leavis can make here. It is that the techniques which enable the poet to give an illusion of describing an actual experience themselves derive from being practised in observing the actual world. And here I think we come to the root of Leavis's position. He is insistent in his essay on Shelley in Revaluation that 'it is strictly the "poetry" one is criticising'. (Here he is contrasting 'poetry', in the sense of the technical qualities of the poetry, with Shelley's 'beliefs'). And throughout his criticism he concentrates closely on the text, on details of vocabulary, syntax and rhythm, to pursue the centrality of 'particularity'. But the ability to produce this sense of particularity in language he sees as going along with certain habits of mind, central to which is the play of critical intelligence in the absorption of experience. The good poet is generally aware of the effect of external events on the inner self and he shows this awareness in his detailed observation of the external world which

1. It was Cyrano de Bergerac's letters which won the love of Roxane for Christian, and while it was the author of the letters she loved, so far as she knew Christian was that author. Of course, Rostand complicated the case, and the romance, by having Cyrano secretly in love with Roxane, so that his letters weren't artificial - but neither were they from him.

reveals itself in the poetry through 'particularity'; the bad poet is self-absorbed, generally unaware of the specific workings of the real world, and he shows this in the lack of specific detail in his poetry. The former is the more likely to produce good poetry because he can reconstruct the relationship between the outer world and the inner self which tends to generate emotional experiences in the real world, and so he is more likely to accurately reconstruct the emotional experiences in poetry. The latter is unlikely to do so because he dwells only on the emotion and makes little attempt to reconstruct that which generated it and was its object. Certainly, the techniques may be in the service only of an illusion, but it is an illusion informed by a general knowledge of the real world. To go back to 'Adlestrop', it is not at all necessary for us to believe that Thomas actually stopped at Adlestrop, nor for him to have had the exact experience (inner and outer) which he describes; but what we are convinced of is that he has some knowledge of the real world and of experiences such as this to be able to imaginatively create a poetic experience which speaks to countless other hearts and minds. On the small scale this may mean that he has a knowledge of railway stations and hot summer days; on a large scale it may mean that he has at least a deep understanding of what it means to love the English countryside. The bad poet, Leavis would argue, has become so far disconnected from even such broad links with the actual world that his poetry suffers accordingly; he cannot recreate the illusion of substance which generated the emotions he describes, and so neither can he recreate the illusion of an object for the emotions.

To sum up, then, Leavis's position, teased out, rests on the centrality of creating an illusion of the description of reality which will answer to the illusion of an inner experience, and which can also act as the object of the emotion created in the reader.

Leavis's epistemology

We begin to see that a whole epistemology underpins Leavis's evaluative stance towards poetry. It embraces a theory of perception in which external events both generate inner experiences and act as their object. Clearly, then, the external world is the dominant force in man's experience; it both instigates and embodies his inner thoughts and feelings. Yet the inner experience is vital; it is the individual, private response to the public event which in the sensitive and intelligent individual can produce an intense and profound understanding of it. But that intense understanding depends upon a constant awareness of the external world balanced with an ability to have inner experiences of an unusual intensity and profundity. Where that balance exists along with an ability to use language, poetry becomes possible.

But there is a further connection which Leavis would want to maintain here: that where the balance of inner and outer exists, so too are we likely to find a refined ability to communicate - 'his power of making words express what he feels is indistinguishable from his awareness of what he feels'. The insistence on the 'objectification of the inner again reveals itself here, and we begin to see why the recreation of at least the illusion of a description of actuality in poetry is so important to Leavis. Words - here the language of poetry - are the link between private and public, they are the public 'event' which readers perceive and which generates their inner experience, but they (the words) are also the expression of the private event, the inner experience, as transmitted by the poet, and to that extent form a private language. Thus the degree to which the private can be made public here depends on the extent to which the language refers to the object of 'public' experience, i.e. the external world. Indeed Leavis would, it seems, go further and insist that the private experience which is not communicable may as well not exist - and certainly the external observer cannot

know that it does. And as it is reference to the external world which renders the experience public, it must be communicable in terms of that reference. Hence the importance of an illusion of the description of actuality to represent what generated the inner experience and to give the reader an object for his consequent inner experience.

So there is a double confirmation for Leavis's stress on the centrality of an illusion of actuality in poetry:

1. The poetic relationship between 'object' and 'emotion' is thus as close as possible to the relationship between 'object' and 'emotion' in the real world, so that the recreation of that relationship is likely to be not just the more convincing but the less likely to be fraudulent or 'insincere'.
2. Private experience can be rendered communicable only through its articulation in a 'public' language, and that language must thus refer to the external world, the public object of inner experience.

Thus poetry which has a firm grasp on the actual is most likely to successfully render inner experience public, without loss of the intensity which belongs to the privacy of the individual experience. And the poet who has the clearest awareness of the external world will not only have private experiences of it which are most substantially related to their originating externals, he will also have an ability with language (an external medium) which will enable him to communicate these. From that point the moral substance of the related experience - whether or not it is appropriate and valuable - can be judged from how far that is informed by a firm grasp on the actual, just as in the real world the validity of an individual response can be judged in terms of its appropriacy to the event occasioning it.

Private experience and public expression

In the previous section I have tried to demonstrate that critical judgements of poetry do often have a moral dimension, and that to deny it leads to a vacuous criticism. I have also outlined Leavis's general position about the moral dimension of poetry and criticism, at the same time trying to clarify areas of confusion in his approach, especially concerning the relationship between poetry, realism and reality. In all of this I am centrally concerned to come closer to a true understanding of what that relationship is.

In this section I shall continue my examination of Leavis, but here I intend to highlight the difficulties with his arguments which are raised by the privacy of experience, a privacy which much poetry attempts to make public, but which remains nonetheless essentially private. In so doing I shall also attempt to deal with the difficulties which this privacy raises for any thoroughgoing account of the moral dimension of critical judgements.

The central difficulty with Leavis's position lies in an area which has provided problems for philosophers for hundreds of years: the relationship between the public world and private experiences of it. Leavis, as I have shown, is insistent upon the importance in poetry of close reference to the external world not only in the obvious sense that reference to it is necessary if language is to communicate anything, but also in the larger sense that the interest and value of private experience is in direct proportion to the degree of its connection with, and communication through, reference to the external 'public' world.

But of course poetry is necessarily an expression of private experience, just as each reader's experience is necessarily, at one level, private; and how similar those private experiences are to each other can be only imperfectly known. For private experience is precisely that: private. To the extent to which it becomes public through language it ceases to be itself, i.e. ceases to be precisely the experience, the private experience, it originally was. At the same time, however, Leavis does not want to eschew the privacy of the inner altogether, because he commends the poet's 'capacity for experiencing' as much as his 'power of communicating', it is the power of feeling which lies at the heart of good poetry. All of the emotional qualities Leavis praises - intensity, conviction, sincerity, the sense of something 'felt' and 'lived' - belong to the personal response. At the same time he would doubtless argue for the centrality of a community of inner experience which the poet can 'realise' (in the sense of recreate by use of realistic detail); hence the importance of 'grasp on the actual'.

The difficulty for Leavis, and it is a radical philosophical difficulty, remains that disconnection between private and public, inner and outer, which makes it impossible for us to know quite what Edward Thomas was thinking about Adlestrop (or indeed imagining about it), or what precisely Wordsworth had in mind when he wrote of the 'huge shape, grim and huge'.

This difficulty is raised in an acute form by the very poets who are central to his conception of good poetry, the Romantics. The Wordsworthian bias of both his epistemology and of his concept of good poetry is striking, and Wordsworth he takes deliberately (as opposed to the ostensibly more obvious Metaphysicals) as his prime example in establishing the importance of thought in poetry (vide "Thought" and Emotional Quality'). But at the heart of Wordsworth's poetry, as at that of Keats's, Coleridge's and Shelley's, lies the primacy of the inner. That unites the Romantic poets,

while the ways in which they explore and express the inner divide them (in spite of those common stylistic characteristics which we retrospectively glean). It is the very illusion of being privy to another individual's thoughts and feelings, exposed in an unusually direct way, which gives such power to their poetry.

'My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains My sense'; what has 'rich immediacy' here, what is 'intensely felt', is the personal. Leavis praises the language of Keats for its 'rich local concreteness' and for 'an extraordinary intensity of realization', but the concreteness, the immediacy, the intensity of realization are in service to that 'my', to the giving of some sort of voice to the inner personal experience.

Now the ambiguity of Keats's simple but stunning first words here pinpoints the difficulty, felt poetically by the Romantics themselves. Is Keats's sensation physical or spiritual? It is of course both, as the word 'sensation' suggests. When my heart aches, my heart aches, that is the sensation I experience. When I read Keats's lines it is the communality of the physical experience which I recognise from the word 'aches'. But what gives it its power is its connection with the deeper, abstract, non-bodily 'ache' to which it gives expression and which is its object.¹ Certainly, Keats more than any of his contemporaries was sensitive to the profound connection made vivid here by the dual reference of a word such as 'ache'. A sensation was for him a deeply felt experience, and he makes it so for the reader.

Now, even were the spiritual reference here missing, each reader's understanding of 'aches' would be a little different from another's. I cannot feel another's pain, and even attempts to understand another's pain are notoriously difficult, witness the

1. When my heart physically aches, it is not the physical ache to which I direct my thoughts and feelings about it - unless I have heart disease, though even then, given the stress factor in heart disease, my thoughts and feelings might be partly elsewhere.

groping metaphors of the doctor's surgery.~ So what of those inner experiences which lie deeper than sensation? On which do not have an answering sense-response? Again, these are the experiences which are central to Romanticism, and to which all Romantic poets sought in some way to give a voice. Leavis might counter here that it is to the extent to which they were successful in giving these experiences the voice they would not otherwise have had, by relating them to a publicly available depiction of the external world, that they are successful as poets. But to argue this is to ignore those attempts made by the Romantics to give voice to the 'ineffable,' not through its connection with the external world, but by some use of language which renders it communicable without sacrifice of its privacy as far as that is possible.

In these cases, the language is, has to be, public and to that extent the privacy and intangibility of the experience are tempered. Expressing the inexpressible is of course an impossibility. Yet both Shelley and Wordsworth, different though they are as poets, are concerned at certain points to come as close as possible to that impossibility, i.e. to give poetic sense to the qualities of the ineffable without destroying the intangibility constitutive of it. At these points they may abandon the depiction of the outer in an attempt to come closer to the abstraction they seek to depict; or - particularly in the case of Shelley - they may mirror the inchoate quality of the inner experience by a corresponding metaphorical depiction of the external world.

If this begins to sound like a form of the higher nonsense, that is because referring to attempts to come close to an expression of the inchoate raises all the problems encountered by those attempts: inherent contradictions, conflicts between accuracy and precision of expression, a sense of tap-dancing on quicksand. It also highlights the reasons why critics might

steer clear of this problematic area, and why Leavis in particular steered well clear of it. But these difficulties and dangers of expression are not sufficient reason for avoiding this area, indeed they demand a closer examination. A consideration of some specific cases, which I shall come to shortly, will help here.

Shelley and Wordsworth: inner and outer

To recap: the cases which present particular difficulties for Leavis's position are those which attempt to come close to an expression of the ineffable or the inchoate. In these cases, the poet may either retreat from reference to the external world to the use of abstractions, seeking accuracy of expression; or he may continue to refer to the external world, but in such a way as to make it answer metaphorically to the inner and inchoate 'world' he seeks to express. It is easy to see that either method will deliberately avoid those very qualities which Leavis sees as central to good poetry (and, a fortiori to its moral dimension): particularity, grasp on the actual, concreteness. These are by their very nature inimical to conveying a sense of the inchoate.

Leavis was, as we might expect, aware of this problem, though he does not state it quite in the way I have done. In his Revaluation essays on Wordsworth and Shelley¹ he seeks to demonstrate that in fact the ineffable can be expressed with and through particularity and concreteness, and without sacrifice of its true nature. The means of this demonstration, is a comparison of Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' and Wordsworth's 'The Simplicon Pass'². By discriminating evaluatively between these key Romantic poets, he seeks to show that a close awareness of and realistic depiction of the real world is more important in poetry which concerns itself with 'the sublime' and is perfectly capable of achievement in such poetry without

1. Revaluation (1936): 'Wordsworth' pp. 154-202; 'Shelley', pp. 203-240.

The main burden of Leavis's argument is to be found in the Shelley essay.

2. Ibid, pp. 212-215

detriment to the abstraction at its heart. Wordsworth does achieve it, in Leavis's view; Shelley does not. Leavis thus deliberately takes on the question of the expression of the ineffable, represented for him by Shelley, whilst at the same time insisting that it is not Shelley's 'ideas' or 'beliefs' but his 'poetry' which is the object of attack.¹ i.e. he roots his argument in what he sees as technical matters. His use of Wordsworth as the contrastingly successful poet, expressing the 'sublime' without loss of particularity is a master-stroke; for as he sees, if he is to sustain the claim that it is not Shelley's 'ideas' he is attacking, the successful poetry he measures Shelley's against must be concerned with roughly the same sort of 'ideas'.

* * * * *

Before I examine the terms of Leavis's comparison of representative examples from Shelley's Mont Blanc and Wordsworth's The Simpon Pass it might be helpful for an understanding of the subsequent discussion to give the examples in full, as Leavis gives them:

The everlasting universe of things
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,
Now dark - now glittering - now reflecting gloom -
Now lending splendour, where from secret springs
The source of human thought its tribute brings
Of waters - with a sound but half its own,
Such as a feeble brook will oft assume
In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,
Where waterfalls around it leap for ever,
Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river
Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves.

(Mont Blanc 11.1-11)²

Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
The unfettered clouds and region of the heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light -
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face ...

(The Simpon Pass, 11.11-16)³

1. Ibid, p. 204

2. P.B. Shelley, The Complete Poetical Works, ed. N. Rogers (Oxford, 1972-5).

3. W. Wordsworth, The Poetical Works, ed. T. Hutchinson, revised E. de Selincourt (1950).

The main ground for Leavis's attack on Shelley in favour of Wordsworth is that Shelley 'offers the emotion in itself, unattached, in the void' (p.214); Wordsworth on the other hand 'seems always to be presenting an object (wherever this may belong) and the emotion seems to derive from what is presented' (p.214). There is a simple and minor, objection to be made here, which is that Shelley's emotion cannot really be entirely 'in the void', for if it were, we could not know it was there, there would be nothing to comprehend. This is perhaps just slackness of expression from Leavis; but perhaps it is not, for perhaps it conveys only too precisely his real objection, that Shelley has in fact conveyed perfectly his inner state, and it is one without an object. I shall return to this possibility.

Elsewhere, however, Leavis modifies his objection to one aimed at Shelley's conflation of inner and outer, which he sees as being 'unsortably and indistinguishably confused' in Shelley's Mont Blanc (p.212). Now either Shelley presents an object or he does not; if he does, the emotion cannot be 'in the void'; if he does not, he cannot be accused of confusing inner and outer. But again it may be that what Leavis is really referring to here - unwittingly, as it were - is the sense of chaos conveyed in the Shelley, which might be precisely the experience Shelley wishes to convey, for that may most clearly reflect the nature of his inner state.

This interpretation is reinforced by the terms Leavis uses to praise Wordsworth in comparison with Shelley. He contrasts Wordsworth's 'collectedness' with Shelley's 'ecstatic dissipation' (p.213); further he praises Wordsworth's ability to 'grasp surely ... what he offers, whether this appears as belonging to the outer world - the world as perceived, or to inner experience' (p.214). Leavis makes clear here, and throughout his Revaluation discussions of the poet, that Wordsworth's grasp on the actual can be seen whether he is dealing with 'inner' or 'outer' experience. This is important

for his thesis, because again he is insistent that it is not the inner nature of Shelley's experience which is under attack by comparison. However, when he praises Wordsworth's collectedness he tells us that it 'does not belong merely to the record; it was present (or at least the movement towards it was) in the experience' (p.213). Whether Wordsworth here means in actual experience in the real world (crossing the Pass), or the inner experience prompted by that, or an imagined episode in the poet's mind, the fact remains that the only evidence we have of the nature of the experience is the poem itself.¹ Similarly, the only evidence we have for the collectedness of the presentation of the experience is the poem itself. So how can we distinguish the experience and the 'record' of it sufficiently to say where the collected quality enters?

Here we again encounter Leavis's mistaken conflation of an account of actuality and a creative illusion of an accurate description of actuality.² But on top of this Leavis's stress on the actual takes no account of that part of the inner experience which the poet seeks to explore which would be falsified by an accurate representation of 'the actual'. He insists that the two passages are similar in 'reacting characteristically to similar concrete occasions', and reiterates that in Shelley it is 'strictly the "poetry"' he is criticising. But to put 'poetry' in scare quotes is not sufficient to excuse Leavis for his basic error here;

1. Another poem apparently composed in the Simlun Pass registers a very different kind of experience.

2. Note that later in the Shelley essay he reveals the depth of this confusion in comparing Shelley's The Cenci, detrimentally of course, with Measure for Measure. Certainly he is correct - not surprisingly - in his preference for the Shakespeare. But he praises Claudio's speech thus: 'Claudio's words spring from a vividly realized particular situation; from the imagined experience of a given mind in a given critical moment that is felt from the inside - that is lived - with sharp concrete particularity' (p.226). Yet, of course, Claudio is an imagined character, who cannot 'live' or 'realize'; it is Shakespeare who does the realizing (ironically, of the unable-to-be-lived experienced of death), and reality is at many removes here.

as he very well knows - indeed it is at the heart of his discussion of Shelley - there is no such thing as 'strictly' the poetry. In seeking determinedly to avoid the usual ideological and moral criticisms of Shelley, and at the same time to demonstrate fully his theses about the role of a poet's 'grasp on the actual', he commits himself to a purely technical discrimination between Shelley's and Wordsworth's passages, and so necessarily to the view that the subject matter of the passages is broadly the same, or of the same kind.

Yet Leavis betrays himself in his own words when he suggests that the 'collectedness' of the Wordsworth passage 'was present ... in the experience'. Might not, then, Shelley's 'ecstatic dissipation' also have been present in his experience - and indeed have been what he was trying to convey? Leavis admits that for Shelley 'the setting, of course, provides special excuse for bewildered confusion', but it is very clear from his tone that the excuse is as far as he is concerned, unacceptable. An experience of bewildered confusion is not what he wishes to read about in poetry - because, of course, an accurate expression of bewildered confusion will be actually inimical to 'concreteness'; 'particularity', etc. But here we see clearly that the tail begins to wag the dog: particularity and concreteness are important for Leavis because they are in the service of accuracy to the inner experience - aren't they?

If we look a little more closely at the Wordsworth and Shelley passages we will see that in fact accuracy to the inner experience is not what Leavis wants, but rather accuracy to a certain kind of inner experience, one which is characteristically Wordsworth's concern but not characteristically Shelley's. Particularly revealing here is what Leavis leaves out in his quotations. Immediately after the opening lines of Mont Blanc which he quotes comes, as the first line of Section II of the poem:

Thus then, Ravine of Arve - dark, deep Ravine

In fact none of the first eleven lines are descriptive of Mont Blanc,

they are descriptive of the 'everlasting universe of things'; and though they have their own inbuilt metaphor springing from natural objects, they are not the natural objects of Mont Blanc, for Mont Blanc is compared to them, indirectly, and more directly 'to the everlasting universe of things'. Indeed Mont Blanc is very much a secondary presence in these first lines of the poem, not even making an 'appearance' until the second section. Now Leavis might easily have chosen a passage from that part of the poem which does make specific reference to Mont Blanc, referring to specific names and features (though even here his subject matter is still crucially that 'everlasting universe of things' of the first line). Yet he chooses not to. Why?

By contrast the Wordsworth passage he chooses is specifically descriptive of the Simplon Pass of the poem's title - and therefore of course it is not surprising that by comparison with the Shelley passage, which is not intended as a descriptive response to a particular place, it comes over as stronger in particularity and concreteness. Yet here, too, Leavis tailors his quotation carefully. The passage he quotes continues thus, to the end of the poem:

[the features
of the same face,] blossoms upon one tree,
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.

Leavis could easily have included these lines, indeed syntactically it would have made more sense to do so. Again, why did he not do so?

Even if we do not attribute deliberate falsification to Leavis here, the effect of the tailored quotations is falsifying, for it leads the reader to see more of the vacuous in Shelley, and less of it in Wordsworth (the vacuous as Leavis would, I think, see it). The Shelley passage begins with, takes its starting point from the

inner, from reflections on and feelings about the inner workings of the mind and its relationship with the external world. Objective reference ('the ... universe of things') serves only to remind us that what flows through the mind does have its origin in the external world, but that origin is not what interests him here. He is far more concerned to capture the nature of the inner experience, and here again objective reference enters, but explicitly in the form of metaphor, united round the image of water: 'flows', 'rolls its rapid waves' 'secret springs'. But again the reference is entirely in the service of revealing the inner experience. Then Shelley, subtly, it seems to me, gradually swims upwards from the depths of the inner experience, leaving metaphor for simile, moving from the rolling waves and secret springs to the lighter 'feeble brook'. Still he is trying to give sense to the inner experience: the feeble brook is drawn in to illuminate 'a sound but half its own', the 'sound' of 'the source of human thought'. In fact Shelley is here making an interesting attempt to convey the way the world acts upon the mind, and the way the mind or inner self contributes to the ensuing experience ('Its tribute brings' - notice the echo of 'tributary'), but always with 'a sound but half its own' for the rest is provided by the external stimulus. And even as he does this he is also moving yet closer to the surface of those inner waters, ending the opening section with the metaphorical 'vast river' (that which provides the other sound to the 'feeble brook', as the 'everlasting universe' provides the other sound to 'the source of human thought'). In the first line of section two, he breaks the surface and inner reflection meets external reality: 'Thus then', Ravine of Arve'.¹

Now, this is not to say that Shelley is entirely successful in his attempt to convey the inner workings of the mind as it meets 'the everlasting universe of things'. But it is to do greater justice than Leavis attempts to Shelley's lines, which, though

1. The inverted form of this opening section is interestingly reminiscent of Wordsworth's extended simile in The Prelude, Book IV, ll 256-276

they need careful reading, are clearly not of the same kind as Wordsworth's in their relationship with objective reality.

