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ENGLISH LITERATURE

An Interpretation for Students Abroad

Laurence D. Lerner



ENGLISH LITERATURE

*An Interpretation for
Students Abroad*

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I DEDICATE THIS BOOK
TO MY FORMER STUDENTS
IN GHANA,
BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE UNIVERSITY,
WHOSE PERSISTENT QUESTIONING
COMPELLED ME TO THINK
IT ALL OUT.
L. D. L.

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I

Literature and Language

THIS is a book about language; and in particular about the English language. It is not an outline of grammar, nor a history of how the language has changed, nor a study of its pronunciation; it is about language in action.

Everyone, when beginning a new field of study, likes to know what is in front of him, so that it is natural an introduction to the study of any subject should begin with a definition. In the case of literature, this is not a very good idea: for definitions of literature, if they have any value, are attempts to classify and explain the experiences we have in reading poems, plays and novels; and until we have had such experiences we shall not really be able to profit from the explanations. The questions, What is literature? What is its value? How do we tell good literature from bad? are very profitable, but they are best asked *after* we have read and appreciated many books, not before; so that we shall have in our minds the experiences needed to answer them. So although a definition of literature is offered in this opening chapter it is a very simple and general one, so wide that it is of little value. After we have read more, we may go on to construct more controversial and more stimulating definitions. For the present we may define literature as *language well used*. This is certainly not an adequate definition, for as we

shall see later in this chapter it is possible to use language well without writing literature. But though this definition takes no account of the subject matter of literature, it is a good starting point, for it draws our attention to the most important thing about a poet or novelist—that he is one who handles language well. That is why so much of this book is about the English language.

This is not a text book. It does not contain 'rules' for criticizing or for writing literature. It does not spend much time making general statements about what literature is and is not. It is above all not an Outline of English Literature, with short notes on all the great writers to save you the trouble of reading them. The best way to think of this book is probably as an exploration: and of you, the reader, and of me, the writer, as fellow explorers. We shall read books, and bits of books, together. We shall try to puzzle out the meaning of difficult passages; to discover why we like some passages better than others; to realize what the aims of some books are; to examine literature, in fact, with enjoyment and understanding. These two things cannot be separated: the more we enjoy literature, the better equipped we are for understanding; the better we understand it, the more we shall enjoy it.

This book might be given the sub-title HOW TO READ: that would indicate its aim very well. But of course it might be misleading. Readers might think, 'I don't want to go back to school again to learn spelling and grammar.' In fact, the aim of this book is to awaken an interest in language, and to show how much more there is to reading than spelling and grammar.

When we first learned English we began by learning simple words, such as 'table', 'house' or 'man'. We learned

to spell them. Then we began putting them together in sentences, and we learned about grammar and punctuation. Soon we knew a lot of rules about grammar, punctuation and spelling. The study of language became for us largely the study and application of these rules.

Now rules like this are very useful because they help us to arrange the language we use when speaking and writing. They are useful in the way signposts are useful: they stop us from getting muddled. But these rules do not tell us the really important things about language. What matters most about a word is not the way it is spelt, or whether it is a preposition or an adjective, or in the main clause or a subordinate clause. What matters most is its meaning.

If we look up the word 'man' in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* this is what we will find:

Man, *n*, human being . . . person . . . the human race, etc.—

When we have read this we have a few ideas which will come into our heads every time we see the word 'man'. But can we say that we really know the meaning of the word? If we read Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*, which is largely about a noble but rather obstinate person called Brutus, we will come across this speech. It is spoken at the end, by Mark Antony, over the dead body of Brutus:

His life was gentle, and the elements
So mixed in him, that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world: This was a man.

Now Mark Antony had been Brutus's enemy and hated him for his murder of Caesar, but he also admired him for his honesty and courage. By this triumphant use of that word 'man' he is trying to show us what he thinks of Brutus.

Shakespeare knows that the word 'man' will suggest ideas to his hearers. They may think of a man as opposed to a woman; a man as opposed to a boy; a person with courage and other 'manly' qualities; or a boastful and aggressive 'he-man'. But his skill in language is so great, that he uses the word to suggest only those ideas that apply to Brutus. We know at once that we are not meant to think of Brutus being a man instead of a woman, nor of his being a boastful bully; these are ideas that the word 'man' might suggest at other times, but in this passage it makes us remember the manly virtues, the heroism and nobility of Brutus.

