Ambiguity, the Literary, and Close Reading

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Abstract: In his article "Ambiguity, the Literary, and Close Reading" David G. Brooks approaches the matter of literary ambiguity from two directions: firstly by presenting the question of what we might learn if we look at ambiguity not so much from the angle of the author as that of the reader, a question which may appear obvious and inoffensive on the surface, but which becomes intricate and captivating as Brooks, arguing that literary ambiguity cannot be discussed without attention to the idea of close reading, peels layer upon layer of commonsensical assumptions away from reading practice, to arrive at the point where ambiguity, like knowledge itself, can be seen as an affect of desire, and its resolution not so much a matter of arrival at truth as of exhaustion or relinquishment of pursuit; and secondly by asking what it is that artifice adds to the semantic operation of the literary text, and proposing that one of the most consistent tributaries to ambiguation in the literary text is to be found in the veneer or asemantic cross-current created by what Roman Jakobson has called the "poetic function" of language.

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Directly or indirectly, literary ambiguity has been a subject of commentary and concern since Aristotle. Since the nineteenth century it has received more concerted attention, particularly with the advent of *Symbolisme*, stimulated by the re-framing of the question of the literary in Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" (Poe *passim*), and reaching a key point in Mallarmé's "Crise de vers." The matter was re-approached by the New Criticism in the early twentieth century, most notably in Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, and taken to further levels with the coming of deconstruction. Making some use, in its later stages, of Jakobson's "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," the argument below is situated between the *Symboliste*, Empsonian, and Derridean positions. Attending primarily to the nature of ambiguity itself, it examines, by way of a consideration of close reading, the neglected question of the reader's desire and ability to perceive ambiguity, and then, via Jakobson, considers the "literary" as a matter of what "Art" adds, and what it is that may generate this essentially non- or a-semantic cross-current in a text.

There are many modes of literary ambiguity. Any attempt to define such a thing, as if it were a thing, will find itself either shutting out several others or dealing with many that it might not at first have intended to deal with. Even at the very outset we must consider that there are two terms to be addressed, separately, before we try to bring them together, but even this is a simplification. I shall approach the matter in two parts, examining firstly the question of textual ambiguity and its essential relation to reading, and then the manner in which this operates within and is further refined by the literary. We might say, for example, that ambiguity is inherent in the text, but even here we will have to determine at the outset whether what we mean is that it is an effect produced by certain tropes or textual practices, or whether it is somehow inherent in textuality itself. We might say, on the other hand, that ambiguity is an effect of reading, if for no other reason than that nothing can be known about a text until some attempt has been made to decipher it. But each of these avenues begs the question of the literary itself: whether by "literary" ambiguity we are referring merely to textual, as opposed to such other modes of ambiguity as the visual or the aural, or whether we are referring to modes of ambiguity particular to a certain kind of text, as opposed to other kinds. Do we need, for example, to consider at the outset where one mode of text — the "literary" — stops and other modes start?

My principal proposition is that textual ambiguity is in some direct proportion to attentness of reading (I use the word "attent" as Ted Hughes does, in his poem "Thrushes": "Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn / More coiled steel than living" 52): that, in a sense, ambiguity is close reading, if we take "close" reading to be open, as in unmotivated, concerned to find what is there rather than what we wish to find there, aware at the same time that nothing is there — can be there — without us, and that we are not in some manner prepared (both as in being ready, and in having been made ready) to find there. Close reading is dependent upon and motivated by a skepticism toward apparent meanings which takes the form of attempts either to verify apparent meanings, or to reject or set aside apparent meanings upon solicitation of further information. Whether or not we can therefore construe close reading as an attempt to find the ultimate or "true" meaning of a text ("true," throughout this article, will be used under erasure, in the absence of a better term), its guiding principle could thus be said to be in attempting to find ambiguity where there appears to be none, being suspicious of its apparent absence, until and in the hope that one runs into a kind of brick wall, a point where the text refuses to allow us alternatives: as if, in close reading, we were in some sense fleeing certainty, albeit in the hope and pursuit of some final, incontrovertible certainty. Hypothetically, this point where the text allows us no alternatives — where no further ambiguity seems to exist, where no choice of meaning seems apparent — is a point of "truth," a point of "clarity." But we can never be sure of this. We should all the time be prepared to find that what I have called the brick wall, when and if at last we reach it, may be in ourselves, and that the "truth" is in this sense something we do not so much attain at last, as if it were a destination, an object, as it is a point of exhaustion of energy or imagination, something we can accept only provisionally, as a limit the nature of which is