Wordsworth's lines do start with objective reality (and earlier in the poem in an almost pedestrian way: 'did we journey several hours At a slow step'). The subject of the poetic sentence, 'Black drizzling crags', is also the subject of the passage, and the descriptive reference is quite specific, 'crags', 'raving stream', 'clouds', 'heavens', 'darkness', 'light'. But what makes them quite clearly referential is that Wordsworth states that they are, and renders the experience through personal sensation: 'spake', 'the sick sight', the 'giddy prospect'. This is, of course, what Leavis praises in it. As in the Shelley, there is metaphorical reference, but while there it is in the service of the inner experience, here it is directly related to the narrator's physical sensation of the particular place: the 'voice' he hears is the voice of the echoing crags, and the humanising metaphor ('the features of the same face') is domestic and personal. Again, this is what Leavis praises. But he praises it as 'offering a sense of sublime bewilderment, similarly inspired' (i.e. inspired similarly to Shelley's). Yet the closest the quoted lines come to 'a sense of sublime bewilderment' is the rather vague 'Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light'. Otherwise, it seems to me, Wordsworth is quite unbewildered, characteristically in tune with and closely responsive to the grand beauty of the Pass. But, 'sublime bewilderment' does enter where Leavis breaks off in the 'Apocalypse', the 'symbols of Eternity' and the unsortably and indistinguishably confused 'of first, and last, and midst, and without end'. I suspect that there is however, too much of sublime bewilderment in these lines for Leavis's taste, and not enough of concreteness and particularity for his argument.

Leavis's comparison does not, then demonstrate that 'sublime bewilderment' is in Wordsworth's passage conveyed without loss of particularity while in Shelley's passage it leads to a

detrimental surrender of his grasp on the actual. For in the former, particularity prevails only where the poetry is clearly a descriptive response to a particular situation and melts away when sublimity becomes the central subject matter. In the latter, a complete misinterpretation of the passage leads to unjust accusations of confusion, and Leavis fails to deal with the possibility that 'ecstatic dissipation' is part of the inner experience Shelley seeks to convey, and not simply a consequence of his weak grasp on the actual.

This failure would not be of such great consequence were it not for Leavis's proclaimed insistence that his criticism is not based on Shelley's ideas and beliefs. It is my contention that it is, and that Leavis's unhappiness with states of 'sublime bewilderment' leads to his powerful emphasis on the need for concreteness and particularity, i.e. that it is the subject matter of the poetry which determines his evaluative stance.

'Fallings from us, vanishings, blank misgivings'

I shall test out this view, that an inherent dislike and suspicion of the ineffable underlies, and underpins, Leavis's moral/critical position, by looking at a further examination he makes of a Wordsworth passage dealing with this area of experience.

In the Wordsworth essay in Revaluation he quotes the following lines, from The Prelude, Book II:

and, at that time,
Have felt whate'er there is of power in sound
To breathe an elevated mood, by form
Or image unprofaned; and I would stand,
Beneath, some rock, listening to sounds that are
The ghostly language of the ancient earth,
Or make their dim abode in distant winds.
Thence did I drink the visionary power.
I deem not profitless these fleeting moods

Of shadowy exultation: not for this,
 That they are kindred to our purer mind
 And intellectual life; but that the soul,
 Remembering how she felt, but what she felt
 Remembering not, retains an obscure sense
 Of possible sublimity, to which,
 With growing faculties she doth aspire,
 With faculties still growing, feeling still
 That whatsoever point they gain, they still
 Have something to pursue.

Leavis firmly places the central concern of this passage, which he describes variously as 'the "visionary" element' (p.173), 'unsounded depths and ... mysteries' (p.174), and, quoting the poet himself, 'fallings from us vanishings, blank misgivings', as being of the same kind as that of The Simpon Pass. Certainly, there is direct reference to a representation of actual experience here ('I would stand Beneath some rock'). But the 'I' leads us almost immediately into the inner visionary experience, occasioned by the experience of Nature, but here dominant, as a central concern in the poem, over that occasioning experience. This passage is about 'sublime bewilderment' as The Simpon Pass is not, except fleetingly and vaguely at the end. Indeed here Wordsworth rapidly abandons the occasioning actuality altogether and launches directly into an account of the abstract inner experience in abstract terms. The last explicit reference to the occasioning experience comes in line 8, and then the order of interest is very clear - 'Thence did I drink the visionary power'. In the subsequent eleven lines even the placing pronoun disappears, and Wordsworth enters into sheer abstraction. Leavis comments upon the elusiveness of what Wordsworth is attempting to convey here, and certainly there is a difference of quality as well as of kind between this and the Simpon Pass passage; this is not Wordsworth at his best. But quite unequivocally Leavis refers to it as the same kind of passage in its concern as The Simpon Pass ('The point of stressing Wordsworth's normality and sanity in dealing with such passages as this comes out when we turn from it to, say, Shelley's Mont Blanc or compare Mont Blanc with Wordsworth's

Simplon Pass) (175), and specifically sees both as recording,
along with the Shelley, those moments when

I forgot
That I had bodily eyes, and what I saw
Appeared like something in myself, a dream,
A prospect in my mind. (The Prelude, Book II, ll. 342-52)

How, then, does he deal with the Prelude passage in the Wordsworth essay? Curiously, he seems embarrassed by the 'visionary moments' described here, urging the reader to 'holding firmly onto that sober verse in which they are presented', and opting himself 'to lay the stress again - where it ought to rest - on his essential sanity and normality'. (p.174) Note that he does not attempt to preserve his Shelley essay defence here, by arguing that there is an organic connection between inner and outer state, that the abstract subject matter somehow grows out of the sober verse so that the two are in harmonious counterpoint. Rather he sees the abstractions as a sort of critical ordeal, best to be endured by a firm hold on the sober verse and the values of sanity and normality also to be found there. Any suggestion that it is the quality of the poetry rather than the visionary subject matter which is the source of embarrassment here is dispelled by Leavis himself.

Perhaps it will be agreed that, though Wordsworth no doubt was right in feeling that he had something to pursue, the critic here is in a different case. If these 'moments' have any significance for the critic (whose business it is to define the significance of Wordsworth's poetry), it will be established, not by dwelling upon or in them, in the hope of exploring something that lies hidden in or behind their vagueness, but by holding firmly on to that sober verse in which they are presented.

We can almost feel Leavis squirming here, and his general unease in talking about the 'visionary moments' in this essay comes out in his very syntax and terminology - note the rather bad joke in the pun on 'pursue' - and how often do we hear Leavis proclaiming so insistently the values of sanity, normality and sobriety?!

* * * * *

It is not accidental, I would suggest, that of the two passages of Wordsworth which Leavis chooses to represent the exploration of those 'fallings from us, vanishings, blank misgivings', one (Simplon Pass) is not really about such states at all, and the other (The Prelude) is an example of Wordsworth's least successful approach to this subject, the latter being saved for Leavis only by the 'sober verse' in which it is couched. Against these are set a passage from Shelley which certainly is about that mysterious inner world, yet which Leavis condemns for its being true to that mystery in its lack of concreteness and particularity. Leavis will not willingly reject the value of this area of concern, though he comes closer to doing so in his grudging acceptance of it in the Wordsworth essay than in the blinkered vision of the Shelley essay; he knows that to do so would threaten one of the constitutive qualities of Romanticism, and also that it would threaten the whole basis of his attack on Shelley, that it is a non-ideological attack. Yet there is evident in his work, as partly evidenced above, a thorough-going dislike and suspicion of those dimensions of the inner which make it difficult to articulate, inchoate, intangible, and therefore inaccessible to precise representation. It is important that I clarify the nature of and reasons for his suspicion, for I believe it will reveal a central flaw in his arguments against a weak grasp on the actual in poetry. It is important in addition because the problem of the inchoate, the ineffable, the 'blank misgivings', is at the heart of any evaluative critical judgement about truth in poetry.

It is instructive to look at Leavis's interpretation of Wordsworth's poetic philosophy, where again he underplays the role of the instinctive and the inner, in order to emphasise the importance to Wordsworth of order and reason. For while he espouses to a remarkable degree Wordsworth's poetic epistemology, what embarrasses him in it is the role of spontaneity:

Spontaneity, that is, as Wordsworth seeks it, involves no cult of the instinctive and primitive at the expense of the rationalized and civilized; it is the spontaneity supervening upon complex development, a spontaneity engaging an advanced and delicate organisation. He stands for a distinctly human naturalness; one, that is, consummating a discipline, moral and other. A poet who can bring home to us the possibility of such naturalness should today be found important. In Wordsworth's poetry the possibility is offered to us realized - realized in a mode central and compelling enough to enforce the bearing of poetry upon life, the significance of this poetry for actual living.

(Revaluation, p. 170)

The particularly interesting thing about this view of Wordsworth is that it both confirms and denies what is vital to Wordsworth's view of poetry (as expressed both in his theorising and in the poetry itself). It endorses 'complex development' and 'advanced and delicate organisation' in relation to feeling (what Wordsworth sees as the interplay between feeling and thoughts 'which are indeed the representatives of our past feelings.'¹) and it endorses the importance of poetry for 'actual living'. But its distaste for the link between spontaneity and the 'cult of the instinctive and primitive' is intense, and intensifies as the Revaluation essay on Wordsworth progresses. Leavis's preference is for a spontaneity tempered by 'habits of meditation',² for 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' rather than 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling'. But it is crucial to recognise the centrality of the latter in Wordsworth's thinking:

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous over flow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.

'The tranquillity gradually disappears'; but for Leavis the poetry is better if the tranquillity remains.

1. Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, ed. W.J.B. Owen (1969) pp 157-8

2. Ibid, p.157

3. Ibid, p.173.

Now, of course, the tranquillity, the collectedness, may remain in the manner of expression even while the 'spontaneous' emotion also exists, is given voice, in the poetry. But if this is what Leavis sought to demonstrate, why did he not choose to consider a Wordsworth passage of high quality specifically attempting to express something almost inaccessibly inner? Such passages are several in Wordsworth, but one is renowned:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

('Lines composed above Tintern Abbey' ll.93-102)

Perhaps this was too Shelleyan for Leavis? And yet it is not truly Shelleyan, it is deeply Wordsworthian. Wordsworth's subject here is avowedly as well as implicitly metaphysical, and he sees this spirituality as far more difficult of comprehension than his earlier 'dizzy raptures' in response to nature (l.85) That he is consciously feeling towards an understanding of these exalted states, rather than expressing a fully achieved understanding of them is evident in the cautious movements of the grammar and vocabulary. His caution does not lead him to hesitate in placing his own feelings centrally in the passage, however, rather than what they derive from. Their origin is mentioned secondarily to the feelings, and as part of an attempt to define them more accurately: 'a sense sublime Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns'. The key words of the passage - 'a presence', 'elevated thoughts', 'a sense sublime', 'something far more deeply interfused', 'a motion and a spirit' - are certainly specific in their differentiation and modification, but they are none of them references to the actual. Yet this passage

is far from blurringly inchoate, it successfully preserves the intangibility of its subject matter whilst coming somewhere close to a realisation of it. It does this partly through specificity of abstraction, but largely through the use of placing and defining prepositions (note the careful precision of 'in the mind of man' which runs counter to the rest of the syntax). This combination gives a sense of approaching nearer and nearer to the truth by an accumulation of successive approximations, culminating in a highly generalized actuality which is no more than the object of the impulsion of that motion and spirit.

Wordsworth does, then, give full poetic weight at times to the inner-ness of certain experience, and he attempts to preserve elements of its inaccessibility even whilst trying to build approach roads. At such times he sees the necessity of abandoning his grasp on the actual in favour of retaining his grasp on the abstract. We are reminded of the certainty of his aperçu in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads: 'Another circumstance must be mentioned which distinguishes these poems from the popular poetry of the day; it is this, that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and the situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling'. While many of the remarks in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads are not always borne out in Wordsworth's own poetry, this one surely is.¹

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1. Wordsworth's remarks on the relationship between the poet's creative imagination and the real world are also of interest here: the poet can 'be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present' and he has 'an ability of conjuring up in himself passions, which indeed are far from being the same as those produced by real events, yet'... do more nearly resemble the passions produced by real events, than anything which, from the motions of their own minds merely, other men are accustomed to feel in themselves:- whence, and from practice, he has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings which by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate personal excitement' (p. 165)

Leavis somewhat misrepresents the issue, then, in his simple opposition of 'sublimity plus actuality' (Wordsworth) and 'sublimity minus actuality' (Shelley) in the Revaluation comparison; and the complexities he ignores introduce embarrassing difficulties for the straightforward equation he wants to construct between 'grasp on the actual' and emotional substance in poetry. As I have said, however, Wordsworth even at his most abstract and least actual is not Shelley; Shelley's inchoateness and lack of concreteness are not therefore rendered good by exposing the flaws in Leavis's argument, and the Shelleyan case still provides a difficulty for the moral dimension of critical judgements. For if Leavis's arguments are faulty, where can we draw the line? How do we decide when a precise picture of an intangible inner state ceases to be that and becomes just bad poetry? This is the question which I shall now go on to consider.

But we must remember that cases transform arguments - as Leavis would have agreed. An examination by Leavis of a truly 'inner' passage from Wordsworth, such as the 'Tintern Abbey' passage, would have had to crucially transform his argument in the Shelley essay - and perhaps this would have served the cause of criticism better.

Thought, Thoughts, and Feelings

An attempt then to construct a simple connection between 'grasp on the actual' and moral/poetic substance founders on those cases where the poet may be trying to give voice to an idea, feeling or state where its conveyance through particularity and concreteness would falsify its nature. Further, a more complex view than Leavis provides of the relationship between poetic realism and reality is needed in any account of moral substance in poetry. But if anyone is thinking at this point, "Well - of course", they must remind themselves both of the critical assumptions about realism, concreteness, particularity etc. exemplified in the previous chapter (vide p.115 above); and of the implications of the flaws in Leavis's position for the moral dimension of criticism. I have already shown the reductive effect of attempting to abandon the moral dimension of criticism; but what of the effect of embracing it without the disciplined framework which Leavis attempted to offer?

Leavis, it might be said, makes the right judgements for the wrong reasons, ruling out of serious critical acclaim a relatively small body of poetry with whose dismissal most critics would concur. But getting the reasons right here could not be more important. For Leavis - and indeed anyone who espouses his thesis about particularity - seeks to command our assent here in his judgements about Shelley, Tennyson, Bronte, and others; we should spend our time more profitably reading other poets.

Leavis is led into the position he takes partly by his extreme reluctance to commit what he sees as the vulgar error of equating poetic value with the moral value of the ideas or feelings expressed in the poetry. Yet it seems to me - and I have tried to demonstrate this - that this 'vulgar error' is not in fact that, and that the moral value of ideas and

feelings expressed has a crucial role in critical judgements about poetry, and in Leavis's judgements in particular. This is a view which most critics are reluctant to espouse, for fairly obvious reasons. In this chapter I shall try to come closer to an understanding of the role of the moral value of ideas and feelings in poetry and in our judgements of poetry, and again this discussion focusses on the 'Shelleyan' case i.e. that where the inchoate, the mystical, the intangible is central to the subject matter of the poetry. I again make Leavis the critical focus of the discussion and again for the reason that his exploration of this area through critical analysis of poetry is the most sophisticated available. And once more I see his errors as creatively revealing and helpful to a truer understanding of this dimension of criticism.

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I have already touched on Leavis's "'Thought" and Emotional Quality'¹ in the previous chapter. In this essay, published subsequently (1945) to the Revaluation essays on Wordsworth and Shelley he more overtly declares the moral interest of which he is somewhat shy in the Revaluation essays. Here he sees the key to the moral/poetic conundrum as thought:

The presentment of this situation involves a disinterested or "constating" attitude and also a critical attitude towards the emotion evoked by the situation: here we have our licence for saying that, however strong an emotional effect the poem has, that is essentially conditioned by "thought"; the constating, relating and critical mind has its essential part in the work of sensibility (p.217)

The connection between disinterestedness or distance in the presentation of emotion and the moral substance of the poetry is still at the heart of the moral position here, but the radical assumption, that an uncritical attitude to emotion is a bad thing, is overtly and directly moral.

1. All references to this essay are to its republication in A Selection from Scrutiny, Vol I (1968)

Two separate claims need to be argued here; that a critical attitude to emotion in life is per se good; and that a critical attitude to emotion in poetry, demonstrated through distance and disinterestedness, is good. Leavis bases his critical demonstrations of the importance of a distanced attitude in poetry on an acceptance of the value of a critical attitude to emotion in life; but at the same time he allows his critical demonstrations to stand as evidence for that view in life. The circularity of the argument is not the only problem here; again Leavis takes too little account of the differences between poetry and life.

Absorption and Restraint

The past is notorious for its ability to arouse emotions quickly and powerfully; it also has a tendency to dull the critical spirit, partly because it is conveniently easy to forget those elements of the past which we would prefer to remain buried there. It is not surprising, then, that Leavis sees it as a danger area for the poet, and the reader of poetry, and one of his key comparisons in '"Thought" and Emotional Quality', of Lawrence's 'Piano' and Tennyson's 'Tears, idle tears', centres on the poets' respective abilities in dealing with the past. The main ground for complaint against Tennyson is that he invites 'a complete and simple immersion: there is no attitude towards the experience except one of complaisance; we are to be wholly in it and of it'. (p.217). Leavis goes on to support this view by reference to the lack of particularity in the poem. By contrast, Lawrence is praised for 'an element of disinterested valuation' (p.215), 'a critical attitude to the emotion' (p.217). Again, those judgements are fleshed out by references to concreteness and impersonality of observation. (Thus, though Leavis is more overt here in his moral stance, seeing a critical attitude to emotion expressed as a desirable quality of poetry, and 'immersion' in the emotion as an undesirable one, he still holds firmly to the connection between these positive and negative elements, and the

presence or lack of it of particularity, concreteness etc.)

In his discussion Leavis refers, assuming it to be self-evident, to 'that most dangerous theme, the irrevocable past' and implies the dangers of 'the poignant luxury of release, the loosing of the reservoirs'.¹ In support of his view he refers to a more professionally expressed account, that of D.W. Harding:

The fact of experiencing a tendency towards regression means nothing. It is the final attitude towards the experience that has to be evaluated ... Lawrence is adult, stating the overwhelming strength of the impulse but reporting resistance to it and implying that resistance is better than yielding.²

Harding in fact realises more explicitly than Leavis that the concept of regression means something rather different in life than it does in literature; that 'final attitude towards the experience' he opines, 'may be suggested only very subtly'. But then, he is a psychologist, and his piece is entitled 'A Note on Nostalgia'. Harding is also, however, an extremely acute literary critic. He takes a far more complex and subtle view of Shelley³ than does Leavis, noting that Shelley's skill may lie precisely in conveying 'an emotional quality of outlook towards rather vaguely outlined situations and ideas, the emotional quality defining itself more precisely than the object that aroused it' (p.212). He also makes the point that though Shelley's lines may often look like 'merely emotional incantation', they often repay careful reading which reveals that there is some structure of thought, often complex and condensed, and so obscure, but there nonetheless. 'The great value of Leavis's criticism here' [i.e. in relation to Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind'], he reminds us, 'is its challenge to flabbily emotional reading,

1. Leavis's imagery here may well be tuned to the tearful elements in both poems; but there is an interestingly strong sense of attraction-and-repulsion in his references to being swept away.

2. D.W. Harding, 'A Note on Nostalgia', Determinations, ed. F.R. Leavis (1934) p.70

3. The Pelican Guide to English Literature (1962) ed. B.Ford, 'Shelley's Poetry' pp207-219.
All further references to Harding on Shelley are to this piece.

though we may differ from him in estimating how far Shelley wrote in the same slack way' (p.212). The point of reminding ourselves of what Harding says about Shelley here is to place in context his remarks about Lawrence's 'Piano'. That Lawrence's attitude to 'regression' is 'adult, stating overwhelming strength of the impulse but reporting resistance to it' does not necessarily mean for Harding that this is the only poetic approach to be taken to 'regression'. As his remarks on Shelley indicate - and of course it is significant that it is Shelley, for Leavis sees a continuity between the Lawrence and Shelley cases, where Harding sees a distinction - distance from or attitude to the emotion expressed in poetry is not a sine qua non of good poetry as it is for Leavis: 'for Shelley thought is valid only as part of a more inclusive state of being and has to be judged by its truth to the matrix of mood and attitude from which it emerges. He stands remote from the important line of English poetry in which exact thinking interpenetrates emotion and seems to give it a structure which it would otherwise have lacked' (p.219).

Lawrence's portrayal of the past is only one of many poetic possibilities for Harding. He thinks it is admirable in its adulthood and in its implication that 'resistance is better than yielding'; but he is perfectly prepared to accept that a Shelley could write a poem of a very different sort about the past, which might be successful in a different way. Harding is thus at once both more explicit in the underpinning of his critical judgements, and more flexible in his approach to that poetry which may genuinely attempt a different mode of approach to emotion, than Leavis is prepared to be.

Central to Harding's flexibility is, I think, his awareness that absorption in emotion is a different thing in life than it is in literature. If we remain with the past as representing the most dangerous of areas in which man can absorb himself, what do we find? Hardy's poetry, the best of which dwells almost

exclusively on the past; the opening chapters of Proust's A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, the most evocative recreation in prose of a child's feelings in his formative years (formative in a substantial sense in the work); individual poems which use the simple device of a photograph, fixed symbol of the past, as a means of exploring our feelings;¹ Dicken's David Copperfield, which contains ^{one} of the most moving images of lost childhood in all fiction.

