

## Ambiguity and the Poets\*

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A stranger meeting ambiguity for the first time might well be taken aback by her mixed reputation. She is disliked and avoided in some realms, whereas in others she is welcome. A philosopher like J. L. Austin will patrol the streets of language in order to identify ambiguity in his book, *How To Do Things with Words*. Ambiguity is the bane of translators, who must decide whether it is intentional or merely casual, and if casual, whether the author is careless or lazy or ignorant. We do not want ambiguity in legislation. Nor do we want it in our wills or in our financial affairs. (Lawyers, of course, like linguists, “[consider] ambiguity as productive because it triggers processes of disambiguation” [Bauer par. 6]) Nor do we want ambiguity in our traffic signs. A recent visitor from Australia, driving on the express highway around Toronto, noticed signs for collector lanes. He assumed—logically enough—that these were toll highways, collecting money, and so avoided them, overshot the city, and was late for dinner. In fact, collector lanes simply siphon off—that is, collect—traffic that is preparing to exit.

On the other hand, ambiguity is a useful and even welcome guest in some places. It is an excellent device for concealing views. The oracles are said to have used ambiguity regularly, though these turn out to be literary oracles more than historical ones, as far as we can tell. Macbeth’s witches offer a well-known later example. The gods are prone to ambiguity or amphibology, according to Chaucer’s *Criseyde*: “He hath not wel the goddes understonde/ For goddes speken in amphi-

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debcook01813.htm>>.

bologies,/ And, for a sooth, they tellen twenty lyes [lies]" (*Troilus and Criseyde* IV.1405-07). In academic life today, ambiguity also has its uses. Suppose a selection committee for a senior position at your university receives a letter of recommendation on behalf of Professor X. How does it read the sentence: "You will be fortunate indeed if you can get Professor X to work for you." Intentional ambiguity or not?

For a literary scholar and critic, the general dimensions of ambiguity can appear singularly difficult to map. It seems to be not so much an unknown land mass as a mythological creature, a Proteus, who changes shape whenever you wish to capture him—*Proteus ambiguus*, as Ovid calls him (*Metamorphoses* II.9). This many-sidedness is sometimes blamed on William Empson's well-known book, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, which he published in 1930, in his twenties. Most of his examples are drawn from poetry. It is not a taxonomy, as one might expect from the title. As his editor, John Haffenden, puts it: "*Seven Types of Ambiguity* [...] offers less a methodology than Empson's own methodised brilliance" (4).<sup>1</sup> Pertinent criticism at the time objected among other things that Empson "had [...] been too prodigal in his associative [...] interpretations," and that "he too often worried the parts without reference to the whole" (4). But the term spread, thanks largely to the so-called New Critics, though by 1947, one of them, Cleanth Brooks, wrote that he held no brief for the term "ambiguity" (or for "paradox" or "irony"): "Perhaps they are inadequate. Perhaps they are misleading. It is to be hoped in that case that we can eventually improve upon them" (195). By 1957, William K. Wimsatt and Brooks acknowledged that "the term 'ambiguity' was perhaps not altogether happy, for this term reflects the point of view of expository prose, where one meaning, and only one meaning, is wanted" (637). That is, the norm for poetry has always included what they call "multiple implication" (638)—a useful enough phrase, if clumsy. In 1958, Roman Jakobson accepted the term "ambiguity," defining it as "an intrinsic, inalienable character of any self-focussed message, briefly, a corollary feature of poetry" (85). He went on to quote Empson.<sup>2</sup> (Jakobson's essay, by the way, was first published in English.) Mean-

while, Empson revised his book somewhat for later editions, then about 1973 mischievously wrote to a friend:

Reviewers were telling me, as soon as *Ambiguity* came out, that not all poetry was ambiguous, and I could see that the method worked best where the authors had had some impulse or need for the process; but, as it had become my line, I went on slogging at it for two more books.<sup>3</sup> Then I thought I had given a rounded view of the subject, and unless challenged to debate had no need to go on about it. (*Argufying* 3)

In 1984, the debate was still not settled. Max Black, the philosopher of language, wrote that since Empson's book, the term "ambiguity" had been "inflated to the point of uselessness" (Black 176).

