

## **AMBIGUITY IN POETRY: DEFINITION, FUNCTION AND ELEMENTS**

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This paper is mostly concerned with ambiguity that occurs in poetry—its definition, elements and function. There are certain factors that determine the occurrence of ambiguity in poetry. Poets often resort to the use of ambiguous references or notions in order to achieve certain aims—aims that may not be brought about by any other device—in so far as it is a characteristic feature of language. Rather, it is a natural phenomenon that characterizes language, and the effects it affords for poets are unlimited. As to the definition of ambiguity, it occurs when one word, or expression, or sentence, or context has more than one meaning. In his *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, William Empson thinks of ambiguity as “indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings.”<sup>1</sup> Decision as to what an expression may exactly mean depends upon the underlying motivation, or context, or situation, or the intonation of

the form of speech. Sometimes, poets deliberately make their poetry capable of giving more interpretations or meanings. In doing so, of course they want to present certain ideas or to show certain moods.

Some critics may consider ambiguity one of the defects of language, for the latter has of course its limitations or restrictions, and since language is the stuff material of poetry, so poetry is limited or restricted accordingly. Yet, for poets it is taken as a device to express more meanings. It is taken for granted that ambiguity is a defect in language where failure to achieve clarity occurs.

But ambiguity provides poets with certain meanings and effects that cannot be made by any other means, and as Jacob Korg puts it:

In poetry, as in every art the limitations of the medium provide the artist with his most exciting opportunities. Just as a sculptor may shape hard stone into soft looking curves of a body, or a painter may produce the effect of depth on a flat canvas, so a poet works with language to overcome its natural deficiencies by taking advantage of the resources it

offers. He does this, not by using a special vocabulary of unusually high-powered words, but by using more or less ordinary words in special ways.<sup>2</sup>

Ambiguity in language has got a certain effect for it affects the understanding of the reader or the hearer, and therefore it has got certain significance that can be detected when it is deliberately used to indicate certain implications. Poets often utilize elements of ambiguity in order that their poems can be made precise, for example—precise in the sense that various ideas, associations and situations are created simultaneously by one single word or expression or sentence, and thus making the poem appear to be almost always full of life. According to Percival Gurrey, implications in poetry have got certain significance owing to the notion that those implications “give precision and reality to general ideas and to amorphous states of mind.”<sup>3</sup>

One of the difficulties that may face poets during the poetic process is the variety of meanings a word or phrase or sentence may have. The poet may then try his best in order to choose the ones that suit his purpose. Yet this trait gives the poet a certain advantage as Korg believes:

Practically speaking, the wide area of meaning attached to most words is an advantage, for if we

had to have a different word for every possible meaning, we would need tremendous vocabularies, and no one word of them would be used very often.... The comparatively vague dictionary meaning of a word is focused more sharply by its context. The significance of a word depends on its environment.<sup>4</sup>

Concerning the function of ambiguity, it may be possible that ambiguity contributes something to the unity of a poem: in “A Poison Tree”, for example, ambiguity stands in harmony with the unity of the poem. The reader is not informed of the way the enemy has been killed, or the reader may even feel that the enemy is still alive and that he is “outstretched beneath the tree.”<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the reader is not informed of which “pole” the poet refers to. Besides, the poem is prone to many interpretations, which can be attributed to Blake's way of writing that often utilizes ambiguous references. In doing so, the poet may want to express an unlimited experience—the poet, for example may want the reader to practise his faculty of imagination to discover new ideas, or experiences, or worlds, etc. Therefore, ambiguity in a poem makes the reader try to search for or unfold what possibilities he can think of in relation to the thing described or referred to, as the reader is not satisfied with what he reads, trying to find relationships and associations among things:

Blake's reader cannot accept passively what Blake writes, as he cannot understand it. He must dig, participate actively; thus Blake's thought is kept living and his ideas fresh.<sup>6</sup>

Making ambiguous references, the poet may want the reader to think of, to imagine and to make new associations, and that is why a poem showing ambiguity will always have freshness and life, for it is born anew every time it is read or touched upon.