These are not examples of regression as we would use the word in life. They do all rely on a profound, if momentary, absorption in the past for much of their power, indeed they create that absorption. But while regression in life implies a consuming concern with the past, indeed a retreat into it, which detracts from the person's interest in and engagement with the present, to the point where they are debilitated or even destroyed, the temporary regression into and absorption in the past expressed in and provided by literature need not have this destructive effect on the present. A normal interest in and concern with the past is seen as perfectly appropriate in life; after all, the past is the source of our being and the shaper, in part, of our reactions and responses to the present. It may be the object of substantial emotions. Poetry, and literature in general, may highlight these feelings, heighten and focus them, in a way which may help us to come to a greater understanding of them. But in doing this it may temporarily absorb the reader in them, and in this case neither the poet nor the reader need be guilty of regression in its destructive sense in life. If a poem happens to catch a moment of absorption in the past - a moment such as any human being will properly have experienced and appreciated in life- how does this differ from its capturing other primary elements in human experience?

In life, then, short periods of absorption in the past are all to the good, but they should not last, and should be seen in

1. For example, Hardy's 'The Photograph' and Ted Hughes's 'Six Young Men'

context, for fear that they disrupt the present in a way that will prevent the person living his life fully. Poetry, on the other hand, can capture such moments eternally - but not therefore in an all-absorbing and debilitating way. For we can go and read other poems which give us a quite different, and yet similarly lasting, view. Through poetry we can experience the annihilation of the past at one moment and its celebration at the next, without endangering ourselves of being lost in either. We can also, of course, experience both in one poem, in the balance such as Lawrence may be seen as finding in 'Piano'. However, Leavis does not just see Tennyson's 'Tears, idle tears' as inferior to 'Piano': 'It is plain that habitual indulgence of the kind represented by "Tears, idle tears" - indulgence not accompanied and virtually disowned by a critical placing - would be, on grounds of emotional and spiritual hygiene, something to deplore' (p.218)

Strong words; but modified words too. 'Habitually' would figure largely, I suspect, in any Leavis defence. If we keep on reading such poems or if a poet keeps on writing them ... that might have consequences for our lives, as well as for our critical judgements. Indeed; for then the habit becomes part of a pattern in our lives (though dwelling so much on the past seems not to have harmed Hardy). But the structure of Leavis's argument is against the insistent offer of emotion and for bare and disinterested presentment in individual cases. Indeed he confirms this in his remark about the comparison of Wordsworth's 'A slumber did my spirit seal' with Tennyson's 'Break, break, break': 'the reader who cannot see that Tennyson's poem, with all its distinction and refinement, yields a satisfaction inferior in kind to that represented by Wordsworth, cannot securely appreciate the highest poetic achievement at its true worth' (p.213).

Leavis's argument in no way depends upon an accumulation of cases, it is rather given force and illustrated more clearly and in detail by that accumulation. In any given case, and without recourse to other examples (and it may be the only case a reader

reads about, just as the poem in question may be the only poem of that kind the reader reads) he will say that the poem which offers emotion directly is inferior thereby to a poem which explores emotion, critically through 'the presence of something other than directly offered emotion, or mere emotional flow - the presence of something, a specific situation, concretely grasped'. (p.217)

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I have in the foregoing discussion tried to show that what many critics take for granted in making critical judgements with a moral dimension about poetry cannot be taken for granted. Poems which absorb themselves in the 'irrevocable past' are not therefore necessarily inferior poems. Reading poetry which indulges us in emotion will not necessarily lead to emotional self-indulgence in life. Now in so doing I am not necessarily departing from Leavis's individual judgements here. I agree with him that 'A slumber did my spirit seal' is superior to 'Break, break, break'; 'Piano' is certainly a better poem than 'Tears, idle tears'. Where I feel Leavis to be wrong is in not squaring up to where that inferiority lies, and, more importantly, to the critical implications of that. It is not the uncritical absorption in the past, nor the lack of concreteness and so a sense of objectivity (it does, after all have a 'specious' particularity), which renders 'Tears, idle tears' inferior. Nor is it a lack of attitude to the emotion; Tennyson states his attitude in the first damning line:

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean

Small likelihood, then, that he, or the reader, will find out in the poem; and this is borne out, for of course the tears mean nothing. They are, as Tennyson has already fairly proclaimed, idle. And nothing he goes on to say does anything to alter his or our impression. There are a few meaningless oxymorons, doubtless intended to impress with their mystery: 'So sad, so fresh, the days

that are no more'; 'Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns
 The earliest pipe of half-awaken'd birds To dying ears'. We
 can just about make sense of 'fresh' (fresh in the memory perhaps)
 but we feel that it is really there in that last line of the
 stanza only because it was there in the first. And while the
 dawn chorus might certainly be sad to the wakening ears of a
 dying man, I doubt that it would be 'strange'; to early wakers
 the dawn chorus is all too familiar. Then there is the
 'first beam glittering on a sail' which, as Leavis suggests, at
 least has something of the world about it - until we read on
 and discover that this is the sail of a boat 'that brings our
 friends up from the underworld'. This we could perhaps stow
 under the poetic licence of classical reference, though even
 in that canon, few were those who made the return boat trip.
 It comes as little surprise when we find that the nicely contras-
 ting adjectives have built up to one of Tennyson's favourite ideas
 'Death in Life' (also to be found in the similarly vacuous 'The
 splendour falls!'). The best we can say of the Tennyson is that
 it captures perfectly an emotion experienced by most people,
 meaningless sadness - 'idle tears'. As such there is little
 wrong with it. But just as we place little weight on 'idle
 tears' in life, we place little weight on this as poetry; and
 to the extent to which it tries to place itself on a more
 pretentious level ('some divine despair') we are likely to see
 it as false.

This is, I believe, Leavis's root objection to the poem,
 just as the more interesting and varied nature of Lawrence's
 response to an understanding of his own feelings (he does know
 what his tears mean, and tells us so very clearly) is the
 reason for his preference here. But this is not what he says,
 nor is it even what he implies in talking about 'attitude towards'
 (p.215) His objection is not to the emotion or idea itself,
 but that 'it unquestionably offers emotion directly, emotion for
 its own sake without a justifying situation' (p.218)

In the process of discussing the relationship between thought and emotion in the two Tennyson poems, Leavis approvingly quotes Yeats: 'I tried after publication of The Wanderings of Oisín to write of nothing but emotion, and in the simplest language, and now I have had to go through it all, cutting out or altering passages that are sentimental for lack of thought'¹ Leavis responds to this: 'This has an obvious bearing on "The Lake Isle of Innisfree". "Tears, idle tears", in the main respects dealt with in the last paragraph, may fairly be classed with "Innisfree"' (p.218). 'Innisfree' could, in fact, be seen as quite strong on particularity ('nine bean rows', 'lake water lapping', 'where the cricket sings') but doubtless for Leavis it would be specious because he objects to what the poem is actually saying - yet again he is not prepared to say so.

What would Leavis's view be of another Yeats poem from the same early collection as 'Innisfree', 'The Rose' (1893); the poem 'When You are Old'?

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how love fled,
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

Traditionally, because of its historical placing, this poem would I suppose be seen as one of Yeats's lesser works, in the early 'full' style rather than the late 'spare' style. Yet it seems to me to be of its kind a fine poem, perhaps not complex, but simple and moving. It is of point to wonder

1. W.B. Yeats, Early Poems and Stories (1925)

what Leavis would make of this kind of example, because it lacks particularity and concreteness, it is somewhat sentimental, it deals with looking back at the irrevocable past (that dangerous area), but it cannot be condemned in the same terms in which I condemned the Tennyson (that it is vacuous, self-contradictory, etc). Perhaps then it can be said to have 'thought'? Yes, but the thought lies not, I think, in the particularity or even in the placing situation, but in the actual expression of feeling itself - 'How many loved your moments of glad grace? The choice of the phrase 'glad grace' implies a reflective knowledge, as does 'moments'; and the thorough affection of the imagined picture of the woman 'old and grey', though described in very general terms quite different from those used in his later bitter pictures of old age, also implies care and thought. Leavis might say, perhaps, that the very distance the narrator places between the woman and himself by the device of 'looking forward to looking back' is all that is necessary to create the objectivity he requires. But now we are getting much closer to attitude to emotion, and much further away from technical devices of distance and presentment. The emotion is still very much there, central, and absorbing in the poem, it is at the heart of it, in a way that Lawrence's in fact is not just because of his intellectual awareness of it, and it is surely this sort of case against which Leavis's connections between thought, objectivity and particularity of presentment need to be tested.

Let us take an even more testing case, a poem which has always moved me in spite of, as it were, its sentimentality (a sentimentality particularly evident in the sung version):

There is a lady sweet and kind,
Was never face so pleased my mind,
I did but see her passing by,
And yet I love her till I die.

Her gesture, motion, and her smiles,
 Her wit, her voice, my heart beguiles,
 Beguiles my heart, I know not why,
 And yet I love her till I die.

Cupid is winged and doth range
 Her country so my love doth change:
 But change she earth, or change she sky,
 Yet will I love her till I die.

The subject of the poem is simple: love at first sight (no doubt as dangerous as the irrevocable past). The treatment is of the most general sort, so that we get no specific idea of the lady at all. There is no attitude to the emotion, except a profound certainty that his love will last forever, and a profound uncertainty as to why. Yet his 'Beguiles my heart, I know not why' is not vapid in the same way as Tennyson's 'Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean', for while Tennyson proceeds nonetheless to attach some portentous importance to his tears ('Some divine despair'), this (anonymous) poet does not do so to his love. He simply recounts his state. So, then, there is no self-indulgence, except in writing the poem at all; but neither is there what Leavis would call 'thought'.

Yet there is, of course, thought in the poem, to the extent that there must be thought in any objective expression of feeling. But Leavis has a narrow view of thought as an appropriate element in poetry. By aligning the presence of thought with the presence of a sense of the actual, he is placing severe limitations on the subject matter of 'good' poetry. Further more by similarly aligning a critical attitude to the emotion with both a sense of the actual and with the consequent presence of thought, he is further limiting the complexity and subtlety of approach available to a poet who may wish to approach emotion in a different way, though it may be nonetheless critically. As Harding says of certain parts of Shelley's poetry, 'he is starting out from an emotional state and finding images and ideas with which to bring it into the realm of thought ... He has only words with which to

express mood, attitude and emotional state, and the words cannot operate unless they are conveying ideas as well.'¹ There is an enormous multiplicity in English poetry, and in our responses to that poetry, which demands a certain critical flexibility. One of the many factors which might be taken into account in considering 'There is a lady sweet and kind' is the discovery - certainly to my surprise - that it is not a Victorian poem, but an anonymous poem of the seventeenth century. How could this fact by itself render the poem more 'thoughtful' or less sentimental? Simply by giving the reader a new context in which to see the poem - one of a very different kind from the conventionally sentimental late nineteenth century, one which throws the last verse of the poem into greater relief. A similar effect can be achieved in reverse by listening to a typical music hall rendition of 'Come into the garden, Maud', in which the chilling quality of 'the black bat,night' is submerged in the simpler insistence of 'I am here at the gate alone'. Contexts can alter poems; they can, amongst other things, alter not just our awareness of the level of thought in poems, but the level of thought itself. And as long as this is true, the proscriptive nature of Leavis's view of the determinants of the presence of thought will be reductive.

There is one further caveat to be made about the role of a critical attitude to the emotion in poetry, especially where that is linked to devices for producing a sense of objective distance. 'Piano' does not simply immerse us in its wash of nostalgia, it makes us aware of the dangers of doing so; but might not this neat combination of absorption and distance offer a spurious adulthood of attitude, where we can enjoy the emotion but also put ourselves on the back for being able to see it as dangerous? There is a danger here of self-deception of a more sophisticated form than that offered by mere absorption in emotion. For in life it is true that extreme absorption in nostalgia would involve

1. The Pelican Guide to English Literature, Vol 5, ed. B. Ford, (1962), p214

self-indulgence and self-deception, whereas attraction towards that but then a subsequent realisation of its dangers would, to be substantial have consequences for actions, and would lead to a lack of self-indulgence. But in poetry, as I have already suggested, indulgence and distance can be sustained contemporaneously, and without contradiction. Thus, whilst indulgence in emotion in poetry is not open to quite the same dangers as it would be in life, because it lacks the active consequences of life, the 'adulthood' of absorption combined with restraint in poetry would not be substantially equivalent to the 'adulthood' of that in life, where it would be prosecuted actively. So the enjoyment of an adult critical attitude to emotion in poetry might allow us to believe there was a greater substance in this than was the case, and so to substitute it for the thing itself in life.

* * * * *

'Thought' and Attitude

When Leavis looks at the role of 'thought' in poetry, he does of course come much closer to an overt moral stance about the content of the poetry. Yet he still wants to insist that it is not the ideas or feelings themselves of which he approves or disapproves, but the degree of objectivity with which they are explored. It is interesting, therefore, to look at a couple of his discussions in which it is clear that he approves of the poem in question, but finds himself in some difficulties with his standards of particularity, concreteness, etc. One such case occurs in '"Thought" and Emotional Quality', when he compares Blake and Shelley, and another in 'Imagery and Movement', where he compares two Wordsworth sonnets of which he approves, 'Surprised by Joy' and 'Upon Westminster Bridge', with a third of which he does not ('Calais Beach'). Here he is talking about 'Upon Westminster Bridge', which at first sight - it is his suggestion - looks embarrassingly like 'Calais Beach'; how to explain this without jeopardising his position?

The opening looks unpromisingly like that of 'Calais Beach'; the key words 'fair', 'soul', 'touching' and 'majesty', suggest the same kind of solemn unction, and a glance at the closing lines seems to confirm the suggestion ... It seems a very generalised particularity, one easily attained. And yet one should by now be aware of a decided superiority in this sonnet that makes it a poem of some interest, so that some further inquiry is necessary. The clue presents itself in the unobtrusive adjective 'smokeless'; though unobtrusive, it is far from otiose; obvious as it looks, it does more than it says. It conveys in fact, both its direct force and the opposite, and gives us locally in its working the structure of the poem. For this poem, unlike 'Calais Beach',¹ has a structure, and what this is now becomes plain.

Leavis goes on to spell out the complexity of this structure, which depends upon our seeing in the description of the smokeless, noiseless, pastoral-like view of the city, its converse at the same time (the smoke, the noise, 'the urban feel' of the place) In 'Calais Beach' on the other hand 'there is nothing to counter the insistent repetitious suggestion; nothing to qualify the sweet effusion of solemn sentiment' (p.243) So the 'ambivalence' of the vocabulary in 'Upon Westminster Bridge' gives it a complex structure - which involves, as it were, an attitude to its own banality; 'Calais Beach' has no such ambivalence or complexity of vocabulary or structure, 'but is just a simple one-way flow of standard sentiment' (p.243). The unease which Leavis betrays in his discussion of these two poems arises, I believe, from the strain involved in his thesis about the vocabulary and hence structure of 'Upon Westminster Bridge' which seems to depend largely upon the one word 'smokeless'. In fact, when one looks at the two poems one sees that his argument is very stretched indeed, and that the largest and most obvious difference between the two poems is not in ambivalence or complexity or even attitude to the emotion revealed separately from these; the central difference is in the sentiments themselves. 'Calais Beach' is far more specifically concerned

1. 'Imagery and Movement', Scrutiny, 1945; reprinted in A Selection from Scrutiny, Vol. I (1968), pp 231 - 248

with God as creator of the scene it describes; if there is a Creator in 'Upon Westminster Bridge' - apart from the mention of God which is more of an exclamation or ejaculation for emphasis on the intensity of the feeling - it is man, who built the ships, towers, domes, theatres, etc. True, Leavis makes reference to 'the soothing bath of vague religious sentiment' in 'Calais Beach', but he does not feel that 'Upon Westminster Bridge' is differentiated from 'Calais Beach' in this respect, but only in the way the sentiment is treated: 'We might say that the sonnet 'Calais Beach' gives us "the sunset emotion"'. To say that, of course, isn't necessarily to damn it. But if a poet invokes a stock experience of that order he must control it to some particularizing and refining use; and refinement and particularity are what we look for in vain in 'Calais Beach' (p.240). The implication, which he then spells out, is that we do get them in 'Upon Westminster Bridge', which would otherwise embody a similar stock sentiment and would thus be poetically vapid. Certainly to speak of the refinement of an idea or sentiment might entail its alteration to a different idea or sentiment; but again this is not really what Leavis is suggesting here. He goes on to say that we might see 'Upon Westminster Bridge' as offering the equivalent 'sunrise emotion' to 'Calais Beach's 'sunset emotion'; but a 'sunrise emotion' controlled and made complex by the ambivalence of vocabulary and structure. Hence the strain he places on 'smokeless' and on the dual interpretations of the opening image, 'The city now doth like a garment wear The beauty of the morning', which he sees as also suggesting the more usual pall of smoke, not yet there. He is simply not prepared to admit that it is not the greater objectivity (which he concedes is of a rather pedestrian kind), or even the ambivalence of thought (an interpretation he has to strain after), but simply the emotion itself which makes the difference here. 'Upon Westminster' entirely lacks religiosity; and that it does so has nothing to do with particularity, concreteness, or movement; it has to do with what

Wordsworth says - which is, after all, very simple

Never did sun more beautifully sleep
In his first splendour valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!

What Wordsworth is stressing here is the power and beauty of that which, in fact, God did not make, because man did, and the landscape references are there only as a foil to the greater splendour of the city. This is not any sort of conventional sunrise emotion, and it is prevented from being a 'bath of vague, religious sentiment' by that fact, and not by its 'refinement and particularity'. 'Calais Beach' on the other hand has at its heart these words:

Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
And doth with his eternal motion make
A sound like thunder - everlastingly

and ends with these:

Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year,
And worship'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
God being with thee when we know it not.

It is not the attitude to the emotion which is different in this poem, it is the emotion itself.

We can see the same strain within the argument in part of '"Thought" and Emotional Quality,' where he compares Shelley and Blake.¹ Again, Leavis is doing his best to be honest in making this comparison, for he sees at once that it might create difficulties for his thesis, given the 'commonplace of academic literary commentary that Blake and Shelley are related by peculiar affinities' (p.227). He is also conscious that 'grasp on the actual' is not so easily to be found in Blake. The essential objects in its preoccupation with which his poetry exhibits such purity of interest - such disinterestedness -

1. A Selection from Scrutiny, Vol. 1 (1968) pp. 225-230

are not susceptible of visualization; they belong to inner experience, emotional and instructive life, the inner life of the psyche' (p.227). Leavis's comparison rests on the view that any ratiocination in Shelley's poetry is specious, whereas in Blake we find the presence of genuine thought, which makes all the difference to the poetic expression of intensely felt emotion.

The two poems Leavis compares are Shelley's 'Music, when soft voices die' and Blake's 'The Sick Rose'. In fact, however, Leavis adopts quite different methods of approach to the two poems; had he applied to Blake the methods he applies to Shelley he would, I think, have found himself in some embarrassment. In looking at Shelley, he asks awkward questions about the sense. In doing so he destroys any suggestive or assimilative force the images might have, looking always for 'equivalent propositions' or 'sharp insistent logic' - qualities which he maintains Shelley himself tries to suggest by the physical and grammatical structure of the poem, but which in fact are Leavis's own criteria for the success of the images. His conclusion is thus this: 'What kind of status the bed has that "Love itself" "slumbers on" there would be no profit in inquiring, or what kind of being "Love itself" is or has. The proposition has a metaphysical air, but, clearly, any significance it may claim is merely a ghost.' (p.226)

Yet when Leavis turns his attention to the Blake, with the specific purpose of pointing up the insubstantiality of the Shelley, he abandons his tough approach and is ready to make every allowance for the associative force of the imagery here. He admits immediately that close representation of actuality is not what we find in Blake:

If we are to associate his essential strength with the "thing seen" it must be in the full consciousness that the phrase here has more than its literal sense. The essential objects in its preoccupation with which his poetry exhibits such purity of interest - such

disinterestedness - are not susceptible of visualisation; they belong to inner experience, emotional and instinctive life, the inner life of the psyche.(p.227)

This is something of an admission for Leavis, one which he goes on to reinforce in his close examination of the rose image, where he supports the view that the 'visual' impact of the image is less important than its associative impact. Yet he does not seem to see that his defence of Blake might equally well apply to Shelley, or that if he asked the same questions of Blake, it would be difficult to find helpful answers. And his justification for defending in Blake what he finds indefensible in Shelley? The sense that 'its intensity is not one of emotional insistence; there is none of the Shelleyan "I feel, I suffer, I yearn", there is no atmosphere of feeling and no I'. There is no 'I' in 'Music, when soft voices die' either, but here Leavis conveniently ignores that.

Leavis's criticism of the Blake is most revealing in his specific discussion of the particular force of the rose image:

"Crimson", of course, makes an undoubted visual impact, but of the total work that it does, in its context, that visual impact is only one element. What "crimson" does is to heighten and complete the clash of association set up by the first line:

O Rose, thou art sick.

To call a rose "sick" is to make it at once something more than a thing seen. "Rose" as developed by "thy bed of crimson joy" evokes rich passion, sensuality at once glowing, delicate and fragrant, and exquisite health. "Bed of crimson joy" is voluptuously tactual in suggestion and, in ways we needn't try to analyse, more than tactual - we feel ourselves "bedding down" in the Rose, and there is also a suggestion of a secret heart ("found out"), the focus of life, down there at the core of the closely clustered and enclosing petals.

The invisible worm,
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

offering its shock of contrast to the warm security of love ... conveys the ungovernable otherness of the dark forces of the psyche when they manifest themselves as disharmonies.