Aristotle, for whom ambiguity was a fault, laid all this out in his attacks on what W. B. Stanford calls the "deliberate abuse of language [...] verbal equivocations" (Stanford 7), whether by Sophists or by rhetoricians. But of course the Greek tragedies are full of ambiguities, for example, in Aeschylus where they are chiefly intended to deceive, and in Sophocles where they are chiefly unwitting.<sup>4</sup> In the nineteenth century, two German scholars attempted an end-run around Aristotle, by arguing that "Rhetorical Ambiguity and Poetic Ambiguity should be treated as quite distinct species" (6n2).<sup>5</sup> And yet, as a later classical scholar observes, for the logician, the rhetorician, and the poet, "the same formal analysis holds, though it is true that often the meshes of the rhetorical categories are too coarse to catch the suppler minnows of poetry" (6). Stanford leaves implicit his own double use of Greek *amphiboleus*, which also signifies casting a fishing-net.

I have run through a familiar literary history in order to set aside the very wide sense of the term "ambiguity." Any fictive construct, whether in prose or poetry, will exploit the richness of diction, syntax, genre, address, and so on, including possible ambiguities. It is the particular context that gives literary meaning, just as it is the particular context that gives meaning to a single word. Words in a poem exist in relation, never in isolation. "[T]here are no bad words or good words [in a poem]; there are only words in bad or good places," to quote Winifred Nowotny (32).<sup>6</sup>

For me, the most interesting and useful cases in poetry are particular ones where ambiguity gives rise to wider effects. I want to start with types of ambiguity familiar to both linguists and literary critics: lexical ambiguity, including ambiguity in oral performance, and semantic ambiguity. Then, a class of ambiguity using associative language or sound structure rather than signification, at least in the first instance. Then, very briefly, ambiguity in genre, before coming to an example of ambiguity governing an entire poem. I shall end with two modern examples of Aristotelian ambiguity.

But first, a cautionary note. The terms “ambiguity” and “indeterminacy” are not synonymous, though they may well overlap. Ambiguity chiefly signifies one or two or maybe three different meanings, with a few more in one type. Indeterminacy signifies indefiniteness.<sup>7</sup> In examples of logical ambiguity in literature, the fun lies in working out the alternatives, and further in working out the relation of the alternatives. Indeterminacy allows for many alternatives. Modernism is sometimes seen as especially given to indeterminacy, but modern writers include Robert Frost and Marianne Moore and the T. S. Eliot of *Four Quartets* and others for whom indeterminacy (and even ambiguity) is not a hallmark.

Most poems in Elizabeth Bishop’s remarkable first collection, *North & South*, were written in her twenties, including the example here, “Chemin de Fer,” whose first stanza offers an example of lexical ambiguity<sup>8</sup>:

Alone on the railroad track  
 I walked with pounding heart.  
 The ties were too close together  
 or maybe too far apart.

[...]

The hermit shot off his shot-gun  
 and the tree by his cabin shook.  
 Over the pond went a ripple,  
 The pet hen went chook-chook.

"Love should be put into action!"  
     screamed the old hermit.  
 Across the pond an echo  
     tried and tried to confirm it.     (7)

While the "ties" are obviously ambiguous (referring to the railroad track or to an emotional bond suggested by the pounding heart), the last stanza offers an example of ambiguity that occurs outside the poem, so to speak, as the word "action" rings in the reader's ear. What is that echo saying? What echo is the "I" of the poem, the persona, hearing? Is she hearing "action, action, action"? Or is she hearing "shun, shun, shun"? And if she is hearing both, what is the relation of "action" and "shun"?

Where two meanings are presented, the reader, I think, needs to ascertain whether they are opposites like black-white or contraries like black-green. And if they are contraries, what is the angle of difference between them? Shunning is not the opposite of action; the opposite of action is inaction. Shunning is a contrary, as with the old pairing of action versus contemplation (which is certainly not inaction). Then we recall that shunning can also be part of an action, and not just acoustically.