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not itself ultimately knowable. And where the nature of truth itself remains in question — that is, whether truth is, in the manner just described, a limit, or simply a point of exhaustion, an end to our means of seeing beyond it — we cannot speak of an end to ambiguity. Perhaps — and provided that the "truth" as I have been describing it is something that the reader recognizes — what is ultimately necessary is some shift in our understanding of "truth" towards something that is perhaps always pro- visional (although to accept this term "provisional" still places us within the province of that earlier understanding of "truth," is still to hold the truth from us, still to posit a "further," "deeper" truth that is not provisional in this way), or, better, as something which is fabricated by, and in this sense is, this limit or exhaustion, a constantly changing (or at least constantly subject to change) horizon, as in skin of knowing, made by this pushing, this close reading.

Truth, then, might come in this way to be seen as process, rather than as something abstracted from process. And meaning, that thing which truth is supposed to give or to allow, will have to be re- construed accordingly as gerund, as a noun which is also a verb. It is traditional to speak of meaning, much as we speak of truth, as a thing (albeit very often an abstract thing), an object to be discovered, something which the reader finds in the text, or extracts from it, rather than something which he or she makes in collaboration with it. Yet it is arguably far closer to the nature of the act to speak of the meaning of a text as that activity upon which the reader engages in the process of reading: that the reader means the text, and that we should speak of meaning as we speak of cooking, say, or swim- ming (one means the text as one swims the Channel). Thus, the very notion of ambiguity is itself am- biguous: whether, for example, it is a fixed entity, a matter upon which there might be some sort of consensus, or whether ambiguity is instead a matter of individual perception; whether there can be an ambiguity that we are unaware of, that we have not yet perceived as such, or whether, by ambiguity, we mean simply — or also mean — an unresolved question, something that we sense already that we do not know, something that we understand already that we do not understand. (These latter possibil- ities are particularly problematic, since they seem to require a knowledge of what we do not know, an understanding of what we do not understand.) Does there, for example, have to be a particular struc- ture or set of characteristics to or of that thing we don't understand, to or of that not-understanding? To construe ambiguity as something which has to have certain features in order to be classified as such in the first place would seem to be rather defeating the point, risking shutting out some of the very things the term, in other respects, exists in order to describe. I suspect that most of the time we speak of ambiguity we are referring, if not actually to crude ambiguities, then at least to larger and more obvious ones, belonging to earlier stages of our investigating, understanding, or meaning some- thing, and that ambiguity is as much a matter of perception as it is of something to be perceived.

To approach this in another way, how can we be sure that something in a text is not ambiguous? In many instances it would seem appropriate, or at least exigent, to concede that the matters that a text sets before us are so simple that the issue of possible ambiguity is something that we can put aside, but in many others it may be that something does not appear to be ambiguous because we do not choose to see it in this manner, or do not know enough about it to perceive its ambiguity, or that it has served adequately the purpose we put it to, or simply because we have not looked at it closely enough. Ambiguity, this is to say, might also be a matter of tolerance and of will to perceive, perhaps even of will in the first place, by which I do not only mean, although I also mean, that a certain will and intention are inevitably involved in our acts of perception, and that these might be satisfied before any ambiguity or question of ambiguity arises. How stable does an ambiguity have to be? Is some- thing truly ambiguous if it is only briefly ambiguous, an ambiguity on its way to becoming something else? And before we rush into an affirmation here — to say that an ambiguity does not have to be sta- ble, that it can be something on its way to something else — we should be aware that this might, po- tentially, make ambiguity a stage in any and every act of perception, and so, potentially, something that exists in proportion to the will or intention to perceive — that it is as much a function of percep- tion as it is something itself to be perceived. And yet, should we take the opposite tack, even a stable ambiguity may be a contradiction in terms. If an ambiguity is stable — always the same when one approaches it — is it not arguably something other than an ambiguity? Whatever else it may be, per- haps we should say that ambiguity is, or is something that occurs to — is an obstacle that presents itself before — an unstable state of knowledge or understanding that is seeking to become a stable