As Leavis has already admitted, he cannot defend the Blake in terms of concreteness of or particularity of observation of the actual. Yet he wants to sustain the link between objectivity, thought, and poetic value (indeed he must if his dismissal of Shelley by comparison is to stand its ground). So we find him here attempting to construct an argument by which the poem demonstrates Blake's ability to 'see' the intensely felt emotion, the inner experience, as an object 'out there' - the quality which Leavis encapsulates in his metaphor of the 'wiry bounding line'. (p. 227) What enables him to do this is, again, the presence of thought, and what would normally be necessary as the medium or agent, as it were, of that thought, 'grasp on the actual', has here been replaced by the 'simplified form' of the image, in which there inheres 'a labour of analysis' which has, however, been wholly absorbed in the visionary power of the image itself. Leavis's difficulty comes in constructing the critical analysis to fit this conclusion. There are many people who would agree with him in his observations, and sympathise in the difficulty of the task of pinning down that curious combination of the mystical and the economical to be found in Blake's short poetry. But pin it down he must, given his condemnation of Shelley. Yet what do we find in the lines quoted above? '... in ways we needn't try and analyse, more than tactual', 'the ungovernable otherness of the dark forces of the psyche'; 'association'; 'suggestion' (twice). There is some analysis of the contrast implicit in the image between the warmth and sensual beauty of the rose and the sickness which attacks it, but no specific interpretation of the ideas accompanying the feeling and atmosphere here (and so powerfully suggested). Yet immediately after this loose and uncritical analysis comes the conclusion: 'The poem, we can see, registers a profound observation of a kind we may find developed in many places in D.H. Lawrence - an observation regarding the possessive and destructive element there may be in "love"'. (p.229). This conclusion is

almost a non-sequitur - Leavis has said little or nothing to persuade us of its truth; and yet it is presented not only as the logical conclusion of the foregoing analysis, but also as the basis of the next statement: 'There is, then, much more solid ground for attributing "thought" to this wholly non-ratiocinative and apparently slight poem than to that ostensibly syllogistic, metaphysical piece of Shelley's' (p.229). Leavis is on dangerous ground here, for he too is presenting an ostensibly ratiocinative, syllogistic piece, in which the conclusions he draws are equally suspect (and indeed there is far more evidence that he really is trying to pass off a piece of close argument, than there is in the Shelley poem, where the syllogistic structure is far more in the eye of the beholder). We can confirm this if we notionally apply the standards he applies to Blake to 'Music when soft voices die', and the standards he applies to Shelley to 'The Sick Rose'. It is only too easy to imagine his questions: 'In what sense is the worm "invisible" and why does it fly? The clichéd associations of "dark, secret love" take the place of any attempt at a more closely observed awareness of the nature of the relationship Blake is here trying to express ... '

It is impossible, for numerous reasons, not least of which are contradictory requirements for both an educated and an uneducated audience, to run a test in which the audience read 'Music, when soft voices die' in the belief that it was written by Blake. And indeed that very impossibility is in Leavis's favour. Knowing Blake, we would know he could not have written 'Music, when soft voices die' - or at least, we would be surprised to discover he had. (Interestingly, however, we can more plausibly imagine that Shelley might have written 'The Sick Rose'.) But what that exercise of the imagination, which stands rather feebly in the place of a test, can do is to cast doubt on the selectivity of Leavis's argument in relation to different examples.

He wishes to see the Shelley as a vapid piece pretending to some logical status, and he attacks it accordingly; the Blake on the other hand he sees as a poem where objectivity has been perfectly absorbed into emotional intensity, and he makes allowances accordingly for its lack of concreteness. And while we may agree with him in his preference, and even agree that there seems to be a toughness in the Blake which is not there in the Shelley, this feeling alone is not enough in the context in which he places this comparison, a comparison which is further demonstration, in his view, of the relationship between objectivity, thought and poetic value..

These two examples of comparisons which present some difficulties for Leavis's theory, but which nonetheless he subsumes to that general theory, show clearly, I feel, that in certain crucial cases something other than the objectivity towards the emotion, however this is displayed, is making the crucial difference to Leavis's differing responses, responses which he would require us to share, i.e. which he sees as being correct. One only needs to imagine an educated responsive reader who finds himself in disagreement with Leavis's analysis of these two comparisons to see the difficulty of sustaining his thesis.

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In certain cases, then, Leavis is right in saying that the presence of 'particularity' lends to objectivity and that that in turn establishes a proper distance from the emotion expressed. But in other cases he attempts to establish either objectivity or distance where neither can be identified separately from the emotion or idea itself; and in still other cases lack of distance may itself be defended in poetic terms. In the latter set of cases, we may find ourselves looking at two poems, both of which lack 'objectivity', both of whose lack of distance can be poetically defended, yet where we find one poem to be superior

to the other. This latter sort of case sets him, with his monolithic thesis, an insurmountable difficulty, but one which anyone exercised by the question of the moral dimension must deal with, and which provides difficulties for Leavis's thesis which are of pressing importance to this question.

In his discussion of 'The Sick Rose' and 'Music when soft voices die', Leavis is dealing with a difficulty of the first sort, where objectivity towards or distance from the emotion cannot be identified separately from the emotion itself (unlike those cases where Leavis has been able to identify those qualities in terms of the presence of particularity, concreteness, etc.). Leavis attempts, therefore, to make the distinction between the two in terms of 'thought', so that 'thought' here replaces 'particularity' as the index of value. But by 'thought' Leavis does not, of course, mean the actual nature of the ideas themselves. Rather he sees thought as another distancing medium, present in the Blake but not in the Shelley. Here, however, the objectivity is internal rather than external: 'The seeing elements of our inner experience as clearly defined objects involves, of itself, something we naturally call "thought"'. Now while Leavis himself draws attention to the fact that this notion of internal 'seeing' is metaphorical, he proceeds to a substantial argument based on the metaphor, which is one he has made use of before in attacking Shelley's 'emotion in itself, unattached, in the void'¹ and 'feeling divorced from thought'².

Now Leavis reminds by his own analysis that Shelley's 'Music' involves not merely 'unattached' emotion, because it attempts to give the appearance of ratiocination, the 'effect of sharp, insistent logic'.³ True, Leavis's argument is that the reasoning is specious, but he admits to the irrational

1. Revaluation (1936), p. 214; and vide p. 221

2. "Thought" and Emotional Quality, p 218,

3. Ibid p 225

superstructure. So in fact his 'feeling divorced from thought', his 'emotion in the void' are part of another misleading metaphor. Shelley couldn't try to deceive the reader into believing he was presenting a rational structure, without seeing his inner experience at a distance. Perhaps then he is also deceiving himself into thinking he is thinking about his feeling? But how would we know? We have the evidence of only the thoughts themselves, as expressed through the metaphors, which also capture the feelings. Thoughts they certainly are: 'Music, when soft voices die, vibrates in the memory'. Such a description requires a degree of conceptualisation and generalisation, albeit of a limited, simple kind. 'And so thy thoughts when thou art gone, Love itself shall slumber on'. Well, this fills out the thought in the first couplet, as we see that the music metaphor is there to reinforce the idea here, about the power of the imagination; (as music remains powerfully in the mind even when physically absent, so his memory of his loved one supports and sustains his love even when its object has gone. (Shelley could not have expressed these ideas without thought, and we cannot understand the lines without thought. Was Shelley 'seeing' the 'elements' of his 'inner experience as clearly defined objects'? He may well have been doing so - if what he stated was what he felt - just as he may have been in trying to give the impression to his understanding of the process of thought, in the opening passage of Mont Blanc.

Alternatively, on either occasion or both, he may have been seeing the experience at a distance, i.e. been involved in thought, but have been deceiving himself, or been simply mistaken, about its nature. Again, he might have been objective towards but not critical of the experience: objectivity does not entail a critical attitude. Or finally he may have 'seen' clearly, but incorrectly, i.e. the inner experience itself might have been suspect. What Leavis does not wish to admit is that certain kinds of expression and certain kinds of idea

make it extremely difficult and sometimes impossible for the critic to tell which of the above alternatives applies in a particular case. Faced with this morass, Leavis reverts to what seems like a sound moral precept from life, that a critical approach to one's own thought and feelings is desirable; this precept he attempts to apply directly to literature. His mistake in the Mont Blanc case is to think that the presence of concreteness is a necessary element of a critical approach; in the 'Music when soft voices die' case internal objectivity has taken the place of concreteness as a necessary condition of a critical approach. The mistake is the same in both cases: there is no simple index of a critical approach to the inner experience in poetry where the inner experience or the poet's approach to it would be falsified by the inclusion of those elements which Leavis seeks in poetry. Where those elements are absent, Leavis takes that absence as sufficient demonstration that a critical approach is also absent; where they or some of them, are present he takes that as sufficient demonstration that a critical approach is present. A critical approach to that idea is, of course, also regarded as obviously desirable. Thus a critical approach to the idea, feeling or state expressed assumes the status of a safe halfway house. It guarantees for Leavis that the state, feeling or idea is itself sound (because critically approached), without his having to put the soundness of the idea at the forefront of the discussion; and at the same time it is clearly connected, for him, with objective, separately identifiable qualities of the work so that the analysis of moral value is unproblematically a critical activity.

I have tried to dismantle Leavis's 'halfway house' and propose that a more honest position would be one in which the soundness of the ideas themselves was placed centrally in the critical discussion. That soundness is, I believe, the crucial determinant of Leavis's response to Blake and Shelley respectively; and in many cases, as in this one, it is one in

terms of which a distinction can more clearly be made. How, then, would we make that distinction, how would we justify it, and how would it voice itself critically?

It is difficult to sort out precisely what Blake meant in his tightly woven but richly packed symbolistic quatrains, but it is certain that at some level he speaks of the imminent destruction of something which is per se to be admired and cherished (the destructiveness of some sorts of love? the inevitable decay of beauty? the unwittingness of beauty of its own inevitable destruction?) Rich beauty, destruction, and the inevitable meeting of the two, are clear and stable elements in the meaning of the poem, and they balance on that sense of inevitability. There is an ostensible lack of judgement; this is how it is - though clearly 'sick', 'worm', 'howling', and 'storm' have an evaluative dimension in themselves. There is a regret implicit in the statement of ineluctable destruction, but the statement is what stands central to the poem. 'Music when soft voices die', however, though it too only states (there really is no 'I' here), states actually a different relationship. It tells us that life survives, and indeed to some extent springs from, death. Partly because of this, partly because of the progression of feeling in the poem, there is a sense of pleasure in death; it is, indeed, 'half in love with easeful death'. Now it is the actual ideas and feelings in the poem which generate this sense; death is approved, because, or so the poem suggests, valuable qualities of life either spring from it or are somehow nurtured by it. Doubtless the nature of the vocabulary, rhyme, form, etc reinforce the sense in this respect. So Blake recounts necessary mortality without approval or disapproval, and the Shelley within certain confines approves mortality, and in both cases the sense of the words themselves does the chief work, though clearly this is reinforced by less palpable factors. But what is it that distinguishes one emotion or idea from the other? It is not the distance from the emotion or idea itself - both have an objective

form in this respect. Blake is aware that beauty and sensual richness are vital qualities in life, and that they are threatened by the far less beautiful, indeed the bleak and threatening, 'worm' of mortality (or jealousy, or ...); but he is also aware of the interdependent relationship of the two (one could say that the poem is a highly concentrated version of the ideas in 'Ode to a Nightingale'). Shelley on the other hand prefers to think of the examples which - possibly falsely - suggest the attractions of mortality. Shelley is less 'realistic' than Blake, and we can say this with certainty because dislike and fear of death is one of the commonest of human feelings.

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Blake's poem, then, seems to accept the inevitability of decay and destruction, and to state it whilst also stating the balancing beauty which it will attack; there is a sort of accepted equilibrium. Shelley's poem, on the other hand, seems to display an active welcoming of decay, and to suggest that life springs from it. And we can call the Blake view more realistic because acceptance-with-regret is the view of death and decay which is likely to be found preponderantly amongst people, whereas the Shelley view of death and decay as a sort of happy breeding-ground for sensation and feeling would be less commonly shared. But of course I would not want to bring the moral dimension of poetry down to the level of the majority response to a questionnaire about death and decay (though the answers would make tempting reading). More powerfully at issue here, surely, is what, if anything, these poets seem to be suggesting we should feel and think. Poets don't affirm, according to Sidney, they simply tell us what should be the case - which seems to me to be an altogether more important thing than telling us what is the case. It is a fairly reliable bet that Leavis shared my view; and surely what he dislikes about Shelley's poetry is its proffering of what we should believe, rather than its description of what we do.

Both Shelley's and Blake's poems take the grammatical form of statements, but both constitute more than descriptions of what is. It is here that the vocabulary and structure of the poetry comes into force. In Shelley's poem, any harshness associated with death and decay is constantly offset by a matching indication of regenerated life in the rhyme of the couplet: 'die, memory', 'sicken, quicken', 'dead, bed', 'gone, on'. Only the last rhyme is a little less positive, because 'on' is the preposition for 'slumber', and so, though the word itself has a progressive sense, it is given a more passive quality both by its grammatical function and by the sense of its accompanying verb. The positive reinforcement of 'life-from-decay' is provided by the reverberating verbs: 'vibrates', 'live', 'quicken',

'are heap'd'. These suggest not just continuing life, but fecundity. Certainly, again, there is a soporific moderating of this fertility in the second verse, but there is still a sense of progression within this, in the move from 'the beloved' to 'Love itself'. The sleepiness of the second stanza increases rather than decreases the incestuous quality of the poem, where sensations breed sensations, and Love becomes more important than the beloved. There is also an innocuously subtle move from the active to the passive voice in the second stanza: the subject either disappears or is submerged in the passive form of the verb. Again paradoxically, this further suggests a regenerative quality: 'Rose leaves ... Are heap'd' echoes the grammatical form of 'Music vibrates' and 'Odours live', thus echoing the suggestion that the rose leaves are producing something by being heaped, in the same way as the music and the odours produce something. Similarly the form of 'thy thoughts ... love itself shall slumber on', placing the object in the natural place of the subject by a simple inversion, echoes the previous constructions and so even manages to render the thoughts suggestively fertile. It is not until we get to the dying fall of 'shall slumber on' that we realise the passive role of 'thoughts'. And perhaps even so Shelley is not being deceptive here, since the rose leaves are forming a bed, they are heap'd in a fruitful way, and though Love slumbers, it slumbers on 'thy thoughts' ... and so may grow from them?

What I am trying to suggest here is that our concern as readers with the technicalities of rhyme, grammatical structure, nature of vocabulary, and so on, springs from an initial concern with meaning. Leavis, too, is suspicious of the transition from first to second stanza, but he articulates it in terms of the relationship between things and thoughts - as we might expect from his general position. He feels that Shelley illusorily suggests a connection between the spiritual and physical references in the poem, moving from the sensations of the first

stanza to the abstractions of the second, and describes the process as a kind of 'legerdemain': 'The proposition [in the final couplet] has a metaphysical air, but, clearly, any significance it may claim is merely a ghost'.¹ Leavis attributes the success of this illusion to 'an absence of attention and a relaxing of the mind'. (presumably on the part of the reader, though he does not explicitly say so). Leavis goes on to press the point home with the comparison with Blake, stating that 'what distinguishes Blake's poetry from Shelley's may fairly be said to be a presence of "thought"' (p.227). The key difference between Leavis's position and that which I am suggesting is the difference between 'thought' and 'thoughts'. Leavis is nervous even to give thought its due weight; the scare quotes allude to his definition of poetic thought, 'the seeing elements of our inner experience as clearly defined objects'. (p.227). He takes this as his starting point, critically, and his consideration of technicalities in Shelley and Blake is constantly related to it (even with his caveat, about 'seeing'). He refuses to look at the nature of the thoughts except through their form; whereas I suggest that we look at their form from the starting point of their nature. Similarly, while I agree with Leavis that realism is important, it is the realism of the thoughts and ideas which I feel we consider primarily, rather than the realism with which they are expressed.

Where does this leave us with the Shelley/Blake comparison? Obviously, in a less straightforward position than Leavis. Do we condemn Shelley because he seems to recommend or endorse the fecundity of decay? Is this a 'wrong' thought? And what of Blake's 'sick rose'? Is his acceptance of inevitable destruction more realistic (in the sense of having more to do with how things are in reality)? Or is there a similarly enjoyed morbidity in his image of the worm's 'dark secret love' burrowing

1. "'Thought" and Emotional Quality' p. 226.

destructively into the rose's 'bed of crimson joy'? If we look at the poems directly in terms of their meaning, I am not so sure that we can preserve the simple distinction Leavis wants to make. Blake's realism begins to reduce to the level of impersonal statement (a certain level of which could, in fact, be claimed for the Shelley). There is certainly a containedness about the lyric, but it is the characteristic Blakean containedness of the riddle or cryptogram, which allows for doubleness of meaning or range of ambiguity. Shelley certainly doesn't offer the same self-sufficiency of form, nor the same implied ambiguity. But does that render his poem less truthful? I think if we look honestly at exactly what Blake and Shelley are saying here, together with, of course, the way they are saying it (and formally there is a superficial similarity), we must recognise

- a) that both present decay or destruction
- b) that both in their vocabulary suggest a certain fermentation within that decay (Blake's 'dark secret love' and bed of 'crimson joy', Shelley's verbs).
- c) that both employ a rather heavily imbued, almost sickly, vocabulary.
- d) that Blake sees destruction nonetheless as a clear threat to beauty to be lamented, while Shelley seems to erect it into a fertile virtue.

Those of us who see Shelley's view as a blinkered one, likely to lead to morbidity and decadence, and a movement away from life, are likely to prefer the Blake. We may see the Blake as telling a truth, whilst we see Shelley as promulgating a falsehood. And the dismay we may feel at Shelley's trembling verbs and soft focus vocabulary will be related directly to this view. But we will also have to recognise that Blake is not without a little of the same infection; and that there is an element of truth in the view that death produces its own

fruitful reverberations. That Shelley captures this truth effectively cannot be denied. Our reservations arise from the feeling that he may be suggesting that this is the view we should always take of death, and that he is deliberately disguising its bad qualities, like a mortician powdering the face of a corpse. Blake, on the other hand, clearly laments the death of beauty, but sees also its hidden pleasure; but clearly he feels we should regret the destructive worm.

These are summaries of the thoughts expressed by Shelley and Blake; the expression of these thoughts involves thought, but not necessarily as Leavis defines it. The greater complexity of viewpoint in the Blake does not necessarily spring from a critical attitude to his ideas, any more than the simple endorsement of death and decay in the Shelley reveals his attitude to be uncritical. But we may finally feel that the more comprehensive view expressed by Blake is a better one to live by. At the same time, we must recognise that there is room for partial truths like Shelley's in poetry; if there is not room there, where is there room?

It is not difficult to see why Leavis and so many other critics have not wished to recognise the centrality of the value of the ideas and feelings expressed in poetry to our judgement of the worth of the poetry itself. My summarising remarks in the preceding paragraph might induce acute critical anxiety for I might be comparing prose statements or propositions. But I have done this deliberately in order to identify clearly my difference with Leavis. The critical work underlying my summarising comments occurs in the earlier consideration of rhyme, grammatical structure and so on. Of course, the ideas on death which I have summarised are voiced in poetry, and our understanding of them is an understanding of poetry. 'Music, when soft voices die, Vibrates in the memory' does not mean exactly the same as 'we seem to still hear a song in our minds even when the voices singing it have stopped'. We must remember Austin's distinction between 'veritas' and 'verum'.

The poetic lines say one thing, and we ask, is this true? The prose lines say another, albeit related, thing, and again we ask, is this true? But the way we decide is different in each case. In the case of the prose statement, which is a proposition, we test it against our experience (in this case our inner experience). Now, Austin would argue that in fact we can't test the truth of the poetic statement; he argues that 'it takes two to make a truth',¹ the words, and the reality to which they refer. Words on their own, he argues, cannot constitute a truth, thus poetic statements are ruled out, because they do not 'refer' to anything. He is both right and wrong. Statements in poetry do not refer to the real world in the same way that statements in life do. If I say 'A thing of beauty is a joy forever' my statement will 'mean' differently than when Keats writes it.² I may be affirming his statement but the test of my affirmation will be different from the test of the truth of his proposition. And this has to do with what Austin is talking about when he says that it takes two to make a truth. Yet the spirit of Austin's argument lies centrally in that 'veritas/verum' distinction at the beginning of his article. And his statement about truth and reference (which he casually relegates to a footnote) can perhaps be countered in terms of verum. Austin says: 'there can be no criterion of truth in the sense of some feature detectable in the statement itself which will reveal whether it is true or false'; and this amplifies his statement that 'When a statement is true, there is, of course, a state of affairs which makes it true and which is totomundo distinct from the true statement about it.' (Ibid). But in literature, of course, there is no such state of affairs independently identifiable from the words which describe the state. There is a state of affairs which may be of relevance, a state of affairs which exists in the world such that when we think about Keats's statement about beauty, we do reflect upon beauty in the world, and test

1. J.L. Austin, 'Truth', Philosophical Papers, 3rd edition (1960).

2. We can see this more clearly if we think of an example which refers to people and things which don't exist. When Jude sees Christminster for the first time, there is no Jude and no Christminster for these words to refer to.

his statement against that. But we also test his statement against the other words in the poem, words which have no reference point according to Austin; and indeed we test Keats's words against themselves. This is even more clearly the case when we think about statements about fictional characters. Statements about Jude and Christminster have to have themselves as reference points. So that statements in poetry and fiction occupy a unique position. We relate them to what we know of the real world; yet they do not refer to the real world. Statements about Jude and Christminster, and indeed statements about beauty, as in Keats's statement, refer to themselves. And yet what is described and narrated in Jude the Obscure clearly not only relates to but refers to the real world. Thus our judgement of the truths it offers occupy a curious position; our knowledge of the real world is brought to bear, but our knowledge of what we learn in the novel is also brought to bear. And while the first would qualify in Austin's terms, the second would be nowhere. Yet what novels, poems, plays each in themselves seek to offer is, perhaps not veritas, but verum. The critic, when he approaches a novel, play or poem - and perhaps particularly a poem, for its statements so often resemble propositions in reality, may well encounter a proffered truth, a true thing. Not the whole truth, not Truth, not veritas, but a case to which we might apply the word 'true'. In looking at certain interpretations of Shelley's and Blake's poems, we are in part looking at certain uses of the word 'true'; our remarks as we do so are voiced in terms of the work itself, and our responses locate themselves in features of the work. They are in that critical remarks; but they are no less for that also remarks about what is true.