In spite of the fact that ambiguity is considered a defect in language, it has got a certain function in poetry: it is, in fact, used in poetry as a means of expression. For example, puns which are taken as elements of ambiguity “provide the clearest illustrations, although the phenomenon is much more general and is basic in poetry”<sup>7</sup> as pointed out by Israel Scheffler.

Nevertheless, ambiguity that is not made on purpose is absolutely a point of weakness in a poem, and at the same time it is not a defect when it is intentionally made to communicate certain meanings. Hence, ambiguity is not desirable in any kind of language except the literary language, for it, as Hazard Adams points out, “thrives on ambiguity, overtones, and odd combinations of meaning. I am not referring here simply to tricks

of syntax and puns but to a much broader conception of multi-meaning.”<sup>8</sup> In scientific writings, where clarity is always required, ambiguity is taken as a point of weakness, and it is a defect when the writer is not aware of the various connotations his expression may refer to. The intentionally made ambiguity is meant to create certain effects or atmospheres. While using elements of ambiguity like pun, irony or innuendo, the poet may want to be ironic, sarcastic, satiric, humorous, or contemptuous etc. The intended effect the poet wants to convey in a certain situation can be enriched or strengthened when ironically expressed. John Clare, for instance, in his poem “I Am” creates an atmosphere of sadness, contempt and disdain as he expressed himself ironically: he conveys the idea that although he lives in this world he feels he does not. He feels that he does not exist in this world at all for he has become cut off from his family, friends and relations. Thus, the poet manages to create the desired effect—to create a sense of scorn, sadness and disdain at the same time. The poet wants the reader to imagine how miserable yet sad his life is, since those people whom he knows and loves best have become stranger than other strange people. Yet, the title of the poem is ironic for the poet says that he suffers from a state of nonexistence:

I AM: yet what I am none cares or knows,  
My friends forsake me like a memory lost,  
And yet I am, and live with shadows tost;

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, it is obvious that the poet deliberately makes his poem show more than one meaning or interpretation. Korg points out that the usefulness of irony in poetry, which is considered an element of ambiguity, is found in the fact that it makes the poet able to present a third meaning by presenting two contradictory things: a new meaning is being conveyed through the use of ironical references:

Another way in which a poet may use connotation to augment the ordinary resources of language is by making his words carry an undertone that expresses a feeling contradictory to their denotation. Hence, by saying two contradictory things at once, the poem really expresses, through irony, a third meaning.<sup>10</sup>

Another function of ambiguity can be shown in Shakespeare's *Julius\_Caesar*. The most prominent example of puns is found at the very beginning of the play. It functions in the following extracts as a means of arousing a sense of humour on the part of the audience and a sense of contempt and scorn on the part of the speaker, and an ambiguous situation on the part of the character addressed:

Mar. ...you, sir, what trade are you?

2 Cit. Truly, sir, in respect of a fine workman, I am  
but, as you would

say, a cobbler.

Mar. But what trade art thou? Answer me directly.

2 Cit. A trade, sir, that I hope may use with a safe  
conscience; which is

indeed, sir, a mender of bad soles. <sup>11</sup>

In this extract the Cobbler, as it appears, plays on certain words in a certain situation at the beginning of the play and this is, of course, pun which is considered an element of ambiguity and which usually occurs in plays and poetry. Loved most by the Elizabethan audience, the use of pun here creates a sense of humour as the Cobbler plays on the words “cobbler”, and “soles”. Therefore, one can realize the various connotations a pun may imply.

Pointed out by Robert Miller, innuendo is taken as an element of ambiguity. It occurs when one gives an oblique allusion or a hint or veiled idea or implication; hence, it implies more than one meaning or implication, or suggestion, or connotation. He says that innuendo is an “element that depends on ambiguity of meaning.... In this the words are chosen and



arranged that we are intended to make an additional meaning from them.”<sup>12</sup>

A good example of innuendo is found in the following couple of lines by Alexander Pope which is inscribed on the collar of the dog presented to the Prince of Wales:

I am His Highness' dog at Kew;  
Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?<sup>13</sup>

The exact meaning of this couplet cannot be decided at all except in one case: it can be decided if we know the exact situation or circumstance that makes Pope write it.