This is the way to study meaning. The meaning of a word in any passage is the ideas which that word brings into our minds when we read it. An important word like *man* may vary its meaning considerably from one passage to another. We have seen how Shakespeare selects some of the ideas it may bring to mind and keeps out others; in another context he may use it so that other ideas are brought to mind.

Of course the commonest way to learn the meaning of a word is to look it up in a dictionary; and there is no doubt that dictionaries can be very useful to anyone learning to use a language. But we can now see that this usefulness is very limited. A dictionary-maker, instead of showing us a word in action, has to tell us what it means. Often all he can hope to do is to describe in general terms what it usually means. If it is a big dictionary he may be able to give a long list of *almost* everything it can mean; he may too be able to quote *short* passages in which the word is used (this is done, for example, in such a book as *The Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, specially written for non-English readers). But to show all the subtle shades of meaning of a word like *man*, or *head*, or *virtue*, its richness in the hands of great

writers, would need a whole volume. For a true understanding of language we need to leave dictionaries behind. We need to read, and to think about what we read.

Language is a universal human activity: necessary in the most casual and in the most thoughtful situations. Through all uses of language there run the same tendencies, and a desire to use it well in one set of circumstances should imply a desire to use it well always. A sensitive and skilful handling of the language in everyday life, in writing letters, in conversing, making political speeches, drafting public notices, is the basis of an interest in literature. Literature is the result of the same skill and sensitivity dealing, no longer with everyday occurrences, but with a profounder insight into the life of man. In this chapter we shall be discussing the innumerable non-literary uses of language—language in everyday life, in work and conversation, and politics; I shall suggest a few principles of good writing, and illustrate them from the way people actually speak and write. And at the same time I shall show that all this is working towards an appreciation of literature: I shall select a few specimens of literature—passages, that is, whose main purpose is not practical, like a business letter, or persuasive, like a political speech, but to give us an insight into human life; and I shall try to show the likenesses between good literature and good everyday writing, as well as the respects in which the former is greater.

I have selected four headings under which to discuss language well used: SIMPLICITY, FRESHNESS, PRECISION, VIGOUR. The headings are largely artificial, and there will be a certain amount of overlapping.

SIMPLICITY

On the return of the juvenile the elder person was in a state of slumber, occupying the chair; and the descent of the sun was already a thing of the past. The young person thereupon grasped the ancient object that had served as a blanket in the army, and removed it from the sleeping couch; when this operation had been concluded he extended it over the rear portion of the aforementioned chair, and across the shoulders which belonged to this elderly person. . . .

What is your opinion of this passage? I hope every reader has already grown suspicious of its way of using words. From the start we can notice the author's fondness for unnecessarily long words: a *juvenile* is a boy, to *occupy* a chair is to sit in it, to *extend* a blanket is to spread it. He is fond too of roundabout phrases, using half a dozen words where one would be enough. Sunset is *the descent of the sun*; the old man's shoulders are *the shoulders which belonged to this elderly person*; phrases like *when this operation had been concluded* could be replaced by *then*, or simply omitted.

This passage is meant to be bad; it is a rewriting of a paragraph from Ernest Hemingway's short novel *The Old Man and the Sea*. Hemingway, a modern American novelist, is famous for the extreme simplicity, almost starkness, of his style: and here is what he wrote, so that you can see for yourself how impressive this style can be, and how much better than the distorted version above:

When the boy came back the old man was asleep in the chair and the sun was down. The boy took the old army blanket off the bed and spread it over the back of the chair and over the old man's shoulders. They were strange shoulders, still powerful although very old, and the neck was still strong too, and the creases did not show so much when the old man was asleep and his head fallen forward. His shirt had been patched so many times that it was like the sail and the patches were faded to many different

shades by the sun. The old man's head was very old though and with his eyes closed there was no life in his face. The newspaper lay across his knees and the weight of his arm held it there in the evening breeze. He was barefooted.