It is also the case - perhaps partly because of the peculiar nature of statements in literature - that we can perceive the truth of such statements simply from the statements themselves. It is as though their truth inheres

in the words themselves, in its being stated. (This can also be true of statements in life, but it happens more often in literature). Metaphors work in this way. They may be more or less apt. Certainly they are not true in relation to some external reality, as Austin would have it. But this does not mean that they are not true, far from it. And consider this final passage from George Eliot's Middlemarch; how do we decide whether it is true?

But we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know.

Her finely touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Alexander broke the strength spent itself in channels which had no great name on earth. But the effect of her being on earth was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.¹

Yes, we decide partly by its appeal and its explicit reference to what we know of life ('that things are not so ill with you and me .. ', 'we insignificant people'). Yet it also refers to Dorothea; and Dorothea's life Eliot herself has created. Does this prevent us from learning from that fictional life the truth fictionally presented to us here? No. We do learn from that truth, and if we have missed it in the novel, we have no alternative but to see it here in the final words of Middlemarch. And what is it finally that helps us to see that truth? It is the words and structures, and images, which carry it, and persuade us of it; and our remarks - our critical judgements - about the power of truth in the novel, will be articulated in terms of those words, structures and images. We will speak of the fine use of antithesis, the balance and bathos of sentences which begin with Dorothea's richness of spirit, and end with the dissipation of that spirit.

1. G. Eliot, Middlemarch, ed. W. J. Harvey (Harmondsworth, 1976).

We will speak of the pathos wrought by that appeal to the unrecognised, unthanked millions who make up the greater part of humanity - a pathos which gathers force in the repeated negatives: 'insignificant', 'not widely visible', 'incalculably' (though note the positive emphasis of the negative here), 'unhistoric', 'hidden', 'unvisited'. In speaking of these elements, and the way in which Eliot links them to the balancing good which is central to her thesis ('that things are not so ill'), we will be speaking of a truth, and one which either presents itself to us immediately we read it, ^{or does not.} If it does not, no amount of pointing to instances in life, or even in the novel, will help. We see it, or we do not. But if we do not, it is not the literature which is at fault.

A Fine Excess

In the end, in literature and in criticism, we are left with particular cases - much as we are in life. In this final chapter I will address myself to a number of such cases which present in a particularly pressing way problems about truth, and the moral dimension of critical judgements. I have tried to show that a certain generosity towards the possible number and variety of truths which poetry can offer is necessary in our critical approaches to it. I have also argued that as critics we need to be fully aware of the role played by meaning, i.e. what poets actually say, in the moral dimension of our critical judgements - and indeed in our critical responses as a whole. I have further suggested that these recognitions in no way undermine the centrally critical task to which we address ourselves when we talk about a poem, indeed they render the remarks we make about vocabulary, rhyme, rhythm, etc more important rather than less - for what could be more important than truth? Now looking at poetry in the way I have suggested may, properly, induce a nervousness in the critic about where and how to draw the line. When is a truth not a truth? When Keats writes 'A thing of beauty is a joy forever' is this untrue and therefore a bad line of poetry? Or is it untrue and a bad line of poetry? Why is it less good than 'Beauty is truth; truth beauty'? How would we articulate these judgements in critical terms?

Keats poses these questions almost constantly, both because he constantly offers us truths, and because he offers them regularly in a style which has to a greater or lesser extent discomfited critics. Perhaps this was what he meant when he stated that 'Poetry should surprise by a fine excess',¹ i.e. disappoint our neat expectations and so discomfit us into a new frame of thought and feeling. But his fine phrase, 'a fine excess', identifies the heart of our critical difficulty with

1 Letter to Taylor, February 27th 1818. The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821, ed. H.E. Rollins, (1958) p 238. All poems referred to in this chapter from The Poems of John Keats, ed. M. Allott (1970).

his poetry. Leavis has more explicitly identified this area of concern (and indeed what he sees as Keats's strength) as 'the relation between Keats's sensuousness and his seriousness'.¹ Keats's poems, and those of the other Romantics to a lesser degree, do exploit excess in the name of a revolutionary intensity of thought and feeling. But is this excess always thereby justified? If it were, would not the floodgates be opened for the worst excesses (note the emotive distinction between 'excess' and 'excesses') of, say, Swinburne - or indeed of Keats himself? One of the mainstays of our judgements, both moral and critical, that excess is undesirable, is swept away by Keats, as he himself recognises in the coining of his phrase. The difficulty for the critic, then, is that of establishing when an excess is fine and when it is not - but without the basic criterion of excess itself. And clearly, as Leavis so acutely sees, this task is at the centre of our understanding of the nature and worth of Keats's seriousness, his ability to tell us important truths. Thus in our critical responses to Keats the crucial moral and evaluative judgements we make coincide in a particularly problematic way, and the focus of their coincidence is Romantic language. That we effortlessly regard Romantic poetry, and Keats's poetry particularly, as some of the finest of the great English tradition gives these cases a profound importance in my discussion of the questions raised in the foregoing chapters - as well as confirming the centrality of the questions themselves to criticism.

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The countless critics who have written about Romantic poetry certainly recognise the moral dimension of Romantic criticism in one way, in that they regularly use critical terms which announce their moral interest: 'sentimental' 'sugary', 'sincere'. Yet at the same time they do not seem to feel the need to fill in their terms with argument, apparently believing that

1. Revaluation (1936) p. 272

their ensuing critical analyses (which are generally broadly based on the Leavisian position, though many of them would throw up their hands in horror at this suggestion) are sufficient argument. Here, for example, is W. Jackson Bate, prefacing his highly detailed and technical tracing of the 'maturing' of Keats's style with these words:

Still, the assigned purpose of this essay is to concentrate briefly on the stylistic character of Keats's poetry. Hard put to compartmentalize in this way, I should be forced to resort to the term 'honesty'. Certainly this is what now appeals to us most when we think of Keats as a whole, especially in the context of the letters. And we feel this impression confirmed in his stylistic development. Considering his short life, there is no parallel to the diversity of styles with which he experimented. Yet it was never experimentation for its own sake. The experimentation moves constantly toward greater honesty, greater openness to concrete life and the claims of experience, toward greater fullness and richness of expression, and at the same time a growing strength of control and sensitivity to the formal claims of poetic art.¹

At first sight this seems an admirable statement, one recognising the moral dimension of critical judgements in precisely the way that I have been complaining critics characteristically do not. Bate certainly recognises the difficulty of the word 'honesty' and displays a genuine embarrassment about the compartmentalization required in talking about Keats's stylistic development. In fact, however, the compartmentalization is self-imposed, and there is no further exploration of the precise weighting of the term 'honesty' in the highly technical description which follows. Having made his obeisance to the term's difficulties, he proceeds to ignore them, and to assume that the reader will immediately recognise, and agree with him in his identification of, what technical characteristics go with honesty, and which do not, without further

1. W. Jackson Bate, 'Keats's Style: Evolution toward qualities of permanent value', in *The Major English Romantic Poets: A Symposium in Reappraisal* ed. C.D. Thorpe, C. Baker, and B. Weaver (1957), pp 217-30.

argument. He makes no attempt to distinguish between honesty in the letters and honesty in the poems. He is confident enough to sweep aside the early Keats as patently self-indulgent, Romantic in the bad rather than the good sense, by the quoting of a few well-chosen words:

His use of 'y'-ending adjectives ('sphery', 'lawny', 'bloomy', 'surgy', and the like); the unfortunate predilection for adverbs made from participles ('lingeringly', 'dyingly', 'cooingly'), and for abstract nouns that have little intellectual content ('languishment', 'designments', 'soft ravishments'); the use of such conventional props in his imagery as 'Pink robes and wavy hair', the 'silvery tears of April', and monotonously recurring nymphs with 'downward glances', the habitual appearance of objects with 'pillowy' softness, and the frequently embarrassing attempts to introduce action ('madly I kiss /The wooing arms') into this smothering world of rose-leaves, doves, 'almond vales' and 'blooming plums/Ready to melt between an infant's gums'

It does not seem to occur to him that many of the qualities exemplified here are essential to the later Keats also; his sensuousness, so vital to his intensity and - yes, as Leavis himself points out - his seriousness, often resides precisely in such words as those quoted by Jackson Bate, and examples of of them can be found in abundance in 'The Eve of St. Agnes' a poem which, though perhaps not of the stature of some of the Odes, would be hard to dismiss as Jackson Bate dismisses these examples of the same sort. Christopher Ricks, in his excellent, daring and highly imaginative book, Keats and Embarrassment, would indeed go farther and defend even many of the lines most commonly condemned as self-indulgently sugary, his defence being based on the belief that Keats captured something integral to the human response, a mixture of 'taste and distaste', in such lines. His defence of the line which Jackson Bate airily condemns (like Alexander Smith before him, whose characterisation of it as an example of Keats's 'nauseous sweetness' Ricks is parrying) - 'blooming

2. C. Ricks, Keats and Embarrassment (Oxford, 1974).

plums Ready to melt between an infant's gums' - is masterly, and needs to be read in its entirety to be appreciated (pp102-104, Keats and Embarrassment, 1974). But Ricks is an uncommon critic in this respect; his recognition of the strong links between Keats's 'slippery blisses' of the earlier poetry and the sensuous strength of the later would indeed cause its own kind of embarrassment to critics such as Jackson Bate, who felt that the last word had already been said on the subject some 15 years before Ricks's book appeared: 'These characteristics [exemplified by the examples quoted above] and their sources have been frequently discussed, are familiar to every student of English poetry, and have little interest to present-day readers except as a stepping-stone in Keats's development. And they are accompanied not only by a lack of structural control but by a deliberately cultivated slackness of manner'

Jackson Bate assumes a simple and clear distinction between Keats's 'deliberately cultivated slackness of manner', the 'pleasant smotherings' of what he would see as the lesser poetry, and the 'greater openness to concrete life and the claims of experience, ... greater fullness and richness of expression, and... a growing strength of control' in the better later work. On this assumption he rests large claims about mawkish sentimentality in Keats's poetry on one hand, and maturity and honesty on the other. That he does not defend these judgements in any detail he attributes to the fact that he is here treading old critical ground. Now Keats himself (apparently) concurred with the judgement of mawkishness,¹ first made by reviewers of Endymion and repeated many times subsequently. But even this is not sufficient in itself to allow the contemporary critic to assume that the judgement must be correct. Keats's self-contemptuous reference to 'mawkishness'

1. See Keats's prefatory remarks to the May 1818 edition of Endymion, The Poems of John Keats, ed. Miriam Allott (1970), p.119

and to the critical 'bitters' provoked or likely to be provoked by Endymion no doubt were prompted to a large extent by the confidence-sapping abuse which was piled on the poem by critics at least partially influenced by considerations other than purely critical ones (e.g. animosity to Leigh Hunt and his 'school' of poetry). In any case, the poet's own evaluative critical judgements of his work do not per se have any greater validity than those of others [as opposed to interpretative ones which may] and it could be argued that they are more suspect because of the poet's personal involvement. One can nonetheless understand the temptation to present the poet's judgement in this case as a peculiarly persuasive piece of evidence in favour of the condemnation of Endymion for its sentimentality and lack of substance, for it coincides so happily with the modern generally accepted critical judgement.¹ It is the grounds for this judgement which we must now consider.

Bate would seem to have three main grounds for the evaluative distinction he makes between Keats's earlier and later poetry, the 'mawkish' and the 'honest', and these are most carefully couched in technical terms. The first is that the sense impressions in the later poetry are more complete and three-dimensional (the equivalent to Leavis's seeing the object clearly?). The second is that the verse forms of the later poetry are 'tighter' and more complex, and that this complexity is echoed rhythmically. The third is that the interplay of long and short vowel sounds and the use of assonance was carefully designed to produce a kind of melody new to English poetry, and here Bate adduces specific analyses of lines. To these three Bate adds, as specific to the Odes, the 'intrusion of the dramatic', by which he seems to mean dramatic involvement with a personal experience, rather than the sort of dramatic narrative to be found in the longer narrative poems. This last point - about which Bate is anyway tentative -

1. Ricks has some particularly interesting comments on this, Keats and Embarrassment (1974), pp 10-11

is the only one where he allows a direct and conscious moral dimension to inform the judgement. Yet the final judgement to which all of these remarks are leading and contributing is overtly moral in its terms: 'the full and dense richness that characterised the great odes of the preceding May, but a richness now harmonized and lifted to a serenity quite unequalled elsewhere in romantic poetry' and 'courage and openness to amplitude of emotion and experience' (of 'Ode to Autumn.') Certainly, Bate's avowed aim in this piece is to 'concentrate briefly on the stylistic character of Keats's poetry', but for the express purpose of giving body and technical force to the larger judgements. This is evident both from the structure and movement of the argument, and from Bate's own words : honesty, he says, is what is most appealing now in Keats 'and we feel this impression confirmed in his stylistic development. Considering his short life, there is no parallel to the diversity of styles with which he experimented. Yet it was never experimentation for its own sake. The experimentation moved constantly toward great honesty - greater openness and to concrete life and the claims of experience, toward greater fullness and richness of expression, and at the same time a growing strength of control and sensitivity to the formal claims of poetic art'. Yet note how already here 'style' is merging into something larger, in spite of Bate's determined self-reminders - the 'honesty' referred to in this quotation is a direct result of stylistic experimentation, as is the 'greater openness to ... the claims of experience', yet it would be impossible to cash out these qualities in purely technical terms. However, Bate makes a manful attempt to do so, in terms of the specific stylistic judgements itemised above.

It is my intention to put these stylistic judgements under some pressure, to see just how far they can do the work which critical tradition has accepted they can. I will do this both by looking at later works of Keats which do display these qualities, but where we might still have evaluative reservations;

and by looking at examples of Keats's early poetry, to see whether the stylistic distinctions between early and late Keats really exist. The 'exceptions' thus thrown up will seriously threaten the 'Leavisite' connection between style and moral value. The critical dilemma which remains largely explains critics' eagerness to accept and endorse this connection, for how are we to distinguish evaluatively between Keats's early and late poetry if not in terms of this connection? This raises the great bogey of Romantic poetry, characteristically extreme and intense in style: once extremity of rhetoric is 'allowed', as it must be if Romantic poetry is not to go out of the window, by what standard do we make any evaluative distinctions at all? And that question has implications far beyond the Romantics themselves. Ricks might be prepared to argue that early Keats is of a piece with late Keats and displays some of the same important qualities; but would he likewise argue that Swinburne has as much to offer as Keats, or anyway has some of the same important qualities? He might be game to construct an argument, but to do that would be easier than to genuinely share it - and that is precisely the difficulty.

* * * * *

Ode on Melancholy

Let us turn, then, to Keats's poetry, and consider first how far the stylistic qualities Bate mentions do contribute to the 'openness', 'richness' and 'honesty' of the later poetry. The Odes are generally acknowledged to be the summit of Keats's achievement, and Bate certainly sees them as so, and so as the best example of the late style. Consider, then, the second stanza of 'Ode on Melancholy':

But when the melancholy fit shall fall
 Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
 That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
 And hides the green hill in an April shroud;
 Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
 Or on the rainbow of the salt-sand wave,
 Or on the wealth of globed peonies;
 Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
 Emprison her soft hand and let her rave,
 And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

It is a wonderful stanza; and certainly it has the interwoven complexity of the characteristic form of the Odes (though 'Autumn' has an extra line) which enables Keats to link 'wave' with 'rave', and 'peonies' with 'eyes', without over-accentuating the connection. This undoubtedly helps to prevent the lines falling into over-indulgence; where, say, a couplet form like that of 'Endymion' might have drawn the rich associations more closely together. In the case of this stanza the main point of the interweaving is precisely that it counters the run of the sentiment and acts as a useful check to it. A secondary function is that Keats models the structure of his 'argument' to fit the structure of the rhyme scheme: the first quatrain carries the main subject ('But when the melancholy fit shall fall'), the first triplet and the second echoing triplet carry the subsequent dependent action ('Then glut thy sorrow' and 'Or if thy mistress ...'). This helps to give the lines the air of a logical argument which is to be resolved in the final stanza - but it is the air rather than the substance, as Keats is well aware, for there is almost a wry wit about his instructions to self-indulgence - argument directed towards the indulgence of its opposite. To this extent Bate is right in attributing some of the richness of the Odes to the interwoven stanza form. But both of the functions of the interweaving in this case are in the service of countering the main run and feel of the sentiment, rendering it more acceptable. It runs against 'fullness' 'richness' and 'openness' and 'honesty'; it is almost sly. Or is that perhaps what Bate means by 'richness' and 'openness to concrete life'? Does he mean something like

complexity of thought and feeling? If he does, then this is a question about Keats's attitude to his expressed emotion - well-worn ground for Leavis, and, as with his, a centrally moral matter. My point here is that it is not enough to point to the technical complexities of Keats's later poetry as though that were quod erat demonstrandum; the question still remains whether the 'massive and interwoven firmness' which the stanza form contributes in Bate's view is 'technical' or moral. The very terms ('massive' 'firmness', with their suggestions of both the physical and the moral), slide away from the difficulty. But the difficulty remains, for at the heart of this poem lies an absorption in morbidity; and it comes perilously close to drowning in its own (highly enjoyable) sorrow. If we talk of interwoven rhyme patterns, it must be specifically in relation to this, and not as something self-justifying by its very nature - particularly if it is a judgement about honesty they are moving towards.

What, then, of the sense-impressions in this stanza? Are they more complete and three-dimensional, and if so does this add to the strength of the poetry (as opposed to, for example, the sense-impressions in 'Sleep and Poetry' or Endymion) One of Keats's famed phrases is to be found in this stanza: 'the wealth of globed peonies'. Numerous critics have remarked on the tangibility of the imaged flowers; indeed, they sound almost good enough to sink one's teeth into, which seems to bear out Bate's reference to Keats's mature ability to flesh out his images by supporting one sense (and sensation) with another. Thus the sense of the weighty shape in the hand (Bate says 'here is virtually enclosing the peony, further assuring itself of the three-dimensional roundness') also suggests the plump richness of the petalled flesh inside. But again, we must ask, in the service of what? Bate brushes aside as though unimportant the debate about whether the imagery is empathetic (projecting feelings upon the object) or sympathetic (in-feeling for the

object), saying there is evidence of both in Keats. Yet he is insistent on the sense of objectivity which emerges and again uses terms most Leavisite to identify it: Keats presents 'a more valid, rounded, and fully realised apperception', has a craving for 'a firm grasp of the concrete as it exists in space'; the 'object emerges as a totality with its several aspects resolved into a unified whole'; there is 'a firmer hold, a more definitely felt outline' which contributes to the fact that 'this centering of impressions into an amalgamated whole, is secured and anchored'. This he explains as being produced by 'intense identification', something like Keats' own idea of negative capability in which the poet submerged his own identity in the identity of the object.

But wait a minute, ... what has this to do with seeing the object clearly? Is it not a matter of objectivity? If we look at Bate's terms again, we see that he is in fact careful to suggest the externality of an objective understanding 'three-dimensional' is repeated, with its companions 'the concrete as it exists in space' and 'a more definitely felt outline'. And at one point he firmly places the poet outside the object: 'the imagination, through sympathetic excitement, draws out and expresses the total character of its object'.

It is not so much that Bate is hedging his bets here as that he is genuinely trying to give fuller sense to that quality of Keats's apprehension of what he describes, carrying as it does a sense of absorption with forgetfulness of self. But there are two difficulties here. The first is that Bate's use of words such as 'centering', 'substantiation', 'a firm grasp on the concrete', 'amassing', 'secured', 'anchored', and 'the object is grasped as a vital whole', unavoidably carry the strength of objectivity, in some cases they echo the very phrases Leavis uses to identify

the poet's 'seeing the object clearly',¹ and further they have in themselves an evaluative dimension, an approbatory sense of strength and solidity, all of which run obviously counter to the normal associations of absorption in an experience, object or feeling (the 'pleasant smotherings' by which both Bate and again Leavis characterise Keats's earlier approach). Bate says specifically that in Keats's early verse 'the impulse towards self-absorption in the object is associated with having the "soul", as he said, "lost in pleasant smotherings"'.

In spite of his lip service to 'in-feeling' in his characterisation of the strength of Keats later imagery, Bate seems not to understand that the earlier pleasant smotherings might be connected in some important way with the later ability for 'in-feeling' for an object, nor does he follow up the difficulties implicit in the metaphorical suggestion that Keats conveys the sense of being both inside and outside the object. True, he uses the word 'apperception', perhaps to suggest affinities with the individual's own state of existence, which necessarily involves both being and a consciousness of being. But is the same combination applicable to our perception of objects? I cannot be another thing, or indeed being; for the same reason the consciousness involved in perceiving an object or being external to myself is not the same consciousness involved in being aware of my own state of being. At best this usage must be metaphorical, to suggest the way in which Keats's images approach something like the combination of externality and internality involved in being ourselves. And in that reduced sense, due weight must be given to the internal and if it is, the connection with the absorptions of the earlier

1. Leavis's main pieces in this area predate Bate's article, and his essay on Keats in Revaluation, of particular relevance here, was it is chastening to realise first published in 1936 (the several subsequent editions are unrevised). Is it merely coincidence of critical judgement which leads the structure of Bate's argument and some of his individual observations to echo Leavis's essay so uncannily? For example, Leavis says of the 'globed peonies': 'the hand is round the peony, luxuriously cupping it;' to characterise the later style in general he speaks of 'the relation between the firmness of the art and the firm grasp on the outer world' (Revaluation pp261.262)

poetry must be recognised.