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one. Knowledge is exigent, is always — or is always under suspicion of being — knowledge sufficient for our purposes. What we deem to be knowledge is not necessarily all that is to be known, but all that needs to be known, and is often called knowledge, taken to be knowledge, when it has satisfied such basic requirements as determined our search for it in the first place. When our question has been answered, this is to say, we are inclined to deem that answer knowledge. No matter that it may not have been a very informed or intelligent or perceptive or demanding question in the first place, or that there may have been a great deal more to know. We must, that is, in any discussion of knowing, separate in our own minds the idea of knowing for its own sake, and knowing for particular purposes — and then, of course, acknowledge the possibility that these things can never really be separated, that even knowing for its own sake operates within parameters that determine and limit what is to be found.

Much of the above has implied that reading is a pursuit of knowledge. Whilst I think that this is a defensible position, I can also see the point in an argument that there are stages to a reading process, stages that, depending upon the intentions of the reader, might also be seen as categories of reading; that one reads, initially, a new — as in unfamiliar — text initially in order to set in place for oneself its broad features, to get a sense, as it were, of the What of the thing before one explores the Why of it — that one seeks, in Eliot's terms, an apprehension of the thing before one goes about a comprehension of it. But these (again) are broad categories indeed and only serve to give us an apprehension of the question. In truth, I suspect, both processes are always in play, and it may be better not to pretend that they are separate processes at all. We have — to return to the opening sentence of this paragraph — to define "pursuit," we have to define "knowledge." Things become the less stable — and the more ambiguous — the more closely we look at them, which is, or has been, precisely my point. It can be argued that the more one pursues the "truth" into the fabric of a text in this manner, the more it is the truth of the fabric, rather than of the text, that one finds, and that since all texts are made of the same basic fabric, language, the closer one's close readings — the further one pursues them — the more they will tend to converge: because every text, and every meaning that any text attempts consciously to convey, confesses, betrays or bears traces of its own condition, the no-thing-ness, meaning-less-ness from which it derives, every text/reading is ultimately the same reading. But this is only the case if we see the reading as the arrival, not the journey, for the journey is always through "real" and "local" conditions. It turns our attention again to the ends of reading, and the notion of "truth" and "meaning" as substantives, entities rather than process, and as we have seen there are substantial arguments against this. There is also the possibility that the close reader, pursuing the text this far, will feel — notice — that something else has happened. Every text invokes the world, is contiguous with it, synecdochic of it, not only in this sense that the nature of textual meaning and truth reveal the nature of meaning and truth beyond the text, but also — if this is in fact different — in the sense that every text, opened by the kind of questioning that close reading brings to it, serves as a window onto something else, something greater, beyond it, is a mode of entry (or exit: the wind blows both ways). Texts may be made of the same basic fabric, language, but they are made of many other fabrics as well — or, rather, language, as language, is not the only fiber woven through them. This, I think, takes us more specifically to the verge of the literary, and so introduces the second part of my discussion.