The boy left him there, and when he came back the old man was still asleep.

Writing like this loses much of its power when taken out of its context; and we need to read the whole book to appreciate how moving is this picture of the old and poor but still proud fisherman. But even without the context we can surely feel how clean and pure the language is.

Simplicity can be one of the greatest of all virtues in writing. One of the most famous books in English begins:

As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a Den, and I laid me down in that place to sleep; and as I slept I dreamed a dream.

This was written by John Bunyan, a poor man, who spent many years of his life in prison for illegal preaching. The Den is prison; the dream is his book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. There is a weight of sadness behind the words *the wilderness of this world*, which would be lost if longer, more out-of-the-way words had been chosen.

Simple language avoids the main diseases which infect style, making it clumsy, dreary and inaccurate. It avoids circumlocution, or the use of too many words; tautology, or saying the same thing over in different words; pompousness, or the use of unnecessarily high-sounding words. Here are four sentences:

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.

The earth may be said to belong to the Lord, also all its contents, or fullness;

to say nothing of the world and all those whom we may refer to as its inhabitants.

The earth may be said to belong to the Lord and be his property, and the fullness thereof belonging to it; the world and its inhabitants who dwell in it.

The terrestrial regions belong to the Lord, and the abundance appertaining thereto; the globe and the inhabitants in its confines.

The first we all know: from the 24th Psalm. It is simple, and impressive. There is repetition—*earth . . . world*—but it is intentional, it adds to the feeling of enthusiastic praise; and it is not mere repetition: *earth* to the writer suggests the fertility and productiveness of the globe, *world* its hugeness.

The second has caught the disease of circumlocution: it beats about the bush. *May be said to belong to the Lord* uses eight words to say the same as was said in three in the first passage; *to say nothing of* and *all those whom we may refer to* add nothing to the meaning, and could easily be left out.

The third has the disease of tautology: words are added which repeat an idea already expressed by other words. *To belong to* and *to be his property* mean the same; *inhabitants* means ‘people who dwell in it’, so that *inhabitants who dwell in it* is tautological.

The fourth is pompous. *Terrestrial regions* is a high-sounding way of saying *earth*; *fullness*, though it is a rather old-fashioned word today, has a concrete, everyday sound which makes it pleasanter than *abundance*; *in its confines* is rather like a phrase from a textbook, and lacks the directness of *thereof*.

An amusing and perhaps profitable exercise, would be to combine into one monster sentence the faults of circumlocution, tautology and pompousness; it might begin

The terrestrial regions may be said to belong to, or be the property of, the Omnipotent Deity . . .

I have already suggested that literature is best thought of as language well used; and sensitivity to literature must begin as sensitivity to language. The 24th Psalm is language well used; the other sentences are not. The ability to pick out the first of those four sentences from the others is the beginning of literary taste.

Among the worst offenders against good, plain writing are government officials and businessmen. An unhappy custom has grown up of writing business letters in a special language of their own, remote from everyday life, pompous, artificial, and often difficult to understand. Here, for example, is the opening of a letter as it might be written in 'business jargon'; followed by the same letter in English.

We are in receipt of your favour of the 16th inst., for which we thank you. We shall do our utmost to expedite delivery of the goods mentioned therein by the specified date.

Thank you for your letter of the 16th July. We shall do our best to send you the goods by the end of the month.

The language of that second sentence has dropped the longwindedness of the first, and used simple words in their normal meanings. Why is it necessary to call a letter a *favour*? Is it because the ordinary English word is not good enough for the writer? And why *inst.* (or *prox.* or *ult.*) when the months all have perfectly good English names? Notice that the writer of the first letter will *expedite delivery* of the goods; he means he will *send* them. He does not *receive* a letter: he must use a circumlocution and write *I am in receipt of*.

Perhaps it is too much to hope that businessmen and civil servants will reform overnight, and cease to write their letters in such jargon. But we can hope that business jargon

will not infect ordinary language. When people begin a conversation 'with reference to your letter of the 17th inst.' or when journalists and short story writers refer to *expediting delivery* or *taking measures in accordance with your request*: then the language as a whole is being infected, and simplicity is being killed.