Here we come to our second difficulty. Bate apparently does, for a moment, recognise this, when he says, tracing the development of Keats's imagery, 'a more sympathetic in-feeling is equally apparent (minnows "staying their wavy bodies 'gainst the stream", lions with "nervy tails", or the organic in-feeling in "Ere a lean bat could plump its wintry skin")'. He continues, 'The verse from Hyperion is replete with such imagery', and carries on through his analysis of the objective/subjective quality of the imagery in the Odes. What is significant here is not that he recognises the line of connection, but that the examples he gives from the pre-Hyperion verse of an element which he goes on to say to be essential to the quality of imagery in the Odes are also marvellous examples of a feature which Bate has, on the previous page, singled out as one of the marks of the immaturity of the earlier style: 'his use of y-ending adjectives ('sphery', 'lawny', 'bloomy' 'surgy' and the like)'. Yet the very same sort of adjective makes a major contribution to the three in-feeling images he quotes: 'wavy', 'nervy' and 'wintry'. This is not enough to refute either claim; but it should at least make us cautious.

This question of absorption is of particular importance in 'Ode on Melancholy', just because the subject of the poem is itself absorption. Leavis himself says that the Ode 'represents one of the most obviously decadent developments of Beauty-addiction' (Revaluation p. 260) Leavis however admires the poem so we know that he sees it as more than just this; indeed he goes on to say that in the poem 'the penalties of the addiction ... are themselves turned into a luxury, a peculiarly subtle drug. The Ode is, as it were, the prescription'. Leavis makes this judgement on much the same grounds as Bate makes his, that the felt images in the poem express 'not merely the voluptuary's itch to be fingering, but that strong grasp upon actualities - upon things outside himself, that firm sense of the solid world', (Revaluation p. 261) Bate summarises the effect of such images

(in the later style in general) as 'capable of securing from the reader an unusually intense emotional and imaginative identification'. But what is it that Keats so fully and firmly calls to mind, and with which the reader so intensely identifies? It is the experience of glutting one's sorrow on some richly beautiful object, precisely because of the deeply-wrought awareness that that brings of the imminent death of that rich beauty. The images are of physical appetite and lust (it is not accidental that the peonies seem good enough to eat) with verbs like 'glut' and 'feed deep, deep', and Joy's grape bursting on the tongue in the last stanza. But what we are being urged to feed upon with such appetite is our own melancholy; the absorption in the images echoes the emotional absorption to which we are being urged. In this context, the balance of the imagery is altered somewhat. When we read the instruction

Imprison her soft hand and let her rave,
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes

I think we are affected more by the drawing in of the sensations suggested than we are by their objectivity. True, the image has that dramatic quality which Bate mentions, but it is a drama where the reader is in the centre of the picture, holding the soft hand and devouring (or being devoured by) those beautiful eyes. Arguing that the images in this poem acquire a firmness of actuality which counters their self-indulgence (the voluptuary's itch), and acquire this by giving solid flesh to the images through an understanding from within, is analogous to Milton's arguing in the Areopagitica that books should not be censored because they could express truth as nothing else could. What better reason could there be for censoring them, if it were their influence one feared in the first place? Similarly, how much more likely we are to be drawn in to the emotional absorption the poet suggests, if the images through which he suggests it are so richly and concretely fleshed out. As Milton's argument works against rather than for him, so

Bate's (and Leavis's) does here. Incidentally, making a not inconsiderable contribution to just this effect are the vowel sounds in this stanza. I have tried to discern some of the patterns of vowel sounds which Bate makes reference to as a feature of the later style, but have not been successful. Assonance there certainly is, however, but this seems to me only to add to the effect of absorption I have suggested, particularly in the last line where the repeated 'ee' sound seems to sink the reader irresistibly into the line, just as he is enjoined to sink into the 'peerless eyes' there described.

Again a critic might pounce upon my style here and argue that I am guilty of making the connections for which I have heavily criticised Leavis and those who adopt his general approach. Quite the contrary. What I seek to show by the preceding analysis are the dangers of separating specific features of style from the ideas and feelings they express. Bate is particularly guilty of this, in trying to generalise about the effect of Keats's later style on the 'honesty' and 'openness' of his poetry; but Leavis is also guilty of it even though he looks at the 'Ode on Melancholy' in some detail, because he takes for granted when he is discussing Keats that the link between 'that firm sense of the solid world' (which he specifies in terms of concreteness of image here) and a lack of or countering of self-indulgence in the feelings and ideas in the poem, has been established. For this reason, and also because here as with Shelley he does not wish his case to depend upon the poet's ideas,¹ [If, then, in Keats's development from "Endymion" to the "Ode to Autumn" we see ... the promise of greatness, it does not lie in any effective presence of the kind of seriousness aspired to in "Sleep and Poetry" ... It lies rather in the marvellous vitality of the art that celebrates "these joys" - in the perfection attained within a limiting aestheticism ... That exquisitely sure touch which refines and lightens Keats's voluptuousness cannot, we are convinced, go with spiritual vulgarity ...], Leavis mistakes the basis of his judgement that

1. Revaluation pp 264 - 5

the 'Ode on Melancholy' is more than just a voluptuous bath in melancholy.

If there is any countering to the bath of emotion Keats provides (both in description and in sentiment) - and whether there is is still open to argument - I would suggest it is provided by Keats's consciousness of the paradox he is suggesting. He is aware that he is working against a commonly endorsed idea. 'No, no, go not to Lethe ...' We are reminded by the similarity of the terms in this first stanza to the terms of the first stanza of 'Ode to a Nightingale' that Keats knows whereof he speaks here. There the experience of the beauty of the Nightingale's song had led him into precisely the state of deep melancholy which is his subject in this ode:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe wards had sunk

There are the hemlock, the drug, the Lethe, but acting only as points of comparison for the experience to which he has here been brought by the awareness of ... beauty

T'is not through envy of thy happy lot
But being too happy in thine happiness

Thus in the 'Ode on Melancholy' he counsels, not the weak and numbing counterparts and conventional accompaniments of melancholy, the drugs of forgetfulness, but the thing itself, the essential root of such melancholy feelings, beauty. And whereas in the 'Ode to a Nightingale' that melancholy had arisen only out of the distance between the mortal apprehension of the observer and the immortality of the observed beauty, here Keats is already aware, as he has become aware by the end of 'Nightingale' that the real pang of melancholy arises out of the realisation that beauty is not immortal. So his advice - his 'prescription' as Leavis would have it, but one which here is intended to lead to the deepening of the illness rather than its cure - is paradoxical, for it encourages the sufferer

from melancholy to feed upon that which will render him even more melancholy. The key to his reasoning is that

in the very temple of delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine

so that if one truly experiences melancholy one must have also experienced delight, for she is seen clearly only by

him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape upon his palate fine.

The contrasts and ironies produced by this paradox fill the poem, and it is surely this if anything which produces a sense of depth beyond the surface lusty exhortations to 'glut' and 'feed' the emotion. Thus the oxymorons of the second stanza, 'glut they sorrow' and 'rich anger' look forward to the bursting of 'Joy's grape' in the last stanza and back to the more conventional symbols of sorrow of the first, and not simply as a matter of clever surface - even less so of grasp on the actual - but as a reflection of the proposition at the centre of the poem's logic. In the same way, the consequences embodied in the final stanza cut back upon the gluttony of the second; we are reminded that he who feeds deep upon the peerless eyes of his loved beauty 'shall taste the sadness' of Melancholy's 'might' 'and be among her cloudy trophies hung'. Even the crushing of the grape upon the palate is not without its subtleties. How characteristic of Keats that amidst this highly sensual image he reminds us that it is a fine palate, for how else could it appreciate the grape to the full, yet balances that phrase against 'strenuous tongue' in the same position in the previous line, to underline that in this region refinement of understanding (taste) depends upon passion. A further complexity derives from the echo of the 'ruby grape of Proserpine' in the first stanza - which was, of course, poisonous.

Now these conclusions are certainly influenced by matters of style: the placing of phrases in accompanying lines, the repetition of a word, the juxtaposition of opposites. But in all of these cases the working of the device is dependent upon the meanings of the words used and what they convey about the

poet's attitude, which is one of high awareness of what he counsels in that second stanza. Without that awareness signalled so clearly in the cross-relationships between the second stanza and the first and last stanza, the plushness of the second stanza would be as self-indulgent as it exhorts us to be; it would be without irony. As it is, irony can be detected in the very exaggerations which Keats uses; is there not a hint of self-mockery in 'glut', 'rich', 'rave' and 'feed deep, deep'? If there is it is produced by the awareness I have itemised, not by any 'grasp on the actual' or three-dimensional quality in the imagery, which in the second stanza serves only to increase rather than undercut the richness and indulgence of the images.

In spite of the ironies and complexities I have suggested in the sense of the poem, however, I believe it is still open to a criticism of morbidity. Leavis surely is right when he says that the poem is in Keats's 'most Swinburnian mood' (Revaluation p. 260) and the terms 'decadent' and 'perverse and debilitating indulgences' vie with his claims for the poem's countering 'vitality' and 'freshness' and 'sense of the solid world'. I think that most critics, if they are honest, even if devoted followers of Keats, would admit to a slight sense of unease about the 'Ode on Melancholy', because it represents that morbidity and enjoyment of the unhappy which are the dangers Keats's particular Romanticism only narrowly avoids. It is, perhaps the narrowness of the avoidance which produces his greatness; he carries the intensities and excesses of Romanticism to their farthest point, extracting the fullest depths of poetic feeling from them, with often falling over the edge. But I would suggest that in this poem of high art, not readily dismissible in the terms that Endymion etc. are dismissed, are to be found traces of the same moral quality which discomfits readers of the earlier verse (and some of the later, such as

'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'). Those 'pleasant smotherings', which Bate and critics like him happily identify in terms of stylistic qualities, in fact have more to do with the embrace of oblivion which Keats was drawn towards by the attractiveness, the seductiveness of death, and of its corresponding elements in life. The structure of the 'Ode on Melancholy' provides an interesting clue to this. Its apparent logical structure seems to suggest a turning away from death by a rejection of the conventional succours of depression, 'No, no, go not to Lethe', in favour of an embrace of the depression itself. This positiveness is accentuated by the metaphor of appetite in the second stanza, of nourishment, which suggests a move towards rather than away from life. This is further confirmed by the first line of the final stanza, 'She dwells with beauty' which seems to put the argument here on a par with the genuinely positive understanding of 'Ode to a Nightingale', where mortality (not death) is embraced because without it we would be unable to appreciate the immortality of beauty. But in fact the apparent upward movement of the argument is deceptive, for the beauty and joy towards which we are led in the second stanza are not the end, but the means to the end - i.e. melancholy, which lies within beauty and joy. So the logic has turned full circle and we find ourselves where we began.

His soul shall taste the sadness of her might
And be among her cloudy tropics hung.

The structure both of the argument and of the poem ostensibly and cleverly suggests that we can find a true enjoyment of joy and beauty through melancholy; but in fact it states that we can find a true enjoyment of melancholy through beauty and joy, because the imminence of their deaths is the true source of melancholy (which is contrasted with the mere 'melancholy fit' of the second stanza). 'Aching pleasure' is enjoyable precisely because it is 'turning to poison'; 'Joy's grape' tastes so sweet to the true palate because the act of enjoyment is also the act of destruction ('burst'). It is beautifully done

but the central theme must be seen as both morbid and decadent. The fact that it is beautifully done does not make it the less so, in fact it adds to the deceptiveness which allows us to accept the idea whilst apparently accepting its opposite; it allows us indulgently to embrace despair, for its own sake, whilst ostensibly embracing joy, to move towards death whilst apparently seeking life. Leavis, and Bate, are deceived, and not by the 'genuine' deceptions of art, in which nothing is true in the way reality is true, but by a moral disguise.

Where does this leave the poem as a work of art? It leaves us with a poem which wonderfully weaves a pattern of thought and feeling, which is not in or by itself self-absorbed or self-indulgent, but whose complexities deliberately lead us to think we are being critical of simple indulgence of emotion, when in fact we are being invited to precisely that indulgence. It certainly shows us very powerfully the attractions of that indulgence; but it embraces the accompanying dangers. It uses words with a marvellous sense for their depths, and it plays those depths off against each other to reinforce the foregoing ideas and feelings. In this way it is a worrying and disturbing poem, both morally and critically - critically because morally. It is for these reasons that the critic who happily endorses the other Odes should be, and often is, less happy about this one.

Endymion

In the foregoing examination of 'Ode on Melancholy' I have tried to show the limitations of the approach, exemplified by Bate and Leavis, to Keats's early and late poetry, by testing their criteria of the value of the late style against a specific example. I shall now reverse the process and apply their criteria for the weakness of the early style to some examples from Endymion. Here I shall compare their approach overtly with an alternative approach which gives full weight to the contribution of sense and subject matter to the moral dimension of the

poetry. I take Endymion as my test case because it is most frequently taken as an obvious instance of the weakness of Keats's earlier poetry. One of the difficulties with extracting representative examples from this poem is its sheer length; but there is no other way than to look at manageable extracts (much as we do with Wordsworth's long poetry). We must however remain aware, perhaps particularly with this poem whose atmosphere partly derives from its somnolent length, that these extracts cannot give the full flavour of the whole poem.

So she was gently glad to see him laid
 Under her favourite bower's quiet shade,
 On her own couch, new made of flower leaves,
 Dried carefully on the cooler side of sheaves
 When last the sun his autumn tresses shook,
 And the tanned harvesters rich armfuls took.
 Soon was he quieted to slumbrous rest:
 But, ere it crept upon him, he had prest
 Peonab's busy hand against his lips,
 And still, a-sleeping, held her finger-tips
 In tender pressure. And as a willow keeps
 A patient watch over the stream that creeps
 Windingly by it, so the quiet maid
 Held her in peace: so that a whispering blade
 Of grass, a wailful gnat, a bee bustling
 Down in the bluebells, or a wren light rustling
 Among sere leaves and twigs, might all be heard.

(Book I, ll. 436 - 452)

It is not surprising that this passage somewhat recalls Keats's 'Ode to Autumn'; its description makes reference to Autumn and the richness of the recalling of drying the flower leaves to make up the couch for Endymion is reminiscent of the richness of the Ode. In addition, the image of Peona steadily keeping still, her fingertips still pressed to Endymion's lips, and its comparison to the willow keeping watch over the stream, reminds us of the Ode's picture of a personified Autumn, keeping patient watch over the elements of her season; the very balance between 'willow keeps' at the end of one line and 'A patient watch' at the beginning of the next foreshadows the more achieved balance of 'keeps' and 'steady' in the Ode. Evidently,

it would take more swallows than this to make Endymion an epic 'Ode to Autumn'. This passage is somewhat unusual in its quiet rhythm and its almost cool images in the generally hectic emotional pace and atmosphere of the poem. Nonetheless I think it provides some difficulties for those who happily make an evaluative distinction between the early and late styles and demonstrate it in technical terms. This passage does in fact have its share of the features Bate or Leavis might characterise as belonging to the early style: the stream creeps 'windingly', Peona is 'gently' glad, rest is 'slumbrous' (Endymion goes to sleep), the passage is as liberally showered with adjectives as any other part of *Endymion*. Alliteration ('Carefully', 'cooler'; 'soon', 'slumbrous'; 'bee bustling', 'bluebells'; 'prest Peona's'; 'still, a sleeping'), assonance ('bower', 'couch', 'flower'; 'harvesters', 'armfuls'; 'blade', 'wailful'), and Keats's famous 'l's and 's's' ('the cooler side of sheaves When last the sun his autumn tresses shook'), all abound. The couplet rhyme scheme of course remains the same. I would attribute the quality of calm peacefulness to two elements in the passage; the very subject matter, a woman patiently keeping an uncomfortable position in order to ensure the sound and needed sleep of a loved one; and the circumstantial detail which fleshes out the picture with its underlying emotional warmth. The lines are, indeed, oddly Miltonic in their digressive detail.

The description of the care which has gone to make up the couch of leaves upon which Endymion finds his rest gives a temporal depth to the incident as though the choice of leaves, their patient slow drying, and the very richness of the harvest surrounding them as they were dried, had all been a witting preparation for this moment of rest. Nor is that entirely fanciful, for all of those things had been witting preparation for Peona's rest - it is her bed - and her rest which she gives to Endymion, exchanging it gladly for her own rather uncomfortable watching over him. For it is that central image of her which dominates and informs the passage, (aided by the willow image

which seems particularly appropriate in the watery setting which Keats has just described). Interestingly, the details which, I have suggested, flesh out the picture do not actually belong to it, in that they either predate it (the dried leaves), or are metaphorical (the willow). In this they work rather as the detail of epic similes work, filling in the detail of a picture removed from what is actually being described, but appropriate to that and therefore informing it, but at a slight remove. Wordsworth makes marvellous use of the technique in The Prelude. The busy detail which Keats includes as part of the present scene - 'a wailful gnat, a bee bustling', 'a wren light rustling' - is in fact shown up in its emptiness by the fuller understanding shown in the 'removed' images.

Could we have here, then, that three-dimensional quality of imagery Bate identifies as a characterising feature of the later style? If we do, this may make for difficulties for Bate as it occurs in Endymion though he could make a defence from the exceptional nature of the example. In fact, I think the qualities displayed in this passage are rather different from the sensual qualities of description to be found in the Odes. These are far more pictures in the mind than the realistically based images of the Odes; they have the classical reserve of the epic simile, which in the case of the harvest image offsets the richness of 'autumn tresses' and 'tann'd harvesters rich armfuls took'. But what essentially determines the stance of the description is, as I have suggested, the central powerful - and present - description of the patient Peona caring for the sleeping Endymion. The image says far more than the descriptions which precede it ('Who whispers him so pantingly and close? ... Hushing signs she made, And breath'd a sister's sorrow to persuade A yielding up, a cradling on her care') and follow it ('O magic sleep! O comfortable bird, That broodest o'er the troubled sea of mind ... great key To golden palaces, strange minstrelsy, Fountains grotesque, new trees, bespangled caves'.) Certainly

the style is sugary, but it strikes us as so. in so far as it reinforces the sugary illusoriness of the sentiments. Peona's sorrow magically 'breathes away the curse'; sleep leads Endymion into the 'mazy world of silvery enchantment'. The world of the curse and the silvery enchantment is almost wholly the world of Endymion; in the midst of it a simpler image of true warmth is the more affecting. And if I am using a criterion of closeness to reality here it is a closeness to reality in the ideas and sentiments; any impression of a description of actuality in the techniques of observation and description are dependent upon the prior realism of the ideas and sentiments. Here Peona's patient stillness is an active sign of her 'endearing love' of Endymion, but there are very few such true sentiments in the poem.

Endymion is guilty of the same fancifulness of sentiment as 'La Belle Dame Sans merci', a poem, Leavis says, 'abandoned for the Victorian romantics to find in it the essential stuff of poetry'. But what, for Leavis, makes this poem so clearly condemnable? That it lacks the 'strength', the 'vitality', the strong grasp upon actualities' which, he argues, render 'Ode on Melancholy' 'more than merely voluptuous' and make 'Keats so much more than a mere aesthete' (Revaluation p. 261) True, he aligns this strength with 'intelligence and character' and with Keats's ability never to 'take his dreams for reality' (ibid p262). Yet he is insistent that the poet's grasp on the actual is prior to these judgements about moral strength. Further, he sees it in Keats's case as being the crucial difference between Keats and the Pre-Raphaelites. In 'La Belle Dame', as in Pater and Rossetti, there is a lack of 'sensuous vitality' (p.259), a quality vibrantly present in the Odes. Yet in fact what 'La Belle Dame' lacks is sense; we may see a similar lack of sense in the passage from Pater which Leavis quotes:

To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain
 this ecstasy, is success in life ... While all melts under
 our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion ...
 stirring of the sense, strange dyes, strange¹ colours, and
 curious odours, or the face of one's friend.

It is not the lack of sensuous vitality which strikes ill here,
 but the reduction of all experiences to one level, the level
 of the 'hard, gemlike flame' - in which, presumably, all
 things are melted down. 'Any exquisite passion' ...?
 A world in which the experience of 'strange dyes, strange colours'
 and 'curious odours' is placed on the same level as one's response
 to 'the face of one's friend'? 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' shows
 the same predilection for the strange and curious at the
 expense of the familiar and good. It is the story of a knight
 who has been enchanted by a woman with magical powers whose main
 interest is in bringing men under her thrall, and then leaving
 them in a state of despair and lifelessness, unable either to
 live or to die. We must feel in this poem that there is a sort
 of ease in examining despair that would not be present if Keats
 were looking at despair in the natural rather than the super-
 natural world. The ease of the knight's enthrallment is
 paralleled by the ease of the reader's.

Now the supernatural is a powerful element in a great deal
 of literature, and the depiction of a fanciful world full of
 fanciful sentiments can be defended in a number of ways.
 Allegorical explorations such as The Faerie Queene and Pilgrim's Progress
 spring to mind. But more testing examples are thrown up by
 the Romantic era itself, most notably by Coleridge, whose
 incursions into the world of the supernatural could ostensibly
 invite the same criticisms as Endymion and 'La Belle Dame Sans
 Merci'. Yet we need only think of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner
 to see how much deeper and more subtle an examination of the
 supernatural is achieved there. In that poem what really gives
 substance to the supernatural bones of the story is a parallel

1. W. Pater, The Renaissance: studies in art and poetry,
 ed. K. Clark (1961), pp. 222-3.

concern with human guilt and forgiveness. Furthermore, Coleridge is far from enamoured with the supernatural forces he describes, though nonetheless he invests them with a phosphorescent, lurid glamour.

