English Poetry: A Journey from Obscurity to Ambiguity

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The machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry.
(Empson, W. 1955: 21)

Meaning, particularly in literature, is a three-dimensional concept – the meaning of a word, of an utterance, and of a text. Possible meanings of words contribute to the meaning of utterance, which is an act performed by the writer. The relationship however is not that simple and straight, as the utterance may, in turn, condition the meaning of the word. Finally, the two together contribute to the meaning of the text. Meaning of a text – what it is and what it is not – has been a problematic area of practical criticism, and this has been the inspiration behind several schools of criticism. The emotive elements of language make it "vague, protean, fluctuating phenomena", something that we accept in literature but refuse to do so in sciences. The lyric, oriented toward the first person, is intimately linked with the emotive function; epic poetry, focused on the third person, strongly involves the referential function of language. The traditional model of language was confined to three functions – emotive, conative, and referential – and the three apexes – the first person of the addresser, the second person of the addressee, and the third person (Buhler, 1933).

> *… the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic, and the aesthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader. From this polarity it follows that the literary work cannot be identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two. The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader – though this in turn is acted upon by the different patterns of the text. The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader.*
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> *(Iser,1988:189)*

It is reasonable to presuppose that author, text and reader are closely interconnected in a relationship that is to be conceived as an ongoing process that produces something that had not existed before. For some, meaning of a text is the author's intention; for others meaning of a text is what the text means, not what the author intends; and for yet others meaning of a text is what the reader understands, not what the author intends or what the text means.

> *There are three possibilities. It might be found in using the text as evidence of writer's intention: what is significant is what the writer means by the text. Alternatively, one might take the view that the text signals its own intrinsic meaning, whatever the writer might have intended: what is significant is what the text means. Or, thirdly, one might say that what is*

> *significant is what a text means to the reader, whatever the writer may have intended, or whatever the text itself may objectively appear to mean.*
>
> *(Widdowson, G. 1992: viii)*

Meaning for Saussure is based on differences – 'language is a system of differences' and the meaning of an element depends on how it differs from other elements of the system that can replace it on the paradigmatic scale. Deconstructionists attempt to deconstruct the author's intention by reversing the process of creation. I. A. Richards (1929) warns against individual readings into the poem and talks about respecting the autonomy of the poem. Cox and Dyson (1965) appear to believe that poems have their own independent existence. The New Criticism locates literary meaning in the formal features of the text, rather than in the author's intention or the reader's response. By implication, *"meaning [is] the property of the poem itself as an autonomous artefact and [is] in principle recoverable from the text, totally and intact" (*Widdowson, G. 1992). Nowottny's 'unarguable' dimension of language and Wimsatt's 'explicit meaning' imply that all words have stable and stateable meanings. Reader Response School of criticism believes that no piece of language has a meaning unless it has been understood by a reader. The only meaning that a text can have is what is read into it by the reader.

Traditionally, the role of the reader has been seen as animator of the text and as a disposable machinery of extraction, *"whose task is simply to activate meanings deemed to be in the text, but who takes no initiative to engage creatively with the text" (*Widdowson, G. 1992). This rather passive role of the reader has been challenged by Fish (1980) and Freund (1987) – *"You do not read meanings out of a text but into a text"*. This three-dimensional picture of meaning – writer's meaning, reader's meaning, and the meaning of the text – would have been easily accepted without debate, if all the three dimensions had been the same. Not only this, different readers generate different meanings in the same text. Though it would be too much to question the legitimacy of what textual critics have done by focusing on the text, and the text only; it is more than apparent that the inspiration behind this was the natural human tendency to streamline things and smother any discordant note. The objection against allowing the readers to have several different interpretations of the text is not philosophical but a practical one.

> *A poem is free of an author's intentions and his experiences, and of a reader's responses, because these are variable, irresponsible, undiscoverable, demonstrably erroneous, etc., while the poem remains stable. We cannot locate the poem in the author's state of mind at the moment of creation because this is inaccessible and may be changed by the act of writing … we cannot allow the poem to reside in the individual reader's experience as he reads, because that would be tantamount to saying that there are as many poems as there are occasions of reading, whereas we know very well that there is only one poem".*
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> *(Bradbury and Palmer, 1970: 178-79)*

It is clear that the objection is more of a pragmatic nature than of a philosophic one. Readers should not be allowed to be differently affected by the 'reality' of a particular text because their responses are "variable, irresponsible, and undiscoverable" which is ample evidence of the fact that there was no love lost between the text and these textual critics, rather they were afraid to allow the readers to spin millions of individual

webs of interpretation to come out of which will be a Herculean task for the critics. The fact of the matter, as it appears to me, is that