Personal letters, in contrast to business letters, are often very well written. When writing to friend, brother or wife we seldom take the trouble to make our letters high-sounding and impressive; and as a result we do not make them pompous. Personal letters seldom have the profundity and lasting value in their language that is found in great literature; but in its place they often have a naturalness and directness far more pleasing than *I am in receipt of your favour*. This is nicely illustrated in the letters of Lady Bertram, a character in Jane Austen's novel *Mansfield Park*. Lady Bertram is fond of writing to her niece; and according to Jane Austen she 'had formed for herself a very creditable, commonplace, amplifying style, so that a very little matter was enough for her'. When her son falls ill, some distance away, she finds this an opportunity to write some roundabout and (as she thinks) dignified sentences:

This distressing intelligence, as you may suppose, has agitated us exceedingly, and we cannot prevent ourselves from being greatly alarmed and apprehensive for the poor invalid, whose state Sir Thomas fears may be very critical. As I have little doubt of your feeling for us, my dear Fanny, under these distressing circumstances, I will write again very soon.

A few days later her son is brought home; and the sight of him, ill and exhausted, shocks her deeply. Immediately the tone of her letters changes; instead of the elaborate, high-sounding phrases, there appears a direct and spontaneous simplicity; and in place of the artificiality comes real feeling:

He is just come, my dear Fanny, and is taken upstairs; and I am so shocked to see him that I do not know what to do. I am sure he has been very ill. Poor Tom! I am quite grieved for him, and very much frightened, and so is Sir Thomas, and how glad I should be if you were here to comfort me.

This is moving because we can hear the speaking voice behind it; there is no barrier of long words to keep the true feelings of the writer away from us.

When we come to think about literature, it becomes clear good writing is not necessarily simple. Simplicity is a virtue in literature—a virtue, not the only one. Many great English writers—Milton, Sir Thomas Browne, Jeremy Taylor, Clarendon, Gibbon, Carlyle—have written prose that is complicated and magnificent; indeed, it could be argued that before the famous ‘reform’ of English prose in the seventeenth century, very little serious prose literature was written simply. For some literary effects—for the rolling Latinized dignity of Gibbon, or the solemn thoughts of Jeremy Taylor—complex sentences are essential; but there are other, and equally moving effects, which depend on simplicity. Consider, for example, this anecdote from Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year*.

I remember one citizen who, having thus broken out of his house in Aldersgate Street or thereabout, went along the road to Islington; he attempted to have gone in at the Angel Inn, and after that the White Horse, two inns known still by the same signs, but was refused; after which he came to the Pied Bull, an inn also still continuing the same sign. He asked them for lodging for one night only, pretending to be going into Lincolnshire, and assuring them of his being very sound and free from infection, which also at that time had not reached much that way.

They told him they had no lodging that they could spare but one bed up in the garret, and that they could spare that bed for one night, some drovers being expected the next day with cattle; so, if he would accept of that lodging, he might have it, which he did. So a servant was sent up with a

candle with him to show him the room. He was very well dressed, and looked like a person not used to lie in a garret; and when he came to the room he fetched a deep sigh, and said to the servant, 'I have seldom lain in such a lodging as this.' However, the servant assuring him again that they had no better, 'Well,' says he, 'I must make shift; this is a dreadful time; but it is but for one night.' So he sat down upon the bedside, and bade the maid, I think it was, fetch him up a pint of warm ale. Accordingly the servant went for the ale, but some hurry in the house, which perhaps employed her other ways, put it out of her head, and she went up no more to him.

The next morning, seeing no appearance of the gentleman, somebody in the house asked the servant that had showed him upstairs what was become of him. She started. 'Alas,' says she, 'I never thought more of him. He bade me carry him some warm ale, but I forgot.' Upon which, not the maid, but some other person was sent up to see after him, who, coming into the room, found him stark dead and almost cold, stretched out across the bed. His clothes were pulled off, his jaw fallen, his eyes open in a most frightful posture, the rug of the bed being grasped hard in one of his hands, so that it was plain he died soon after the maid left him; and 'tis probable, had she gone up with the ale, she had found him dead in a few minutes after he sat down upon the bed.