But first some reiteration and clarification. It might be argued that this account of literary ambiguity excludes the possibility that there is pleasure to be found in an awareness of ambiguity for its own sake, a pleasure that does not push toward resolution, since, as I have myself implied, there is ultimately no final resolution of the text to be elicited. While I would not in any way wish to derogate such pleasure, and while this position is in one respect very close to my own in its relation of the perception of ambiguity to desire, to see these points as pertinent involves something very much like a category error. Firstly, it is doubtful whether we can refer to this as an "awareness" of ambiguity, rather than an assumption of it, since something cannot be known to be an ambiguity until it is tested, and to "know" that something is an ambiguity implies that a "push for resolution" — albeit, as it might be in such circumstances, a fairly weak or nominal one — has already been made. And secondly — and setting aside the question as to whether one has in mind that there is a "truth" as in the "true" or "final" meaning of fiction — it has of course been a premise throughout my argumentation that all

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truths, whether within or beyond what might be designated "fiction," are nonetheless provisional, and thus potentially "fiction," and I have use the term "truth," accordingly, without any presumed capital "t." There may be a better term for something so provisional and horizontal — i.e., so much more a goad to further questioning than an objective one believes one might reach — and readers who feel that they have found it are most welcome to substitute it.

Although there is no reason why the observations above should not apply to all manner of texts, one must at the same time admit that the question of close reading is far more likely to arise with certain kinds of texts than with others. It would be risky to attempt to specify these types, but one might begin with the literary, the sacred, and perhaps the legal. This, of course, has much to do with the kinds of needs, and questions, that the reader brings to them, but before these it has to do with what it is, or might be, in "literary" works, that makes people feel they can or should bring such things to them. Jakobson, in his famous article "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," speaks of the six functions of language. Dividing the speech act into six parts — the addresser, the message, the addressee, the context of the message, the contact through which it is made, and the code in which it is delivered — he attributes a "function" to each: the emotive for the addresser, the conative for the addressee, the referential for the context, the phatic for the contact, the metalingual for the code. For the message itself, he speaks of the poetic function: "focus on the message for its own sake, is the poetic function of language. This function cannot be productively studied out of touch with the general problems of language, and, on the other hand, the scrutiny of language requires a thorough consideration of its poetic function. Any attempt to reduce the sphere of poetic function to poetry or to confine poetry to poetic function would be a delusive oversimplification. Poetic function is not the sole function of verbal art but only its dominant, determining function, whereas in all other verbal activities it acts as a subsidiary, accessory constituent. This function, by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects. Hence, when dealing with poetic function, linguistics cannot limit itself to the field of poetry" (1263-64).

We might note the first half of the fourth sentence here, that "Poetic function is not the sole function of verbal art but only its dominant, determining function," and, noting also the central positioning of the word "art," draw out the clear assertion that this half-sentence makes, i.e. that poetic function is the dominant, determining function of verbal art. Jakobson gives three examples to establish the nature of this poetic function. Odd and contentious as they are, it might help us to look at them:

"Why do you always say *Joan and Margery*, yet never *Margery and Joan*? Do you prefer Joan to her twin sister?" "Not at all, it just sounds smoother." In a sequence of two coordinate names, as far as no rank problems interfere, the precedence of the shorter name suits the speaker, unaccountably for him, as a well-ordered shape of the message. A girl used to talk about "the horrible Harry." "Why horrible?" "Because I hate him." "But why not *dreadful*, *terrible*, *frightful*, *disgusting*?" "I don't know why, but *horrible* fits better." Without realizing it, she clung to the poetic device of paronomasia. The political slogan "I like Ike" … succinctly structured, consists of three monosyllables and counts three diphthongs … each of them symmetrically followed by one consonantal phoneme … The make-up of the three words presents a variation: no consonantal phonemes in the first word, two around the diphthong in the second, and one final consonant in the third. A similar dominant nucleus … was noticed by Hymes in some of the sonnets of Keats. Both cola of the trisyllabic formula "I like / Ike" rhyme with each other, and the second of the two rhyming words is fully included in the first one (echo rhyme) … a paronomastic image of a feeling which totally envelops its object. (1264)

The poetic function, in short, is language looking at itself, composing itself in the mirror of itself.