The device in this ballad poem seems to me to imitate a heart that is divided, for reasons indicated in the pun in stanza 1 on railroad ties and the metaphorical ties of a "pounding heart." That is, ambiguity here presents a mimesis of a divided heart or a divided mind.

Of course, the ambiguity in context is doing even more. The echo is trying "to confirm" the sentence but, as we know, the poor nymph Echo can't confirm anything. She is condemned to repeat and repeat. Here again is a mimesis, now suggested more tentatively, a mimesis of a heart that keeps repeating and repeating the same old alternatives. Acoustically the sounds do just that in our mind's ear.

This is lexical ambiguity, made richer by oral performance. There is of course the further ambiguity that the sentence is screamed by someone characterized only as a "dirty hermit," a figure out of ballad or folk tale, given the poem's generic behaviour and its metre. Do we

take the sentence at face value or not? And what about that adjective “dirty.” Does it signify merely “unkempt” in the usual way of hermits or is this an attribute of his mind? The lexical ambiguity here extends to character and genre.

In another example, ambiguity exists only temporarily, for a single line. Here is Milton, in the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*. They read:

Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit  
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal tast  
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe [...] (l.1-3)

And so on, in Milton’s masterly style, with its distinctive commanding rhythm, latinized syntax and much more. We are so familiar with these lines that we must stretch our minds and imagine a first-time reader in order to hear the brief ambiguity in the last word of line 1, “Fruit.” This first-time reader might well assume that the word carries its abstract meaning of “result,” so that we expect something like: ‘Of Man’s first Disobedience, and the Fruit/ Thereof that led to loss of Eden.’ But no. Instead, Milton breaks our expectations with the line-break—and for all poets, and especially for Milton, words at the start and finish of the line are worth attention. He moves to the literal meaning of “Fruit” as in the creation narrative in Genesis, the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. This lexical example is an ambiguity of scale, so to speak: one piece of fruit as against enormous results. Milton has thereby highlighted the implicit significance of the small decisions we make, how they may lead to much larger consequences.

Of course, the unobtrusive preposition offers a rich field for ambiguity. “If as a poet,” writes Christopher Ricks, “you seek the simplest and most permanent forms of language, you are bound to give special importance to prepositions and conjunctions—those humble fundamentals, *in, up* [...] *of*, and so on. If as a poet you are concerned above all with relations and relationships, you are bound to give special importance to those words which express relationships: prepositions and conjunctions” (120). And not only poets. At lunch one day at Victoria College, Northrop Frye told us that he had lain awake the

night before thinking about the differences between “break up” and “break down.” Besides Ricks’s essay on prepositions in Wordsworth, there is one by John Hollander titled “Of *of*: The Poetics of a Preposition,” from which I drew the Milton example. Here are some other instances, the first by Wallace Stevens from his poem “The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad.” The opening stanza sets the tone and the subject:

The time of year has grown indifferent.  
Mildew of summer and the deepening snow  
Are both alike in the routine I know.  
I am too dumbly in my being pent.  
[...]

The malady of the quotidian... [ellipsis sic] (81)

In Stevens’s memorable phrase from the third stanza, “the malady of the quotidian,” the “of” is quietly ambiguous. Its back-and-forth offers a mimesis of the state of mind afflicted by the malady of the quotidian, and raises the question of causation. Is the cause of this malady the dull routine of everyday (an outside cause)? Or is it caused by the person experiencing it rather than everyday life (an inside cause)? Or both, and in what proportion? Stevens’s phrase pinpoints the general malady in such a way that it covers various particular cases. Similarly with his phrase “a mind of winter” from his well-known poem “The Snow Man.”

Or think of the title of Northrop Frye’s best and best-known book, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Is this Frye’s invention of an anatomy of critical terms, approaches, concepts? Or is this structure, this anatomy, intrinsic to criticism, something that Frye has discovered? Or, as with the phrase, “the malady of the quotidian,” is it some combination of outside and inside causes? Frye’s answer to that lies, not surprisingly, with the metaphor of an “anatomy.”<sup>9</sup> Where there is a question of causation, the ambiguity of “of” can be very useful.