We can see something of this substance if we compare two passages from The Ancient Mariner.⁴ In the first, Coleridge describes the deadly threat of the supernatural:

The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.

About, about, in reel and rout
The death fires danced at night;
The water, like a witch's oils,
Burnt green and blue, and white.

In strikingly similar vocabulary, but with a strikingly different intent, Coleridge describes the water-snakes later in the poem; the representatives of the natural, rather than the supernatural, world, the world which the mariner has attacked with his killing of the albatross:

They moved in tracks of shining white,
And when they reared, the elfish light
Fell off in hoary flakes.

Within the shadow of the ship
I watched their rich attire:
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,
They coiled and swam; and every track
Was a flash of golden fire.

Even the simple addition of an extra line enables Coleridge to enrich the vision of the water-snakes. But what is startling here is that the slimy things of the supernatural world are so close to the coilings of the water snakes. What makes all the difference, expressed as it is in very few words, is the narrator's attitude to them. Moved by their beauty, he blesses the water-snakes which he has just described, and it is this acceptance and understanding of the beauty of the natural world

1. S.T. Coleridge, The Complete Poetical Works, ed. E.H. Coleridge (Oxford, 1975).

which frees him from the spell of his guilt. Through the image of the coiling creatures, transformed through his own understanding, he links the worlds of nature and supernature, so that we feel the supernatural events of the story have a sort of rationale connected with the subversion of natural forces by the narrator's act of violence against them. Nature is restored when the narrator expiates that act with his act of love for the water-snakes. The supernatural is thus firmly connected to the natural world, and the relationship between the two is used as a sort of narrative metaphor for the narrator's loss of moral sense, his subsequent guilt, and the assuaging of that guilt by his regaining moral sense ('I blessed the water-snakes'). It always remains clear that the natural world is preferable to the supernatural world (the same is not so clear of 'Christabel' which strays nearer to the world of 'La Belle Dame'). Coleridge's supernatural world is not, then, a world of fanciful sentiment; it embodies true feelings and ideas, substantially explored, and this is a matter of the dominating concerns of the poetry and the clarity of attitude therein expressed. Nothing could more clearly demonstrate this than the similarity of the actual vocabulary used in crucial descriptions of the natural and supernatural worlds in The Ancient Mariner. The world of La Belle Dame, of Peona and Endymion, the world of Elfland in Tennyson, are, on the other hand, unreal worlds used not to explore ideas and feelings with some connection with those experienced in life, but to provide us with an appealing spectre, an illusion, of ideas and feelings which, when we make a serious effort to identify and analyse them, slip away into nothingness.

Keatsian Irony, and 'The Eve of St. Agnes'

If substantiality of ideas is, as I am suggesting, the crucial factor in differentiating between Keats's early and late poetry, how do we operate the distinction? An important factor to be aware of here is the level of the irony in the

poetry. Now irony is not normally a feature we associate with Keats, or indeed the Romantics in general other than Byron, and while we expect to find wit in the Metaphysicals, it is not what we expect to find amidst Keats's intensities. Yet if we examine Keats closely we will see that irony or wit is to be found in all his substantially serious poetry. A difficulty with irony is to identify the factors which produce it; but without doubt irony cannot operate unless the reader conspires with it. For an understanding that what is being said is not what is meant, and indeed may be the opposite of what is meant, must involve an awareness of the gap between the two. Yet how is the gap produced, when we have only the statement on the page - what is said - to judge by? It must be produced by our measuring what is said against either our own or the author's standard of truth. Certainly the author may signal the irony by some mannerism or trick of style, but he cannot employ tone of voice as a speaker can, and any stylistic clue must be subtle if the irony is to work without being crude.

Wherever irony operates, then, truth must also be at work, a truth commonly agreed 'between' author and reader, and embodied in the negative of the ironic statement. Thus where we find irony in poetry it can be an important factor in the moral dimension of the poetry. A consideration of how it emerges in Keats will, I think, lend some valuable clues to our understanding or moral value both in Keats's poetry and in poetry in general.

The move away from the 'early' to the 'late' Keats takes place in the narrative poems, and it is here, I would suggest that irony first makes its entry. There could be nothing more devoid of irony than Endymion; a glance at almost any passage will demonstrate this, and a particularly good illustration can be found in the opening lines:

A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
 Its loveliness increases; it will never
 Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
 A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
 Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

Keats goes on to identify the forms of beauty on earth:

Trees old and young, sprouting a shady boon
 For simple sheep; and such are daffodils
 With the green world they live in; and clear rills
 That for themselves a cooling covert make
 'Gainst the hot season; the mid forest brake,
 Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms:
 And such too is the grandeur of the dooms
 We have imagined for the mighty dead;
 All lovely tales that we have heard or read:
 An endless fountain of immortal drink,
 Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink.

Not only does Keats spend twenty four lines simply reiterating what is at most a banal truth - if indeed it is a truth - that a 'thing of beauty is a joy forever', in a repetitively earnest fashion. He further sees no distinction between the natural forms of beauty which he praises and 'the grandeur of the dooms We have imagined for the mighty dead; All lovely tales that we have heard or read'. Indeed there is a clear pleasure in the use of that word 'dooms', with its rhyme with 'blooms' and its alliteration with 'dead' and the end of the subsequent line; the 'grandeur' of the imagined 'dooms' matters far more than the effect of them on the 'mighty dead', and is equated grammatically with 'lovely tales' and with 'fair musk-rose blooms'. Not a trace of irony to be found here; indeed Endymion is almost entirely lacking in the self-consciousness that would be necessary for irony. But if this were the Keats of the Odes or even of the narrative poems a sentiment of this sort would be much more likely to be couched in terms of self-mocking or reader-mocking irony. In 'Lamia' we see it in a comment such as

Love in a hut, with water and a crust,
 Is - Love, forgive us! - cinders, ashes, dust;
 Love in a palace is perhaps at last
 More grievous torment than a hermit's fast.

This undercuts the rather pompous opposition of love and intellect in the narrative of the poem. But in this somewhat stilted and unsuccessful piece, the irony is little more effective than

the earnestness it accompanies. In 'The Eve of St. Agnes', however, where we see Keats's narrative powers in their full fruition, we also find a much more interesting and effective form of irony. Here Keats uses a running contrast between warmth and cold (a contrast already introduced earlier in the poem in the descriptions of the chilly deathly chapel and the warmth and light of the festivities) to develop a gulf between the hot intensities of Porphyro's passion and the cooler dreams of Madeline's religious rituals. The gulf helps to undercut the richness at the heart of the poem, but also serves, in reverse, to underline the final dominance of the real world over the dream world, of warmth over cold. It also prepares us for a later irony involving the fictional world the poem involves us in; and it is reinforced by a dramatic irony, both of which I shall discuss.

The sensuous middle passages of the poem gives full expression to the emotional intensity Keats is seeking to explore, and particularly important here is the description of Madeline as she enters her chamber, over looked, though she does not yet know it, by her lover Porphyro. The description of Madeline herself is presaged by a rich account of the casement which gives a faint glow of light from the moon outside into her room:

'A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings'. The blushing of the dead monarchs is of course artificial; but it is echoed by the actual warmth of Madeline - a warmth, however at first conveyed through the medium of the warm light falling through the window, a light itself only artificially warmed by the stained glass. The actual light itself is the cold virginal light of moonshine ('the wintry moon'). Madeline's breast, the actual living breathing warmth of young flesh is described merely as 'fair'. Indeed throughout this stanza (× × √) the reversal of warmth and cold, so that the warmth is artificial while the cold seems to belong to the virginal girl, emphasises the ambivalence of what Madeline is doing. She is a virgin,

celebrating a religious festival (the significance of the moon again); but the purpose of the celebration is to dream of her lover:

And soft adorings from their loves receive
Upon the honeyed middle of the night.

In addition, in a highly effective piece of dramatic irony, her actual lover, Porphyro, is actually looking on as she performs these ceremonies; and while Keats is discreet with this touch of voyeurism, it certainly adds an erotic edge to the description of the virginal Madeline. This contrast of sexuality and virginal religiosity - or perhaps it would be better to say combination, for the two qualities are complementary as described in the poem, rather than mutually exclusive - is continued in stanza xxvi. Again, Madeline's warmth is conveyed at second-hand: 'Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one; Loosens her fragrant bodice'. The warmth and aroma of her flesh are transferred to her jewelry (itself originally cold, but rich and warm in colour, and now physically warm because of its proximity to the flesh) and to her clothing (Porphyro later gazes 'upon her empty dress', a powerfully erotic image just because Keats has transferred Madeline's attractions to her accoutrements.)) The final mermaid image is a masterpiece, the mermaid combining as she does a sinuous sexuality with a non-attainability which have made her the mythical object of men's dream-like desires for centuries. Here the discarded dress is Madeline's 'seaweed', reminding the reader's (and Porphyro's) imagination of what it hides from the eyes. At this point the reader too becomes voyeur; and yet ^{it} is a voyeurism robbed of prurience both by Madeline's innocence and by the realism of Porphyro's intent, soon to be fulfilled. And this, of course, is the point of the ironies in these few key stanzas. The warmth of Porphyro's actual passion breaks into Madeline's slumbers, into her religious aura, into the dream-world to replace his own dream image with his actuality. Madeline gets more than she bargained for; but this serves to remind us that the dream image of St. Agnes Eve and its rituals is dependent upon the reality of the actual

world. Further, Keats seems to be saying, the dream world is no substitute for the actual world, or where it is we are misleading ourselves. Madeline herself is initially discomfited to find the real Porphyro replacing the dream one:

There was a painful change, that nigh expelled
The blisses of her dream so pure and deep
At which fair Madeline began to weep,
And moan forth witless words with many a sigh.

But once awake she pleads with Porphyro not to forsake her as her dream image has forsaken her. The verse in which Porphyro takes the place of her dream lover is perhaps less than successful, but there is little doubt that we are meant to take this as the actual consummation of their love:

Into her dream he melted, as the rose
Blendeth its odour with the violet, -
Solution sweet: meantime the frost wind blows

The ironic contrasts of the earlier stanzas, the reversal of warmth and cold, the incongruity of sexuality and virginity here find their fruition. Madeline somehow preserves her innocence, whilst consummating her passion; Porphyro 'melts' into her dream world, a marvellously ambiguous word which covers both the melting of the edges between what is real and what is not, and the melting of the flesh (as well as the 'melting' of ejaculation, a suggestion echoed in 'solution sweet' - how characteristic, both of Keats, and of this poem, that he should thus stress the detumescent rather than the harsher erectile aspects of the sexual act).

The irony here exemplified has, then, a number of effects; it underlies the richness at the centre of the poem, and prevents that from being over-cloying; it allows both a subtle and erotic account of the feeling between Porphyro and Madeline; and, most importantly perhaps, it reminds us of the real world surrounding (and finally penetrating) Madeline's dream world, which is to be important if we see the poem as endorsing Madeline and Porphyro's attempt to find happiness in that real world. The truth behind the irony here, then, is that Porphyro

is right to drag Madeline into the real world and out of the illusory one; that, finally, the heat of his passion is preferable to the cooler lights of the protected illusion Madeline holds dear. But the irony enables Keats to express this without pure absorption in the rich sensuous intensities it involves.

Not content with this, however, Keats employs a further irony, as a reminder to us that this is but a truth within a truth, that the real living world is that which surrounds us, and not the world of the poem.

In the last stanzas of the poem, Keats recounts the danger-laden traverse of the lovers through the castle, on their way to freedom. Sustaining the suspense until the last minute, he keeps us hanging from the last line of the penultimate verse (an Alexandrine, so that the sense of suspense is even greater):

The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans
to the first half-line of the last stanza to discover that the lovers do indeed manage their escape: 'And they are gone'. But our relief is as short-lived as it could be, for that line is completed thus:

aye, ages long ago
These lovers fled away into the storm.

Suddenly we realise that we have been kept on tenterhooks throughout the preceding two stanzas, only to be told, and within the same breath, that not only are the lovers gone from the castle, but they are gone from life - 'aye, ages long ago'. To ensure that the point sinks in, Keats completes the stanza with liberal mention of death: the castle guests dreamt of 'witch and demon and large coffin-worm' (a peculiarly unpleasant image, possibly because it reminds us, however glancingly, of the earlier sexual encounter?); Angela and the Beadsman have died. It is not

their deaths, however, but those of the young lovers, which by their proximity in the stanza seem to be put on a par with the ancient pair; so that when Keats says ambiguously 'And they are gone' it is as though they had died at that moment.

Keats makes the 'gone' work doubly, producing an almost vicious irony, wherein our belated consciousness that these lovers are long ago dead makes us embarrassed about our engrossment in their more immediate fate, and our excitement that they are able to make their escape. The second sense of 'And they are gone' turns round upon its first sense and cruelly exposes it for what it is: a cheap literary trick in which the writer persuades the reader of the aliveness of his characters to such an extent that he really becomes involved in their fate. But the irony is further deepened by our awareness that it is pointed at the writer as well as at the reader; by means of his own technical expertise, Keats exposes the art which has kept us so involved up to this point. For the true edge of that ironic 'they are gone' is that they were never here, in the sense of alive; they live for us only through the power of Keats's imagination. What he is in fact exposing here is our vulnerability to that power; not only do we succumb to its creations, becoming engrossed in the lives and fates of two young lovers, but we also succumb to its destructions, being deflated by that casually masterful ironic stroke of the pen which equates the lovers' escape with their deaths. The point is that in the literary work the two are equal; the poet is here creating the deaths as he created the lives of the lovers. What we should be embarrassed by, he seems to be suggesting, is not that we became so involved in lives which are now part of ancient history - but that we became involved in lives which are not part of history. These lovers are fictional; the historical gap between their deaths and now is as fictional as their deaths. So the irony is actually a triple irony, whose third prong attacks our belief in the fiction - a brave

move by Keats, who thereby endangers our response to his own poetry.

If it should be doubted that Keats intends this third element in the irony, I would suggest that many elements in the rest of the poem reinforce this interpretation. If we look back at the middle section of the poem, in which I pointed out the first example of irony, we can see that the reversal of warmth and cold there, the seeing of Madeline's flesh through the 'stained' light from the casement which 'blush'd with blood of queens and kings' is not a mere device, it is there to link the first example of irony with the second. In the middle section of the poem the artificiality of Madeline's warmth is stressed because she still belongs to the dreamworld, from which Porphyro is about to drag her (under the influence of her 'real' warmth and sexuality, and his 'real' passion). Her virginity and religiosity tie her further to that dreamworld, along with their images of cold paleness. The ironic contrast of warmth and cold, of life and death (the light from the stained glass figures falling on and warming the pale flesh of the 'living' girl) prepares us for the breaking out into the real world, the warmer world of reality, in which the living Porphyro penetrates Madeline, along with her dream. But when we recognise the full force of the later irony ('And they are gone') we see that the coldness of the earlier images of Madeline, her 'warming' in the artificial light, also presages the later realisation that Madeline and Porphyro were never alive, except in the imagination. We are made aware of the necessity for the quotation marks round 'real' and 'living'. The description of Porphyro as 'pale as smooth sculptured stone' beside the sleeping Madeline sunk in her 'midnight charm' 'Impossible to melt as iced stream' are revealed as images not just of the illusion of the dream world Madeline is in, or of the possibility of death which surrounds them, but also of the illusory nature of the poem itself. Porphyro's 'smooth-

sculptured' figure is as much an artefact as 'the sculptured dead' of the introductory section of the poem, who 'seem to freeze'; Madeline's sexuality is as petrified as the blushing queens and kings of her casement, imprisoned in the cold glass just as the 'sculptured dead' are 'emprisoned in black purgatorial rails'. Madeline and Porphyro may escape from the castle; but they cannot escape from the confines of the poem. Nor is this a facile or pretentious point on Keats's part; for this deeper irony fits in very well with the theme at the heart of 'The Eve of St. Agnes', the relationship between illusion and reality. In a poem in which Keats seems to be demonstrating the importance of substantiating one's fantasies in the real world, at any rate if these fantasies have any semblance to genuine passions, it seems perfectly fitting that he should issue a warning along the same lines to his reader, engrossed in this counterfeit of passion. Porphyro's depth of emotion as he watches the innocent Madeline preparing her religious ritual, and hers as she concentrates to achieve her dream, are powerful and richly conveyed; but Porphyro cannot gaze upon Madeline's empty dress forever, and presumably her dream of him is dependent for its force on its future fulfilment in reality. 'The frost wind blows Like Love's alarum' to remind Porphyro and Madeline of the real world calling to them outside, the real world whose fruits they have just tasted together. Similarly, and simultaneously with the lovers' exit into the 'flaw-blown sleet', the irony reminds the reader that these figures are mere 'phantoms'; we too must return to the real world. The poetic expertise seen in the handling of the irony adds to the subtlety of the effect. Particularly important here is the handling of tense in the final four stanzas of the poem. We move from the present tense of direct speech in stanza 39, very involving and immediate, to the past tense of reportage in stanza 40 (the tense of all the reportage up to this point). Then suddenly in stanza 41 Keats moves directly into the present tense. The separation of stanzas in this long narrative poem helps him to slip this change in without its being too jarring, as does

the chosen verb itself:

They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall;
Like phantoms, to the iron porch, they glide

Keats then changes back to the past tense to describe the porter, then actually mixes the two tenses in describing the bloodhound:

The wakeful bloodhound rose, and shook his hide,
But his sagacious eye an inmate owns

He then remains in the present tense for the crucial freeing of the bolts and chains and the opening of the door

By one, and one, the bolts full easy slide:-
The chains lie silent on the footworn stones:-
The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans.

The combination of the suspenseful situation - bolts, chains, key and door can all make a noise sufficient to arouse the 'sleeping dragons' - with the present tense here really make the reader feel closely and personally involved in the event. Then Keats very neatly, in the first line of the next stanza, uses a form of the verb which initially looks like a present tense - 'And they are gone' - to continue this sense of immediacy and involvement. It is not until the explanatory 'aye, ages long ago', followed by the past tense 'These lovers fled', that we see that the verb is actually a form of the perfect tense, combining a present auxiliary with a perfect participle; indeed it is this combination which also makes the double sense of the verb possible. (They have fled, and they are dead). The rest of the final stanza is in the past tense. This skilful handling of tense makes the contrast of immediacy with distance more dramatic; but it also tempers the irony, giving it a sort of delayed action effect.

Thus, skilfully and sensitively, Keats handles an irony which deliberately challenges the reader's involvement in his own fiction, but whose challenge answers to the ironic conflict at the heart of the fiction itself. We learn Porphyro's lesson; and then we learn it doubly, being pushed out at the

end of the poem to grasp our own lives and live our own passions, before death seizes us (as 'death', the death of the illusion, has seized the fictional characters and their passions in the poem).

Irony always has a cutting edge; that is precisely why we do not naturally associate it with Romantic poetry. It works against the surface meaning, because it is produced by incongruity or contrast, whether between two stated ideas, or between the stated and the unstated. Thus its immediate effect is to render what is expressed more complex and also to enable the statement together of apparently conflicting ideas or feelings. Thus through irony Keats is able to devote himself to the intensities of rich emotion sensuously expressed, and at the same time undercut or question that without destroying it. This means that he can express a complex attitude to the emotion which is central to the poem, whilst absorbing the reader in that emotion at the same time. Thus the earnest banalities lovingly and richly conveyed in Endymion can be replaced by a far more complex view, without loss of richness. And this is vital, for we do not wish to throw the baby out with the bathwater. There is no question that what is central and original to Romantic poetry is the very intensity and absorption which is critically so vexing.

It is the caveat implicit in the irony which helps to render the feelings and ideas expressed in the poetry more complex, and which ultimately deepens and enriches the poetry, morally, and poetically. This is the crux of my difference with Leavis, Bate, and so many others who happily put the (happily assumed) evaluative distinction between Keats's 'early' and 'late' poetry down to a difference of style. In so far as irony is a matter of style, it is so only instrumentally; the importance of irony lies in the indication of attitude, an indication economically and subtly handled so that there is no sense of didacticism. But it is not that economical subtlety to which critics refer when they talk about the late style.

Irony and Truth in 'Ode to a Nightingale'

The use of irony as a 'device' for truth reaches its fullest development in 'Ode to a Nightingale', arguably Keats's finest Ode. The irony at the heart of the poem lies in the realisation that, in order to appreciate the beauty of the world, man has to be mortal, and therefore is always in danger of losing the beauty - indeed it is that very danger which makes his awareness of beauty so sharp. Listening to the song of the nightingale, the poet strives to escape his mortal coils to try to achieve unity with its beauty. Finding such escape impossible, except very briefly on the 'viewless wings' of the imagination, he longs for death, so that he can at least die at a moment of experiencing exquisite beauty. It is at this point that he realises the impossibility of his quest: if he dies

Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain -
To thy high requiem become a sod.