Jakobson makes quite clear that he isn't speaking of poetry alone, but of literary art more generally. It is the centrality of this "poetic" function which distinguishes the "literary" from the "non-literary" in the first place, though this of course, as he seems also to admit, is to beg the question of degree — that is, that every text, every act of communication for that matter, manifests the poetic function to some extent (see, e.g., Barthes's description of intertextuality in his "The Death of the Author": the idea that all our communications are influenced by communications we have heard in the past, and a judgment as to which of them have been more effective [1468]). This of course still begs a further and equally important question, as to what mysterious powers — we, probably, as people who discuss such things (or perhaps it is, after all, market forces, the publishers, the "literary" agents) — deter-

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mine the point at which a text manifests this function sufficiently for it to enter the realms of the "literary," but the basic point should be fairly clear, that it is this, the poetic function, which, the question of degree aside, distinguishes the literary from the non-literary text: novels, plays, look into their own mirrors, if not just as much then at least in the same kinds of ways in which poems do.

Although he might have been the first to name it such, Jakobson was hardly the first to have noted this function. Indeed some had turned it into a matter of mystery, even mysticism. Poe addressed this same issue in slightly different terms in his essay "The Philosophy of Composition" implying that language has its own mysteries, and that one can only discover them if one can quell the human desire to manipulate that language for its own purposes in things like messages, etc. (744-45). Perhaps Poe had discovered, and simply thought about a little further, something that most writers in almost any genre discover, that the text sometimes seems to have a mind of its own: that what the poet wants to do with a poem, for example, or wants the poem to do, is not always what the poem itself seems to want to do. It is this apparent will, this apparent mind, in the textual object, and in particular in the poetic object, that intrigued the *Symbolistes*, leading Mallarmé (849) to go so far as to suggest that the real point of poetry was to expose and express this mind, and that the poem only really pursued its own purposes when — did not really come into being until — the "message" or "meaning" function had been stilled. If the point of the poem is to convey — encode — a message, and the point of reading the poem is to extract that message, then why go to the trouble of putting it into — hiding it within — the poem in the first place? Why not simply scrawl the message on a scrap of paper and be done with it? Is it not the point of poetry, as poetry, something else, something other than message? Of course, some will say that the poetic function exists in order to enhance the message, to ensure that it is presented in its most powerful form, and certainly that is a classical position — "what oft was thought but ne'er so well express'd" (Pope, "An Essay on Criticism" l. 298) — but, and it would be hard for me to explain why, even if I could, in just a few sentences, I think that this won't wash. Not only is it a little like asserting, by the back door (and much as we might secretly appreciate it when it seems to be so), the transparency of language, which, after Lacan, Kristeva, Derrida, is hard to do, but it does nothing to explain the power itself, and, as far as the matter of ambiguity is concerned, it leads us into a rather strange place.

The very concern to discuss ambiguity, the perception that there is ambiguity, that some things are ambiguous in a literary text, bespeaks a desire for meaning — I do not yet speak of a clarification of meaning — that, if Jakobson and Poe and Mallarmé *et al* are even to a slight extent right, may be a sort of literary misprision, a misprision of or about the literary text in the reader/critic's mind in the first place, a sense that meaning is or should be in some manner one of the text's principal concerns, when, when it comes to distinguishing the "literary" from the "non," it might be something quite different that we have to call upon. Of course, to throw out the question of meaning from the literary text is very close to absurd, and I am not really suggesting any such thing. I argue as I do only to highlight the issue of what art adds. In as much as one looks for and finds "meaning" in a literary text (and of course one does; that is the point, after all), it will derive from a combined effect of the signifiers of "meaning" or "message" that the artist has intentionally or inadvertently placed there — his or her attempt to convey — and what art, this textual looking-in-the-mirror, adds.