Sometimes oral performance uncovers ambiguity. There is a minor example in Wallace Stevens’s poem, “The Lack of Repose,” which is centered on a writer aware of the traditions behind him:

[...]. It is the grandfather he liked,  
With an understanding compounded by death

And the associations beyond death, even if only  
Time. What a thing it is to believe that  
One understands, in the intense disclosures  
Of a parent in the French sense. (269)

“In the French sense”? But a parent in the French sense is a *parent*, whereas in Stevens’s poem the word is not italicized, and so not read as a foreign word. Only at the end of the line do we realize that it is ambiguous in both sound and sense. We then reread the line, remembering that *parent* in French is not only a synonym for “parent” in English, but also signifies a relative, a kinsman. The angle of difference between the two meanings is not large, though it is noticeable. It allows Stevens in a very short space to compress an entire argument about a line of tradition: our literal family and our literary family, the difference between our parent’s generation and the generation of our grandparents and beyond.

Ambiguity in acting, incidentally, includes more than oral performance. Gesture, bearing, and so forth can make a character appear ambiguous. More interesting are known stage effects, especially the playing of female roles by male actors in Shakespeare’s time, and the doubling of roles in a theatre company. Stephen Booth has some fruitful observations to make on this latter practice in contemporary performances of Shakespeare.

As for ambiguity in sentence structure, Richard Wilbur’s poem “The Beautiful Changes,” the title-poem of his 1947 collection, is often cited (*Collected Poems* 462). Is “beautiful” an adjective or is it a noun? Note what a difference this makes if the poem is concerned with the beauty of a human being, say, a woman called Mary. As adjective, it might imply ‘the beautiful changes in Mary’ as against the unattractive changes in Mary. As noun, it suggests a much wider understanding: that our ideas of the beautiful themselves change, including the changing beauty to be found in Mary. This is ambiguity that moves us



from stereotype to the enrichment and subtlety of a memorable love-poem.

One area of ambiguity that acts differently is the area of association. I don't mean a word's field of association, as in the illustrative quotations in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. I mean sound association, the area that writers of charm verse exploit—all those lulling incantatory lines, say, on sleep. (Tennyson's "The Lotos-Eaters" is well known).<sup>10</sup> My example is from a short poem on the autumn season, again by Stevens, called "Metamorphosis" (238-39). As the language breaks up in the last line, the associative process that is common to charm poetry takes over. Logic comes into play only after association has done its work, as with dream language:

Yillow, yillow, yillow,  
 Old worm, my pretty quirk,  
 How the wind spells out  
 Sep - tem - ber... .

[...]  
 Oto - out - bre.

[...]  
 The street lamps

Are those that have been hanged,  
 Dangling in an illogical  
 To and to and fro  
 Fro Niz - nil - imbo.

The last line sounds like one of those word-puzzles offered to newspaper readers: how many words can be made of these letters or syllables? Fro to frozen, Niz to frozen nose (French *nez*), nil as death (by hanging) and as zero temperature, then a state of being in limbo—in short, November in the northern temperate zone. The last syllable of November is omitted. Stevens has prepared for this disintegration that is part of metamorphosis with the refrain lines of September and October that divide the syllables and end with Brr. The last stanza

apparently can't make it to the end, having died metaphorically and left any Brr behind.<sup>11</sup>

All these effects of ambiguity contribute to the full reading of a poem, but I want to offer an example where ambiguity is at the heart of a poem, where we cannot read it at all without thinking about ambiguity. This type of ambiguity is like ambiguity of genre, which is more considerable in its consequences and more difficult to do. Henry James's extraordinary short novel *The Turn of the Screw* is a *locus classicus*. It is as if a coroner were listening to evidence about the death of a child. Who or what or what combination of causes killed this child? How reliable is the chief witness? Or, in generic terms, is this a tragedy or is it a conspiracy novel? Writing about doubles presents a special case of back-and-forth ambiguity, sometimes resolved, as in "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," sometimes not, as in José Saramago's recent brilliant novel, *The Double*.