Adams declares that the function of ambiguity in the following example is “contemplation”<sup>14</sup>:

Hamlet: Alas, poor Yorick! I know him, Horatio;  
A fellow of infinite jest, of most  
Excellent fancy...[etc].<sup>15</sup>

While digging out to prepare the grave of Ophelia, the skull of Yorick, whom Hamlet knew when a child, appeared. Hamlet makes a comment on the skull which suggests many possibilities as the term 'alas' indicates: he may show his lament towards

Yorick in particular or towards Man in general, or he may lament the fact that he himself will one day face the same situation. Ambiguities always occur in literature. They give rise to suggestions, possibilities, implications, connotations and meanings which are most desirable in and necessary to poetry. Korg comments on the reference made by Hamlet, saying:

And the poet is not yet done with the device, for he makes a pun or "reflection", ... Here it carries along that optical meaning, but it means primarily "contemplation," for not only is the poet in love "perhaps" with his own immorality, but also he is enamored of thought upon it.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, the very word "alas" makes us think of another function of ambiguity that forms brevity and precision: so many meanings are contained within one single word.

It has generally been accepted that Robert Browning's poetry is usually characterized by ambiguity. "To My Last Duchess" shows an example of ambiguity that is intended to create certain effects:

This grew; I gave commands;  
Then all smiles stopped together.<sup>17</sup>

Ambiguity in this poem reveals certain aspects of the Duke's character that is crooked or not straightforward: he unfolds his cunning while making the messenger think of the possibility that the Duchess has already been killed, so that his future wife will well be informed of the way to deal with him. Besides, it reveals that the Duke is not only cunning but also selfish, cold, and crude. Thus, the poem is ambiguous: ambiguity pervades every part in the poem: without ambiguity in this example, all those meanings and possibilities cannot be conveyed at all.

As a conclusion, ambiguity is often associated with poetry for it can be taken as a means of creating various meanings, implications and connotations; a means of creating imagination; a means of expression; hence, it is a fundamental device used by poets and its “machinations...are among the very roots of poetry.”<sup>18</sup> Being ambiguous, the poet can hide himself behind his implied attitude towards something: “it is a particularly subtle device for enriching the expressive power of language, a clear way of saying two things at once.”<sup>19</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, as quoted in N.A. *The Idea of Literature: The Foundations of English Criticism* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979), p. 232.
- <sup>2</sup>Jacob Korg, *An Introduction to Poetry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p. 32.
- <sup>3</sup>Percival Gurrey, *The Appreciation of Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 34.
- <sup>4</sup>Korg, p. 33.
- <sup>5</sup>William Blake, "A Poison Tree", as quoted in James Reeves, ed., *The Poets' World: An Anthology of English Poetry* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1974), p. 156.
- <sup>6</sup>Samuel Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1965), p. x.
- <sup>7</sup>Israel Scheffler, *Beyond the Letter: a Philosophical Inquiry into Ambiguity, Vagueness and Metaphor in Language* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 18.

- <sup>8</sup> Hazard Adams, *The Context of Poetry* (Boston: Little, 1963), p. 184.
- <sup>9</sup> John Clare, "I Am", as quoted in James Reeves ed., *The Poets' World*, p. 210.
- <sup>10</sup> Korg, p. 39.
- <sup>11</sup> William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, as quoted in *The Illustrated Stratford Shakespeare* (London: Chancellor Press, 1982), p. 752.
- <sup>12</sup> Robert Hillyer, *In Pursuit of Poetry* (McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1960), p. 51.
- <sup>13</sup> Alexander Pope, as quoted in Hillyer, *In Pursuit of Poetry*, p. 51.
- <sup>14</sup> Adams, p. 11.
- <sup>15</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, as quoted in *The Illustrated Stratford Shakespeare*, mentioned above, p. 827.
- <sup>16</sup> Korg, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Browning, "To My Last Duchess", as quoted in Reeves,  
p. 228.

<sup>18</sup>Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, as quoted in Korg, p. 97.

<sup>19</sup>Korg, pp. 40 – 41.

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