> *The literary text activates our own faculties, enabling us to recreate the world it presents. The product of this creative activity is what we might call the virtual dimension of the text, which endows it with its reality. This virtual dimension is not the text itself, nor is it the imagination of the reader: it is the coming together of text and imagination.*
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> *(Iser, W. 1988:191)*

This discordance between the intention of the author, the text and the response of the reader as well as between various interpretations of the same text by different readers may be understood in terms of the fluctuating relationship between signifier and signified. In Derrida's view of language the signifier is not directly related to the signified. There is no one-to-one set of correspondence between them. Signifiers and signified are continually breaking apart and reattaching in new combinations, and one never arrives at a final signified which is not a signifier in itself. Derrida argues that when we read a sign, meaning is not immediately clear to us. Signs refer to what is absent, so in a sense meanings are absent, too. Meaning is continually moving along on a chain of signifiers, "*and we cannot be precise*" about its exact 'location', it is never tied to one particular sign (Sarup, 1993).

I would rather use *'and we cannot be precise'* – literature defies precision. A great work of art cannot be reduced down to a precise, neat and systematic explanation; it is achieved by a subtle use of language that induces different meanings in different minds. Nowottny says that the structure of a poem is not *"discontinuous with linguistic process in ordinary life"*, however, she accepts that the language of poems is *"more highly structured"* than *"language outside poems"*. One characteristic of a poem is that it fashions the language in such a way as to give poignancy to words which cannot be explained but experienced only. When readers try to explain this unexplainable, they read different meanings in the same text. In a poem, the function of language is not referential but representational.

> *Whereas with reference language is dependent on external and actual context, with representation, context is internal, potential, and dependent on language: it takes shape in the verbal patterns of the poem. These … provoke the reader into divergent interpretation … ".*
>
> *(Widdowson, 1992: 33)*

Reading a literary text is a creative process that is much more than a mere perception of what is written 'there'. Part of this creativity, to me, is lexical in nature. Reading literature gives us the chance to formulate the unformulated. Gaps or blanks in literary texts created by Derridean binary oppositions like presence/absence stimulate the reader to construct meanings which would not have otherwise come into existence. The techniques frequently used by the poets to create these gaps or blanks is that of sincere lying, non-linear progression of events, the art of distancing and back and forth movements of rhythm and tone eventually evincing a keen bend towards 'purposeful distortion', which lends words and phrases more than one possible meaning. The possibility of this plurality of interpretation makes a poem ambiguous.

It would be worthwhile to carefully state the parameters set for this paper whereby 'ambiguity' means not the multiplicity of meaning caused by phonological,

morphological or syntactic ambiguity but a multiplicity of meaning caused by a word having two or more than two relevant connotations that keep on changing from time to time, from text to text, and from reader to reader: co-text and context become very significant here. Ambiguity has rightly been argued to be a purely mental phenomenon that takes place in the mind of the reader, however, that is caused by some linguistic features – and that linguistic feature for the purpose of this paper is the connotative aspect of English vocabulary.

It is also essential for the purpose of this paper to distinguish ambiguity from obscurity which is the case of a word having more than one acceptable, but stable and stateable, meaning that call upon the reader to choose the relevant one. Potentially ambiguous words possess distinct, disparate but clear meanings all of which are relevant as alternatives in a given context, although there is always an uncertainty as to which one is the more appropriate. Lack of clarity lies at the pragmatic level where the intended meaning is not clear to the reader. Ambiguity is an intrinsic, inalienable character of any self-focused message, briefly a corollary feature of poetry. Not only the message itself but also its addresser and addressee become ambiguous (Jakobson, 1988).

In the case of obscurity, on the other hand, lack of clarity occurs at the semantic level itself. Faced with ambiguity, the reader asks, "Which one is the intended meaning?"; faced with obscurity, he asks, "What is the intended meaning?" Obscurity is, therefore, different from ambiguity, though it can provide the latitude for ambiguity to occur in. Most of us, I think, will agree that 17th and 18th century poetry may be obscure because the reader faces the difficulty in finding 'what is the intended meaning', but not as ambiguous as modern poetry wherein he undergoes the trauma of deciding 'which one is the intended meaning'. This may partly be significant to show how English poetry has been on the move from obscurity towards ambiguity.

Heavy borrowing from different sources, particularly of words that led to an unequalled profusion of synonyms, is a characteristic of English that distinguishes it from other languages.

> *The Latin element in Modern English is so great that there would be no difficulty in writing hundreds of consecutive pages in which the proportion of words of native English etymology … would not exceed five percent of the whole.*
>
> *(Bradley, 1904: 63)*

It is a matter of common knowledge that traditionally education and literacy had been the prerogative of a particular class of British society, and the poets had that particular class in mind while writing. So much so that there may be seen a clear distinction between language being used in poetry and that being used by the common folk.