In poetry, my example of an ambiguity governing an entire reading is at once very simple and very difficult. It consists of Blake's two familiar paired poems, "The Lamb" and "The Tyger," the first from his *Songs of Innocence* and the second from his *Songs of Experience*. It is not so much a question of genre as of the questioner himself:

#### The Lamb

Little Lamb who made thee  
 Dost thou know who made thee?  
 Gave thee life & bid thee feed.  
 By the stream & o'er the mead;  
 Gave thee clothing of delight,  
 Softest clothing wooly bright;  
 Gave thee such a tender voice,  
 Making all the vales rejoice:  
 Little Lamb who made thee  
 Dost thou know who made thee.

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,  
 Little Lamb I'll tell thee;  
 He is called by thy name,  
 For he calls himself a Lamb:

He is meek & he is mild,  
 He became a little child:  
 I a child & thou a lamb.  
 We are called by his name.  
     Little Lamb God bless thee,  
     Little Lamb God bless thee.

(Plate 8)

### The Tyger

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,  
 In the forests of the night:  
 What immortal hand or eye,  
 Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies  
 Burnt the fire of thine eyes?  
 On what wings dare he aspire?  
 What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,  
 Could twist the sinews of thy heart?  
 And when thy heart began to beat,  
 What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,  
 In what furnace was thy brain?  
 What the anvil? what dread grasp,  
 Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears  
 And water'd heaven with their tears:  
 Did he smile his work to see?  
 Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,  
 In the forests of the night:  
 What immortal hand or eye,  
 Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

(Plate 42)

Blake is one of the rare artists who excel in two media: poetry and visual art—for him, chiefly engraving. He illustrated these two poems, and the tiger illustration is especially noteworthy. It has nothing to do

with the fearful creature depicted in the poem. Blake knew well how to draw fearful creatures, but the tiger we encounter at the bottom of the page, after reading the poem, is an amiable household pet, a child's shabby stuffed toy. Blake has foregrounded the great disparity between the verbal and the visual tiger. An ambiguous creature indeed.

As for "*The Lamb*, usually considered a fine example of namby-pamby, [it] is a poem of profound and perilous ambiguity," to quote Harold Bloom; it "raises for us the crucial problem of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, the pairing of matched poems, here *The Lamb* and *The Tyger*" (33). Throughout the series, Blake implicitly raises the question of the relation between innocence and experience. Innocence turns out to be a highly ambiguous term. It is very easy to assign it to children, and then say that they acquire experience and grow up in body and mind and spirit. What happens to a sense of innocence in the adult? Does it mature into a sense of goodness—not the same thing as innocence? Or is it lost? What kinds of innocence are disingenuous or even dangerous in an adult? Blake's wider implications are clear from his evocation of Jesus as Lamb. Christ the Lamb of God, yes, and familiar from the *Agnus Dei* in many a requiem. (*Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi [...]. Lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world [...].*) But the Lamb of God is also a sacrificial lamb, as we know. In fact the flock of sheep illustrating Blake's poem may well be headed for the dinner table. In short, ambiguity here gives rise to religious or at least ethical thought far beyond its usual domain.

My final two examples are at the opposite end of the scale, and are a little frivolous. Ambiguity in Aristotle included different significations for one word. Philo followed him in this, giving as example the word "'dog' which means a terrestrial animal, a marine monster [dogfish] and a celestial star."<sup>12</sup> Some ancient philosophers also included the ambiguity of one proper name used for different people. For a modern illustration of ambiguity in proper names, I recommend John Ashbery's poem, "Memories of Imperialism," where he conflates Admiral George Dewey, conqueror of Manila with Melvil Dewey,

inventor of the Dewey decimal system used in library classification.  
Thus:

Dewey took Manila  
And soon after invented the decimal system  
that keeps libraries from collapsing even unto this day.  
A lot of mothers immediately started naming their male offspring "Dewey,"  
which made him queasy. He was already having second thoughts about  
imperialism.