The story begins in a bare, matter-of-fact manner, naming the streets and inns of London where it took place, discussing whether they still exist, to convey the conviction that this is an incident which really happened. Defoe's skill as a narrator is seen in such simple touches as *bade the maid, I think it was*, in which he appears to be trying to remember the details aright, thus increasing the impression that this is fact, not fiction.

The second paragraph is direct and unelaborated, but the wretchedness of the citizen is brought home to us. *He was very well dressed, and looked like a person not used to lie in a garret* informs us of his unhappy situation; and all that is needed to make us aware of his misery is the mention of the *deep sigh* and the moving remark *I have seldom lain in such a lodging*

as *this*. If more fuss were made about his feelings, the powerful impact we get from this restrained writing would be spoiled.

This second paragraph gains in significance after we have read to the end; the citizen's simple remark, *but it is but for one night*, takes on a horribly ironic meaning. The lodging *was* but for one night, but not for the reason he imagined!

The last paragraph is still direct in style; but in the description of the dead man Defoe leaves his restraint for a moment to give us a graphic and realistic picture of the repulsive sight: *His clothes were pulled off, his jaw fallen, his eyes open in a most frightful posture*. After this, the return to the calm, matter-of-fact style in the last sentence is even more effective.

Here then is a passage of very powerful writing, moving and varied, which is simple throughout: and which is certainly literature. The general conclusion which emerges from the discussion therefore is surely this: that of the best prose in English, some is simple, some complicated; whereas the worst prose is all complicated. The most highly involved language can be very fine, if handled by a writer who is master of every rhythm and every distinction in meaning; but a needless complexity is pompous, tedious and unattractive: whereas simplicity, because it frees us from so many faults, is a guarantee of at least a minimum level of good writing.

FRESHNESS

The second quality I wish to deal with is freshness, or originality. When we know in advance what is coming as we read, our interest is naturally likely to flag; and good

language, in consequence, is a perpetual slight surprise. It is often language used in more unusual, more appropriate, more interesting ways than we would have expected. The good conversationalist is usually he who can give what he says a twist at the end that will surprise and delight his listeners. Byron was once speaking of the long and dull epic poems of Southey, which were highly praised in their time; he began as if to praise them himself, but very neatly turned his sentence round: '*Madoc* and *Thalaba* will be read when the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are forgotten—but not till then.'

Of the literary value of freshness, its use for highly serious as well as merely witty purposes, we shall have much to say in Chapter III; the aim of this section is to discuss one particular, and very common, form of staleness: cliché.

It is easier to explain what a cliché is than to show how it is to be recognized, but it is such a widespread and serious disease of language that it will be necessary to discuss it in some detail.

At all times the art of writing is a matter of striking a balance between tradition and originality—between following an accepted pattern, producing expected effects, profiting by the work of predecessors, on the one hand: and on the other, shocking one's readers by a phrase, a word, an idea utterly different from anything they have heard before in such a context, from what they expected at that point. Both these elements are of course necessary, but at some times one will be particularly emphasized, at other times the other. The tendency today is to stress originality: the reasons for this are no doubt complicated, but they certainly include the great importance we attach today to the individual. Terms like original, unusual, startling are in the twentieth century terms of praise when applied to writing; and it is no doubt

in consequence of this that I have mentioned freshness as one of the virtues of good writing.

Cliché is the fault which this attitude was sure to produce. A cliché is an attempt to be startling by worn-out means; a phrase which was once fresh, and is now stale. It is a fault hardly found in Elizabethan, or eighteenth-century literature, where the fault of the bad poet is colourlessness, rather than the faded colour of a cliché.

Sometimes the originality which someone has shown in creating a new metaphor, a new combination of words, becomes popular: the phrase is more and more widely used, and soon any third-rate writer with no originality of his own begins to use it to liven up his style. The first man to write about *the band of doom* or *a ray of hope* deserves high praise. The idea of doom hovering above us like a hand waiting to seize its victim, or of hope as a ray illuminating darkness: both these are brilliant ideas. But these two phrases have been used so often by poor writers, that they would not come to the mind of a really original writer today; he would detect their staleness.

At this point a real difficulty arises: how to recognize a cliché? And there is no simple answer.