It is precisely this contrast between mortal man and immortal beauty which makes the latter so moving to the former; with this realisation, the poet is able freely to celebrate the immortality of the nightingale's song, and through it to feel some link with those, now long dead, who have listened to it in ages past. But he cannot escape the implications of the irony; in the final stanza, the bird flies away and with it disappears the song, and the beauty. The poet is left with his own mortal self, in doubt even about his physical sensations ('Was it a vision, or a waking dream?'), and questioning even his recent understanding of the place of mortality in the awareness of immortal beauty. For if even that beauty can disappear as suddenly as it appeared, what price immortality then? And without immortality, mortality is reduced to its basic element - 'a sod'. A lesser poet might have been happy to end the poem on the high note of the fifth stanza, where he achieves temporary communion with the beauty of the nightingale's song through the power of imagination; Keats himself, we feel, might have been content to end with the seventh stanza, celebrating as it does the beauty of the bird song in full awareness of the

irony of man's mortal relationship to it. But it takes the best of Keats to push on to the ultimate irony of the final stanza, where the power of the imagination, formerly seen as the highest of mortal attributes, is called into question, through the device initially of turning round upon and undercutting the power of the poem itself. The device employed here echoes almost exactly that used in 'The Eve of St. Agnes'; the similarity cannot be accidental. In Stanza 7 Keats enumerates examples of the power of the birds song over the ages, and the universality of its appeal to man. In keeping with the climatic importance of 'Poesy' in the poem (Stanza 4), the culmination of these instances is provided by an image of the literary imagination:

The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

I would contend that there is a subtle hint of self-mockery in these lines, the slightest hint of tongue in cheek, conveyed by the alliteration and the deliberately archaic vocabulary - devices which in a poem like 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' would be undoubtedly earnest, here, because they stand out a little incongruously from the vocabulary of the rest of the poem (which is certainly rich and sensuous, but not archaic), seem deliberately to draw attention to their own excesses. However, the suggestion is so slight that it is not sufficient to be termed ironic, or to undercut the serious point Keats is making here. But perhaps it was sufficient to make him look a little more critically at his own art here - or at least to give the appearance to the reader of doing so. For in the first line of the next (and last) stanza turns round upon himself (and, in so doing, upon the reader who has become intimately involved with the first person voice of the poem):

Forlorn! The very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self.

On one level, the word 'Forlorn', just used as an adjective to

describe the 'faery lands' of the literary imagination, echoes the actual experience of the poet, as the bird flies away and leaves him, so that he is forsaken by it; the coincidence reminds the poet that 'forlorn' applies to him as well as the 'faery lands', and so the word itself 'tolls' him back to himself, and to reality. It is the contrast between the 'forlorn' of the previous stanza and the 'forlorn' of the final one which produces the irony, and again, as in 'Eve of St. Agnes', it is the slight adjustment of meaning in the repetition which is crucial. In the first use, Keats is using 'forlorn' to mean 'lost'.. remote deserted. In the second use that adjectival use of the past participle recovers more of its verbal power; Keats is not simply intransitively 'lost'; he is actually forsaken by - by the nightingale. Indeed he can actually feel the act of being forsaken, as the nightingale moves away and the song -- and with it the experience of beauty - fades. The irony stressed by this contrast of feelings conveyed through the repetition of the same word is that at the very high point of the poet's celebration of a truth and understanding which he has painfully laboured towards through the progress of the poem comes the accompanying realisation that the physical manifestation of that understanding is disappearing - and with it all the certainty which could remain as long as he was undergoing the sensations the experience of beauty, which underpinned his acceptance of the limitations of his own mortality. It is like the enactment, but in reverse, of the realisation at the end of the sixth stanza - here, instead of the nightingale singing while the poet is deaf to the sound, because dead, the song dies, and the poet is left only with the sensation of its loss; his mortality enables him to feel the pain, without the accompanying consolations of beauty. This bitter irony does not destroy the truths of the poem - but it qualifies them in a particularly painful way, for the reader as well as Keats. The truth is tied to the experience - the sensation - itself, because sensation is what is central to human experience as Keats depicts it in the poem; even the deepest spiritual awareness is physically 'felt':

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains my sense

Hence the desperate search for escape in the poem, and the repeated emphasis on invisibility ('leave the world unseen', 'forest dim', 'viewless wings', 'here there is no light', 'I cannot see what flowers', 'Darkling I listen'). The body feels, and the flesh decays, and because it does so it longs for freedom and for immortality; but if it could attain them, it would not long for them. It is the understanding of this basic paradox which has led the poet to the acceptance of stanza 7; and that is why it is particularly bitter to have it thrust down his throat in the final stanza. When the only sensation the poet is left with is the fading away and then finally the complete absence of the nightingale's song, he is left only with his own body, without even the comfort of the heightened awareness of the first stanza:

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?

The vulnerability of man to experience is demonstrated particularly powerfully in the profound uncertainty which is left when the beauty of the bird - the one apparently stable and undying element in the poem up to this point - disappears.

Again, as in 'The Eve of St. Agnes' we have to some extent been prepared for the ironic turn by its relationship with the irony of mortality at the centre of the poem. Yet the ending of the 'Ode to a Nightingale' seems to cut more profoundly than that of the earlier narrative poem, partly because of the more concentrated form and partly because in the Ode we become deeply involved with the first person voice. The repeated word 'forlorn' rings in our own minds as well as in the writer's and this effect is achieved the more strongly because at this point Keats becomes reader as well as writer. His repeated 'forlorn' suggests that he stops and looks at and considers what he has just written, thus placing himself outside the framework of the poem he is in the act of writing, and so at this point we feel even more strongly identified with him. This is particularly appropriate at the stage because - again, just

as in 'The Eve of St. Agnes' - there is a further irony in this reversal of 'forlorn', one which depends on reminding the reader that he is sunk in a literary illusion at the very point when he is most involved in and moved by the poem. And whereas in the narrative poem the reader is primarily embarrassed by the reminder, in a thought-provoking fashion, here he feels the full weight of despair in that ringing 'forlorn' closely followed by the bitter

'Adieu: the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.

Again, our involvement with the first person voice is important here; for where Keats previously, in the narrative poem, still held the objective reins - it is he who tells the reader that Porphyro and Madeline are long since dead, and indeed are dead in a stronger sense of never having lived - here he is discovering the illusion to himself, and as it happens to the reader at the same time. The poignancy of this 'discovery' coincides both temporally and in nature with the realisation that the beauty of the birdsong, and the understanding of man's relationship with that beauty, may also be an illusion. The despair is felt so personally because, of course, the poetry Keats is in the course of writing here is his only claim to immortal beauty. If its status is as perilous as that of the birdsong, what comfort is there? It is tribute to the power of Keats writing that our level of involvement is such as this stage of the poem that this glimpse of the poem's framework, this revelation of the limitation of imaginative illusion, does not destroy our involvement but only deepens the intensity of feeling. Keats risks exposing the raw edges of the poetry in this Ode, and in doing so only strengthens our understanding of the paradoxical truth he explores. It is not false emotionalism which makes us think here of the epitaph Keats wrote for himself: 'Here lies one whose name was writ in water'. The power of the irony here is such that we can see the essential truth of this even as we read words which are immortal - because that is the truth the immortal words are telling us, and it is one of the reasons for their immortality.

I do not claim that what renders the 'late' poetry of Keats especially good is the irony itself, or indeed that we must find irony in all his good poems. I do suggest that the irony is an important indicator of the nature of the ideas and feelings in those poems where it occurs. It enables Keats to express the centrality of death and suffering in life, and the attendant intensity of experience of love and beauty, indeed of life itself, in the richest fashion, without morbidity or self-indulgence. The key difference between Endymion, 'La Belle Dame' and 'Ode on Melancholy' on the one hand, and 'The Eve of St. Agnes', and the Odes on the other, is that in the former Keats is 'half in love with easeful death' whilst in the latter he sees and says that he is/has been, and moves back towards life. He acknowledges the power of death's attraction, but ultimately rejects it. There is a powerful self-consciousness at work in that image, as there is in the line

Now more than ever seems it rich to die.

But it seems, not is. In the later poems, Keats is strongly aware of the difference; the irony enables him to express both states - the pull of death and the corresponding pull of life - in their fullness, with depth and passion. But in the end these poems embrace life. Indeed it is not simply that the thought and feeling moves back towards life, but somehow the reader is thrust back into life in a symbolic way. As Keats destroys the illusion he has created at the end of 'The Eve of St. Agnes', though the final concern of that stanza is death, it pushes the reader, as it were, out of the poem, towards reality, in imitation of the lovers' bursting out of the confines of the castle. In much the same way, Keats deliberately breaks the framework of the poem's illusion at the end of 'Ode to a Nightingale', with his reference to 'forlorn'; and again though his last words are about illusion, the thrust of the poem is quite the opposite, as the reader is almost literally tumbled out of the work and into the world.

The embrace of life? Perhaps this sounds a little like Leavis? That is not surprising, as I am sure that what lies at the heart of many of Leavis's critical evaluations and responses is indeed the ideas in a work. In his attempt to render criticism more

clearly critical, whilst at the same time trying to give sense and substance to the moral dimension of criticism through argued examples, he rejects this position. In doing so he attempts to attach the moral dimension of poetry to its stylistic qualities of concreteness and particularity. The effect of this is in fact more reductive than a full acceptance of the role of ideas would be.

I have tried to show in my examination of examples of 'early' and 'late' Keats that the nature of the ideas and feelings expressed accounts for the major difference between these examples. In this, and in my examination of Shelley and Wordsworth, I have also tried to show that the acceptance of this view actually allows the reader a greater generosity towards ideas and feelings of the inchoate, 'ineffable' kind, whilst Leavis's position does not. At the same time we remain clear that certain poems express more powerful and lasting truths than others, and that very often this may have to do with their, i.e. the poems', generosity towards certain states and feelings. 'Ode to Autumn' accepts the decay implicit in the over-ripening of late summer; but it ends with the light music of Autumn, a music which is separate from but looks forward to the songs of Spring, and life. We see the value of the acceptance of decay: we see the truth of that picture. But we see the greater truth of the subsequent realism of the domestic life of Autumn in the last stanza. That realism may there be expressed through particularity and concreteness; but it is the truth of the idea which is central, and which they serve.

Conclusion

It is not the purpose of this thesis to argue that literature is always and everywhere expressive of truths. How unbearable it would be if it were! Literature spends much of its time reflecting the spaces in between truths. Keats's 'I stood tiptoe' will never be regarded as great poetry; but we are glad of it because it demonstrates so clearly, like the bad jokes in his letters, his ordinariness. And would we want to purge literature of its limericks, its clerihews, its McGonagall? Literature would be, paradoxically, a much lesser thing if we did.

It is, however, my purpose to argue that truth is central to literature, and that if the moral function of literature were abandoned or nullified, literature would be so reduced as to be of little substantial interest. Criticism has a crucial role to play here. It is noticeable in the 'new' theory that its first move is to detach itself from the work, from the literature, and become a self-contained entity; it is no longer theory about literature, literature enters only in the modifying adjective, 'literary'. It is the theory which is central. This renders literary theory enormously powerful for it can thus erect theory of literature which is in direct contradiction to its practice (that of both the writer and the reader). Indeed, there is a sense in which deconstructionism conceives that as its central purpose. Since most of the new theory is hostile to the moral dimension of literature, it can pursue its aggression, but without having to deal with the practice or experience of literature itself. It is thus invulnerable to counter-examples. In such a climate the moral dimension of literature might atrophy; it would become impotent.

The critic then has a doubly important task: to oppose this development - and to oppose it, not through reactionary zeal, but in pursuit of what criticism is and must be. Criticism is a second-order activity dependent upon literature, taking its cue from the experience of literature, and in the service of helping others to a clearer and fuller understanding of it. Any metacritical activity (activity which is, I think, crucial to good criticism) is also, at

one remove, in the service of literature. Thus it is the responsibility of the critic to reflect a central role of literature, its moral role, in order to be true to the nature of literature, to do its own job properly, and to ensure that an adequate body of understanding is built up about critical approaches to truth in literature, and the moral dimension of critical judgements.

In the foregoing chapters I have therefore sought to show a number of things:

1. That truth is central to literature but that it is, in Austin's words, verum not veritas - a true thing, not the Truth.
2. That literature seeks to increase our understanding of individual experiences, and so make more available to us a wide range of truths.
3. That it does this partly through its imaginative power, a power which J.S. Mill (who thought that he was deficient in it, because of his Benthamite upbringing) described as that 'which enables us, by a voluntary effort, to conceive the absent as if it were present, the imaginary as if it were real, and to clothe it in the feelings which, if it were indeed real, it would bring along with it. This is the power by which one human being enters into the mind of another. This power constitutes the poet, in so far as he does anything but melodiously utter his own actual feelings.'¹
4. That because of this power, as well as the freedom of its language, literature can deal with experiences which might otherwise seem to be inaccessible, except through direct experience, e.g. inchoate inner states; and that the expression of such states supersedes certain of our moral assumptions in life (e.g. the built-in disapproval in the idea of excess).
5. That this moral generosity which is central to literature does not, however, render truth just a matter of subjective response. Incoherence within a literary work remains incoherence; vacuity remains vacuity. We may have to exercise greater care in the way that we identify them within literature, distinguishing them from

1. Mill on Bentham and Coleridge, ed. F.R. Leavis (1950), p. 61

devices with a further intent, or from the proper revelation and exploration of unfamiliar or vague states. And our identification of them will be in terms of the way in which they appear in the work (and not simply by means of paraphrase).

6. That the existence of irony, in a variety of forms, in literature reveals also that literature sometimes depends on, reinforces, and even reveals a common agreement that certain things are wrong or certain statements untrue. A consensus must exist for irony to operate. Literature can similarly state truths which in some sense we already know, but which are revived, or seem to be revealed by our experience of the work.

7. That while there is a continuity between literature's generosity to the truth of a range of experiences, and normative truth in literature, at points the two may conflict, and at these points the critical task is particularly sensitive.

8. That getting the critical judgement right depends on our having a thorough, sophisticated and flexible understanding of the relationship between literature and reality.

9. That that relationship varies, between the genres, and to a lesser extent between individual works.

a) Drama imitates reality in its dynamics, yet it can make us profoundly aware of the illusoriness of some judgements about truth. In 'deluding' its audience, it is a powerful model of the unreliability of real people's words and actions as a true reflection or expression of their inner selves.

b) Fiction, at key points, clearly removes itself from reality, especially through the role of the narrator, and the omniscience of the author; but of the genres, it seems to come closest to a match with reality (in particular the realist novel of the nineteenth century, which is at the core of the English novel tradition). But just because of this closeness, we must be very careful not to conflate the novel with reality. Judgements about truth in the novel must explore the many ways in which fiction and reality are connected, without being continuous with each other.

c) Poetry is, of the three, least 'like' life, but perhaps better

able to express directly truths about life, because it speaks to the inner 'ear'. The ways in which poetry uses language are crucial to our critical understanding of the way in which it can convey truths, and characteristically critical remarks about truth in poetry will be simultaneously remarks about poetic language.

10. That our understanding of the relationship between literature and reality depends partly upon a prior understanding of the philosophical problems raised by statements in literature. I argue, albeit briefly and, largely, through cases, that statements in literature can be referential (against the position argued by Frege that they could not be referential, and so could not admit of truth or falsehood). But we must be aware of the peculiar status of the reference made, where some words refer both to objects which exist in the real world, and at the same time to objects which do not because the reference is within a fictional world; and where some words refer to places or people who do not exist in the real world, though people and places like them do.

11. That critics have made all sorts of assumptions about the topics touched on above, and in so doing have made a number of errors. In some cases these errors have led to a critical withdrawal from truth in literature, whether in practice or in theory; and in other cases has led to the entrenchment of mistaken practice, based either on mistaken theory, or on no theory at all.

12. That F.R. Leavis has played a crucial role in bringing about the recognition of the moral dimension of literature and of criticism in this century, and that many of his ideas have been absorbed into critical practice even as they have often been aggressively rejected in theory. I have argued however that Leavis's erecting of the 'objective eye' into a central principle in identifying truth in literature is mistaken and reductive. It is a mistake which springs from his persistent attempt to render the moral dimension of critical judgements more 'technical', more disciplined - more critical - and so free it from the 'problem of belief' and the 'heresy of paraphrase' with which it had been dogged.

13. That to abandon or attack Leavis's position is not therefore to abandon the thoroughly critical nature of critical judgements about the moral dimension of literature. I cannot adequately summarise my discussions of Leavis's comparison of Blake and Shelley, or my own discussions of Keats, but these embody some ways in which the work itself is the central determinant of the moral dimension of our critical response. It is my contention that a prior understanding of the role of what the work says in determining our response to it - the role of the ideas and feelings it expresses - will clarify the relationship of that with the 'technical' aspects of the work, and so highlight those areas towards which our critical concern should be directed.

14. That thus to recognise the moral dimension of critical judgements is not to return to a state of naive subjectivity. There will be many problems which will arise when critics disagree about a work, and this disagreement coincides with a conflict of belief; but it was ever thus, and we have been unable to carry the disagreement to any fruitful conclusion just because we have not allowed ourselves to recognise the role of belief. Trying to rule out that role from critical concern will not make it disappear, it will simply reduce the area of literature with which critics can concern themselves. As for paraphrase, there has to be something to paraphrase, an understanding received from the work, and our remarks about it will be remarks about the work. It is not (or should not be) that I scan some lines and cry 'Aha! Religion!' and then, being an unbeliever, cast aside the book. But I do read, say, Crashaw's 'Hymn to the Name and Honour of the Admirable St. Teresa'; and when I come to these lines about Teresa's visionary sacrifice (in which a burning spear pierces her heart):

How kindly will thy gentle heart
Kiss the sweetly-killing dart!...
And close in his embraces keep
Those delicious wounds, that weep
Balsom to heal themselves with.

I feel uneasy. I feel distaste. My unease and distaste are with certain phrases: 'delicious wounds, that weep Balsom', 'sweetly-killing dart' (rhyming and thus linking with 'heart'); and with

1. *The Metaphysical Poets*, ed. H. Gardner (1961)

overall image of the heart's embracing the dart. The erotic quality of the description partly enhances, partly masks the sacrifice at the heart of the poem. The weeping balsom is blood; the wounds are delicious because sacrifice and suffering are spiritual goods (and will also lead to Heaven) ; the metaphor of appetite is not surprising given the sacramental context, but 'delicious', which conjures up an image of Teresa licking her own wounds, seems distastefully excessive. The combination of flesh and spirit in the language of gluttony and lust , about a bloody sacrifice representing spiritual self-negation , strikes me as deeply corrupt. The only truth it has to offer is in its disturbing revelation of the states of mind of adolescent virgins who have religious visions. This response is, without any doubt, to the work, and my articulation of it is in terms of the work.

15. That literature thus has a relationship with morality in life, and critical judgements with a moral dimension have a relationship with moral judgements in life, but it is not a simple or direct relationship.

* * * * *

Received wisdom about an intellectual discipline often makes its most telling appearance at the lower rather than the higher levels of the activity. My 'A' level teaching has taught me a great deal, and most of that I have learnt from my pupils. But one of the most significant things it has taught me is this : that the study of literature as it is handed down from university English departments in its manifestations through the public examination system does not truly reflect our experience of literature in respect of its moral dimension.

The universities exert a powerful influence - perhaps properly in view of their role in teaching and research - over the national Examining Boards; and indeed when Mode 3 'A' levels, with teacher assessment largely replacing timed examinations, began to appear from some Boards a few years ago, it was the universities who raised

the howls of protest. The then Chairman of the English Board at the University of Kent, in a letter to the national Press, complained that a lowering of standards would ensue, and argued that it was vital, if English were to remain a credible academic discipline, that the universities retain their influence over national examinations in English.

Now the main impetus of 'A' level examinations is to discourage actively the kind of concern which, I have argued, is central to literature and criticism. I suspect that, if new literary theory has its way, that concern will be submerged altogether, and will surface only furtively, in private places, where an individual sits down and reads a book in an act of purely personal understanding. I think, and I hope that this thesis helps to demonstrate, that if this were to happen it would be an immeasurable loss; it would be to the detriment of literature and of criticism; and most importantly it would be inimical to the true nature of literature.

I finish with a brief comparative example which I hope will speak for itself. One of the texts I have recently taught at 'A' level is 1914 - 18 in Poetry, edited by E.L. Black (1975). Along with it we studied Vera Brittain's harrowing Testament of Youth - an apparently appropriate combination, though in practice a deeply depressing one. I was teaching these works when, as it happened, the Falklands War erupted. Even if I myself had wanted to suppress the evident connection, my students would not have allowed me to do so. It is impossible to talk in a vacuum about the bitter irony of Owen's Dulce et Decorum Est, about the image of 'vile incurable sores on innocent tongues', about the intent of 'children ardent for some desperate glory', about why it was 'the old Lie' - when children, glory, sores, innocence, pro patria mori, and all the old lie are appearing on the television everyday, and when the students you are teaching might without exaggeration themselves be conscripts in six months time. To do so would beat even the bitterness of Sassoon's irony.

The connection I am making here is, in one sense, vulgar, but in another not; it is perhaps the most evident, the most blatant,

but not the most characteristic, example of the way in which literature can tell us truths. But it is none the less important for that.

The examiners, however, did not think so. In their annual report after the examination for that year, a report intended as feedback to teachers and students, commented thus on answers to questions about the War Poets:

The War Poets still attract many candidates who offer thorough and well-supported answers. Careful attention was paid to the wording of the questions, but regularly there arose the suspicion, reinforced by the number of references to the South Atlantic conflict, that candidates do not always respond to this selection for literary reasons. Nevertheless there was a wealth of appropriate quotation, and adequate though not always penetrating evaluation of it.

(Associated Examining Board, Report of
Examiners, June 1982)

A few months after the examination, I had a letter from one of my students, Lesley Wallis. She writes about a handkerchief which I had shown to the class when we were studying the War Poets. It was a commemorative item, fine silk, embroidered in one corner (which was edged with lace) with the dates 1914-18 , the 4 and the 8 being in Union Jack colours:

I remember first seeing it very well, and I remember thinking then how it seemed to sum things up, such a delicate, gaudy thing coming from that hell. I suppose we were looking for such 'souvenirs', such compacts of feeling in literature too, that is perhaps what it offers.

Her words express better than any of mine could one of the central forces of literature which, I have argued, is, must be, and can be without intellectual embarrassment, also central to criticism.

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