In his dreams he saw library books with milky numbers  
on their spines floating in Manila Bay.  
Soon even words like "vanilla" or "mantilla" would cause him to vomit.  
The sight of a manila envelope precipitated him  
into his study, where all day long, with the blinds drawn,  
he would press fingers against temples, muttering "What have I done?"  
all the while. (34)

As for different significations of a single word, and more, here is  
Richard Wilbur on the word "punch" in his charming illustrated  
rhymes for children, *Opposites* and *More Opposites*:

The opposite of *punch*, I think,  
Might be some sort of *fruitless drink*,  
Unless we say that *punch* means *hit*,  
In which event the opposite  
Is *counter-punch* or *shadow-box*.  
Or if we think of *punching* clocks,  
I guess the opposite of *punch*  
Is *always to be out to lunch*.  
What if we capitalize the P?  
*Judy's* the answer then, since she  
And *Punch*, although they chose to marry,  
Are each the other's adversary—  
Each having, ever since they wed,  
Pounded the other on the head.  
How many things we've thought of! Whew!  
I'm getting punchy. That will do. (More Opposites 21)<sup>13</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Quoted from an unpublished and undated letter to Roger Sale (c. 1973).

<sup>2</sup>Jakobson adds: "Let us repeat with Empson: 'The machinations of ambiguity [I like that metaphor "machinations"] are among the very roots of poetry.'" The quotation from Empson is from the 1947 edition (np).

<sup>3</sup>He refers to *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), and *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951).

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Stanford 137-73, and see *passim*.

<sup>5</sup>The dissertations, the "two best" on the subject, are *Die Amphiboile bei Aeschylos und Sophokles* by J. Pokorny (Mähren, 1884-85) and *Die Amphibolien bei den drei griechischen Tragikern* by L. Trautner (Nürnberg, 1907) (cf. Stanford 6-7). "Aristotle discusses ambiguity in his *Topics, De Sophisticis Elenchis and Rhetoric*" (Stanford 5).

<sup>6</sup>I hardly need to remind readers of *Connotations* that dictionary meaning in the *Oxford English Dictionary* consists of grammatical function, etymology, signification (or what most people understand "meaning" to be), and illustrative quotations. These latter are invaluable for a word's field of association, which a translator needs to master.

<sup>7</sup>Marjorie Perloff is sometimes cited in this context. She does say that Empson's "famous 'seven types of ambiguity'—that is, the multiple layers of meaning words have in poetry [...]—give way to what we might call an 'irreducible ambiguity'—the creation of labyrinths that have no exit" (34). But she also distinguishes between her use of the term "indeterminacy" and Jacques Derrida's: "'Indeterminacy,' as I use the term in this book, is taken to be the quality of particular art works in a particular period of history rather than as the central characteristic of all texts at all times" (17n19).

<sup>8</sup>Lexical ambiguity for me is the ambiguity of a single word in a given context. A lexicon ideally has no ambiguities; lexicographers try to eliminate them. What a lexicon indicates is the possibility of ambiguity.

<sup>9</sup>Anatomy is both the science of the structure of the body, and a skeleton or bodily frame itself.

<sup>10</sup>The primitive form of this is called babble by Frye, who explores it in *Anatomy of Criticism*. "The rhetorical analysis founded on ambiguity in new critics is a lyric-centered criticism which tends, often explicitly, to extract the lyrical rhythm from all genres" (273). He goes on to analyse "the oracular associative process" that he has "identified as one of the initiatives of lyric [...]". One of the most direct products of this is a type of religious poetry marked by a concentration of sound and ambiguity of sense, of which the most familiar/ modern example is the poetry of Hopkins" (293-94).

<sup>11</sup>Frye observes in *Anatomy of Criticism* that "verbal association is still a factor of importance even in rational thought" (see 334-35).

<sup>12</sup>*De Plantatione Noe* 37. 151, referred to in Wolfson 168.

<sup>13</sup>Wilbur also knows full well that he is introducing doubleness in another way in his word "fruitless" and in his phrase "out to lunch."

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