… a similar historical process began in English in the seventeenth century, when literary and colloquial norms were set apart by the conscious creation of a literary Standard.

(Adamson, S., 1989: 207)

Though English replaced French as the official language in the later middle ages, and Latin as the language of scholarship during the Renaissance in successive stages, the substitution was not a single act. In both the cases the English that substituted French or Latin was heavily influenced by the language it substituted (Baugh, 1959). Prescriptive

grammarians and lexicographers of the 18th century turned to Latin for their models of correct usage. There was a widespread belief among writers that the propagation of Latinized forms would 'fix' the diversity and changeability of speech forms, and place English on the rational foundation of universal grammar.

A reading of English poetry down the ages reveals that words of foreign origin tend to be used more frequently in the poetry of 17th and 18th century in comparison to that of the 19th and 20th century poetry. It can also be safely assumed that modern poetry is by and large more ambiguous than 17th and 18th century poetry. Modern poets, like modern men, look at themselves in relation to others or others in relation to themselves. Life for them since Einstein is no more absolute but relative; it is not possible for them to look at life in isolation like 16th century lyricist, for example. The primacy of the metaphoric process in the literary schools of romanticism and symbolism has been repeatedly acknowledged, but it is still insufficiently realized that it is the predominance of metonymy which underlies and actually predetermines the so-called "realistic" trend, which belongs to an intermediary stage between the decline of romanticism and the rise of symbolism and is opposed to both (Jakobson, 1988). Modern poetry tries to transform the sign back into meaning: its ideal, ultimately, would be to reach not the meaning of words, but the meaning of things themselves. This is why it clouds the language, increases the abstractness of the concept and the arbitrariness of the sign and stretches to the limit the link between signifier and signified (Barthes, 1957).

The reasons may be many, but the one that I propose to be the case is an apparent journey from the classical to the colloquial. The substitution of classical by the colloquial that started during the latter half of the 17th century was completed by Wordsworth's democratic humanism which demanded that literature must leave the territory of the literate elite and occupy the common ground shared by both the poet and the audience. Gradually Latin got 'frozen' as the language of education and books. Today its creative use is confined to a diminishing elite whose classical education gives them a working knowledge of Latin roots and derivational morphology.

The failure of the classical vocabulary to get integrated into the colloquial standard has had important consequences for the semantic structure of English. There are systematic differences found in meaning between classical and colloquial terms which can be attributed to their dichotomous learning conditions. Colloquial terms are learnt communicatively in the context of actual experience and hence are interpreted by reference to a wide range of experiences with which they are associated. Classical terms, on the contrary, are learnt in academic context devoid of any real life association and hence are interpreted by reference to a prescribed definition. They "fall upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines," smothering any possibility of multiplicity of interpretations.

To support my line of argument I would take a classical-colloquial pair *'parsimonious-mean'* as an example. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1998) defines *'parsimonious'* under a single entry as *'extremely unwilling to spend money'*, while it defines *'mean'* under multiple entries as *'have a particular meaning; intend to say something; say which person or thing; intend to do something; say something seriously; result in something; involve doing something; show something is true or will happen; unkind or nasty; unwilling to spend any money or share what you have with other people; cruel and bad tempered; average; poor or looking poor; and*

belonging to a low social class'. The word *'preserve'* too is defined under three entries as *'to save something or someone from being harmed or destroyed; to store food for a long time after treating it so that it will not decay; and to make something continue without changing'*, whereas *'keep'* is defined under thirty entries as *'not give back; not lose; not change/move; make somebody/something not change/move; do something repeatedly; delay somebody; store something; look after; protect; and celebrate something'* (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1998).

The two examples, though by no means exhaustive, demonstrate my contention clearly that colloquial words have greater connotations than that of the classical ones. It is this fluidity or indeterminacy of meaning associated with the colloquial vocabulary that makes readers have divergent interpretations – the hallmark of ambiguity. Moreover,

> *… [classical terms] have connotations of conceptual clarity and emotional neutrality, while the … [colloquial terms] are associated with physical reality and subjective response. In the most general terms, the … [colloquial] vocabulary is associated with an experiential mode of reference, the … [classical] vocabulary with a noetic mode.*
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> *(Adamson, S., 1989: 214 – 15)*

This dichotomy further strengthens the idea that colloquial terms do have greater scope of plurality of interpretations and their greater frequency in modern poetry leads to greater ambiguity. The movement from classical to the colloquial vocabulary in English poetry can be seen as a movement from the monosemic to the polysemic, from the noetic to the experiential. The relatively monosemic nature of the classical items allows it to stand as an abstract statement of the semantic content, whereas the more polysemic colloquial items are open to scrutiny for alternative meanings leading to greater ambiguity.

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