What art adds is complicated and multifarious. It is, if you like, the whole field of what Jakobson has called the poetic function of language, provided we realize that his own examples are very slight indeed, and only the beginnings of an exploration of this area. My intention is not to elaborate them, but to offer something else about — an alternate approach to — ambiguity. Each of these many, many things that one could list in the arsenal of the poetic function is, after all, a sign. The "I" of "Ike," for example, and the way it is echoed in "like," etc., is a sign, just as is the repetition of an image or motif or brief structural signature in a novel. And these signs not only taunt us, haunt us, into our old habits of meaning (gerund), or meaning-making, but they also overlay any signs that the author, or the whole system of authorship, all the authors that make up the author, might have set down for us. At the very least, or very best, this gives us, as it were, two layers of suggestion that are not aligned — it is hard to see how they could be, or indeed why they should be — and when we find layers of meaning or signification that are not aligned we have ambiguity. What art adds could in this sense be said to be a kind of glaze over the level at which "message" might be said to function, a glaze which does

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not necessarily obscure the message, but seems to haunt it with something that it (the message) is not. That very thing which might be said to distinguish the "literary" from the "non-literary" — and again I would emphasize that this is always and only a matter of degree, arbitrated by fashion, by the market, as much as by any clear laws of genre — brings to it and ensures it of, an inherent destabilization which is, surely, a precondition of ambiguity in the first place.

As a way of conclusion, it might help us to determine a little more about the nature of this ambiguity to contemplate briefly the question as to where the devices we normally identify with the poetic function — assonance, say, and alliteration, repetition, return, permutation, paronomasia, etc., and perhaps more importantly the metrical and rhythmical events that underpin and extend these — come from. They may have their origin, as many have speculated, in oral culture, in mnemonic devices, devices to enable people to remember the text in the first place. They may have — and this is not an either/or matter — their origins in music, and represent an ekphrasis-like desire within every text at one and the same time to admit and to stretch the skin, the limits of language. But the origins of at least some of these devices may be even earlier and more primal. I myself am inclined to think that what the poetic function actually does is to remind us of, to bring to or represent within the text, something of the liminal space at the edge or threshold of language. In searching for a conclusion to this paper — trying to conclude the unconcludable — I remembered a passage I had written in one of my notebooks several years ago, in which I expressed this point better than I could do right now, and so I think I might end with it:

A place. A site. It is 5.00am. Since 3.39 I have been lying awake and for the last hour or more going over and over in my mind the same few lines of a poem I began yesterday. Obsessively, over and over, though I think already I have done all I can with them. As if — as has only just occurred to me — it were not the words themselves, not the meaning of them, so much as something in the rhythm, or the sequence of sounds. All of my writing life I have done this … a few lines, a sentence, sometimes only a few words or phrases, as if the activity, the mind's action with these words, these rhythms, somehow sustained me — or as if one were not only trying to polish them (that is often already done), or even to try to get used to them … but somehow trying to get through them. I thought I knew this before: that one was trying to get through them, as in along them, to what might or should come after them, as if by simple, obsessive repetition they could be forced to grow into whatever they seemed to be holding within themselves, or break through the barrier at the (temporary) end of them — some organic-*cum*-Deep-Image theory of poetry — but have only just now realized that "through" in this other sense: of going through the lines or phrases to something behind the rhythm and sound and fragmentariness (the deep but incomplete meaningness of the fragment): to something of which it is the token and residue. Because only just now has it occurred to me that it might have a connection, its roots, in something far earlier, the moment or hour, or maybe it is the weeks or months, when one first falls in love with language, the rhythms of it, the sequence of sounds (as I remember my own child doing, repeating the same simple sequence of sounds *ad nauseam* in the back seat of the car...), and presumably, plausibly, goes over them obsessively like this, and that one of the things we do, or at least I do, in writing, is to go back to, or try to get back to — or perhaps it is to recreate, reiterate — this place or site or time: that one remembers it, even when — mostly when — one does not know that it is memory, and that that is what one is doing. And a further thought, an extension of this: that that moment, that obsession, that love, is a kind of bridge, belonging as it does as much to an earlier, pre-linguistic time, as it does to the time after it, when language would become all that it does; that for a moment, then, language, before one really has it, is a thing, a new discovery in, and so, briefly, a part of, that earlier place, not this. And that, in this way, in the making of poems, as presumably, in some other aspect, in the making of stories, one is (also) going back, however much one might also be trying to go forward.

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