Students of English poetry often read poetry in Old English: the language that was spoken in England a thousand and more years ago, so different from modern English that it looks like a foreign language. Some phrases in Old English poetry stay in the memory: the sea is called the *swan's road*, or the *whale's way*; a ship is the *floater-on-the-waves* or the *foamy-necked vessel*; a generous prince is the *gold-friend of men*. To a modern reader these phrases are vivid and exciting—and fresh. But scholars of Old English have discovered that they were in fact the clichés of Old English

poetry: that they were used over and over, by different poets, in poem after poem. Now, after many centuries, the phrases have been forgotten again: and we come across them with all the pleasure and surprise of a new discovery. In short: the clichés of Old English are not clichés today.

Now, this is just the position many foreigners are in when reading English. *The hand of doom, a ray of hope*, may really be fresh to them. They may be discovering them for the first time, just as an Englishman may discover the *whale's road* for the first time. And those who have not read enough bad writing in English, and enough good writing to compare it with, will not realize that these phrases are the stock in trade of every poor writer trying to enliven a dreary style.

Perhaps readers would like to test themselves on this point. Read this passage through:

My friends, let us explore all avenues before we abandon our last ray of hope. The hand of doom is upon us. We are in the very jaws of death, and must beware of the snake in the grass. Let us not jump from the frying pan into the fire. If we keep a stiff upper lip we need not fear what the future will hold. We are on the ladder of progress. The cup of fortune is within our grasp. The flood tide of freedom is flowing, and the fruits of progress are ripe for plucking.

There are twelve clichés in that passage; it is, in fact, nothing but a mass of clichés joined into continuous prose. Before reading far in such a passage, one should have grown suspicious; the thought should arise, 'I have seen these phrases before; and in bad prose.'

If they were still fresh, some of these clichés would be well worth using: *out of the frying pan into the fire* is a very memorable way of saying 'out of one danger into a worse one'. But it has been said too often.

Of course few writers use clichés as thickly as that; one or

two on a page is enough to stamp the mark of inferiority on a writer, and more than that would be very unusual. But cliché is not an isolated fault. Because it is an effort to be sensational, it is likely to be found in a writer whose prose is exaggerated and unrestrained, lacking simplicity and self-control, as well as unoriginal.

Here is a further extract for consideration: not made up for the occasion this time, but the opening paragraph of Marie Corelli's novel *Vendetta*:

I who write this, am a dead man. Dead legally—dead by absolute proofs—dead and buried! Ask for me in my native city and they will tell you I was one of the victims of the cholera that ravaged Naples in 1884, and that my mortal remains lie mouldering in the funeral vault of my ancestors. Yet . . . I live! I feel the warm blood coursing through my veins—the blood of thirty summers;—the prime of early manhood invigorates me, and makes these eyes of mine keen and bright—these muscles strong as iron—this hand powerful of grip—this well-knit form erect and proud of bearing. Yes! . . . I am alive, though declared to be dead; alive in the fullness of manly force—and even sorrow has left few distinguishing marks on me, save one. My hair, once ebony black, is white as a wreath of Alpine snow, though its clustering curls are as thick as ever.

It is difficult to believe today what enormous popularity Marie Corelli enjoyed only fifty years ago, even among thoughtful readers. I hope no reader of this book is taken in by the false glitter of this passage. The first two sentences are harmless enough; as we read on, the first phrase which should pull us up suspiciously is the circumlocution *mortal remains*, for 'body'. The first cliché appears in *the warm blood coursing through my veins—the blood of thirty summers* (*coursing* and *summers* well worn and unnecessary variants for 'running' and 'years'). Then they come thick and fast: *prime of early manhood, strong as iron, white as a wreath of Alpine snow, clustering curls*. And even when we cannot fasten on a single

phrase and call it a cliché, there is a stale, undistinguished, over-familiar quality about the adjectives: *eyes . . . keen and bright, well-knit form*. This is third-rate, unimaginative prose trying to pass itself off as fresh and original.

The problem still remains, How is the foreigner, to whom it may still be fresh, to recognize a cliché? Part of the answer has now been suggested: By the company it keeps. There will be a false sensationalism, a cheap glitter, all through the prose of the writer who uses clichés. Turning back to Marie Corelli, we can observe that it is not coincidence that almost all her punctuation marks are dashes; that small fact is evidence of her almost hysterical manner of writing, her inability to construct careful and balanced sentences. But that is very general advice; and when it comes to anything more specific, it must be admitted that there is no simple rule for knowing what is and what is not cliché. Some may wish to learn a long list of clichés: such a list can be found under *Hackneyed Phrases* in Fowler's *Modern English Usage*; and no doubt it will be useful to learn it. But the usefulness is limited: it will not help us to achieve the feeling for a cliché, the sense of staleness when we meet one; it will make the process purely mechanical, and no true understanding of language can ever be purely mechanical. And it will not help us to realize when a phrase by appearing too often in poor writing is in danger of becoming a cliché.

The only true solution is reading and patience. Like all the difficulties dealt with in this chapter, this insensitivity to cliché is one which must disappear in time. As our knowledge of literature increases so will our sensitivity to language well or badly used. The more attentively anyone has read, the more likely he is to detect a cliché.

PRECISION

The third virtue of language I wish to discuss is precision, the ability to say exactly what one means. The basis of this is a care for fine distinctions in words. It is commonly remarked by writers on the English language that since it has drawn its vocabulary from both Germanic and Latin sources, it has been able to develop a large number of synonyms. Consider, for example, the number of words with meanings similar to the word *brave*: courageous, gallant, valiant, plucky, bold, intrepid, fearless, and many others. Subtle distinctions can be drawn between these words that are not always possible in other languages. *Valiant*, for example, has taken on an old-fashioned flavour, and would be the word used to describe the exploits of a medieval knight; *plucky* is colloquial, and generally used of children in praise or encouragement; *bold* refers not only to physical courage but also to a tendency to push oneself forward, and is usually used as a term of blame; *gallant* refers to polite and elegant conduct towards women (and, with a different pronunciation, to a man who indulges in such conduct), retaining however in its meaning a trace of the idea of physical courage; and so on.

There are two ways in which fine distinctions can be drawn between words; to make this clear, it is first necessary to explain an idea that will be frequently used in this book: the different elements in the meaning of a word.

Suppose we say that the meaning of a word is what we find in the dictionary. Then we must admit that many words bring into our heads other thoughts besides the meaning. The word *yam* is defined in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* as 'the edible tuber of a tropical plant'. But when an Englishman

hears the word *yam* it brings into his mind thoughts of a strange, unfamiliar and perhaps fascinating vegetable, which he has never seen. None of these thoughts occurs to a West African. To him a yam is everyday food, something he is quite familiar with and perhaps grumbles at. And suppose a particular individual had been frightened, when very small, by a snake crawling out of a pile of yams; the word *yam* might bring fear into his mind.

These extra thoughts and feelings, besides the meaning, which a word brings into our minds, are called *associations*. We may say therefore that although the meaning of the word *yam* is the same to an Englishman and a West African, its associations are very different. The associations of *yam* to the latter are similar to the associations of *bread* to the former.

Though it is fairly generally agreed that what a word says to us can be divided in this way, there is great diversity in the terminology. I have used the term *meaning* to refer only to the inner core that always belongs to the word, and have therefore spoken of meaning *and* associations. Others would use the term *meaning* to refer to everything that a word can bring to mind. A common and useful pair of terms is *denotation* and *connotation*: a word denotes the same to anyone who has learnt it, and connotes different things according to the background of the listener. Sometimes the meaning of a word is even divided into three: the denotation, which is the same for all; the connotations, which are additional meanings lurking in the background, such as meanings which the word could possess in other contexts, or meanings of other words it reminds us of; and associations, which are feelings aroused by it. But I shall here use the simpler division into two, denotation and associations.

Now a difference in meaning may be a simple difference between the denotations of words, a difference that can be learned from a dictionary: thus a *transparent* object, such as glass, is one which enables us to see clearly what is behind it; a *translucent* object, such as alabaster, allows light to pass through it, but may prevent us from seeing more than a vague blur behind it. This is a difference which one either knows or does not know. In the second place there are differences in the connotations or associations of words: two words may have the same meaning, in the narrow sense of that word, but may call into the mind of the hearer very different feelings, may suggest very different ideas of the sort of man who uses them, or of the circumstances in which they are usually used: and may therefore impart a very different atmosphere to the whole passage. Thus the pairs *fatherly* and *paternal*, *death* and *decease*, *daily* and *diurnal*, all mean' the same as each other; but in each case the first word is of Saxon origin, is the one in everyday use, and is felt to be an ordinary, familiar, friendly term; whereas the second, of Latin origin, is felt to be out of the way, and calls to mind circumstances which are not ordinary: *paternal* is pompous, likely to be used by such a character as the long-winded Mr. Micawber in Dickens's *David Copperfield*; *decease* reminds one of legal documents; *diurnal* is felt to be a poetic word, with an atmosphere of mystery, and though a good poet would be likely to use *daily* if he wanted an ordinary word with no special 'effects', he might use *diurnal* to help build up a solemn and 'literary' impression.

Such distinctions between words can get very subtle and complex, the two types of distinction occurring together in many different ways, and only experience and a care for words can teach us to recognize and use them skilfully. Let

us consider the words *thrift* and *economy*, both of which can be used to mean 'the habit of spending one's money carefully'. In the first place there is a difference in denotation, since *economy* has many other meanings as well, notably 'the whole process of producing and consuming wealth on a large scale'. It is related to the word *economics*, and all this affects slightly the meaning it has in common with *thrift*, making us think of it as a slightly more theoretical, more scientific term, so that an economical man is not quite the same as a thrifty man—the former would be thought of as prudent and thoughtful in his actions, planning intelligently how to spend his money; the latter, being a more homely word, might suggest a man who saved money by hiding it away in a stocking, rather than by using it wisely. (I must emphasize, of course, that these are only associations which gather round the basic similarity of meaning.) Then there is a further distinction between the words, which results from *thrifty* being of native English origin, *economical* of Latin. I have already remarked that the Saxon word is usually the more familiar, everyday term; in this case, however, *economical* is the commoner term even in everyday usage, and this has imparted a special flavour to *thrifty*: that of a word which we feel to be very familiar, but which we do not in fact use very often—like a brother we hardly ever see, but with whom we feel intimate on the rare occasions when we do meet.

Precision in language is based upon a sensitivity to such distinctions. It is worth distinguishing two ways of being precise, though the two often mix. Scientific precision is concerned only with plain differences in meaning, that is, denotation: the sociologist, the historian, the biologist, and especially the philosopher, are often trying to use terms whose

meaning can be clearly defined, which can be differentiated accurately from other similar terms. A word may be so complex in its denotation (like the historical term *Renaissance*) that the only way we can analyse its meaning is to split it up into separate ideas and examine the connexion between them; but even in simple cases, such writers are constantly aiming for the exact and definable word. This is the type of precision aimed at by the lawgiver and the judge. One of the most important functions of an Act of Parliament is to make it quite clear what is and what is not an offence; since the framers of the Act often cannot foresee just what people are going to do, there may be circumstances for which they have not allowed; it is then the task of the judge to interpret their statements, that is, to say whether the offence he is considering falls under its provisions or not. Often this will entail defining some of the terms in the Act, and then showing that the case in question does or does not fall under the definition. Clearly a keen and precise use of language is essential to any judge.

Yet a good judge will not necessarily be able to write good literature. This is because the precision which literature aims at is of a different sort: it is concerned not merely with the denotation of a word, but with all that it can imply, the feelings it arouses, the circumstances it reminds us of, the flavour it imparts to its surroundings. (For literature deals not simply with intellectual ideas, but with men's total experiences; and the poet and novelist are therefore interested in the whole impact of a word.) They may find that they are not able to draw such clear distinctions between denotations as the judge or the scientist, because these distinctions obscure other aspects of the words used; but they will be far more sensitive to the whole of a word.

Let us take as an example the economists' use of the word *efficient*. In economic theory an object is said to be efficiently made if there has been no waste of labour or materials in its manufacture. Thus there may be two identical glass bowls, one made in half an hour by machine, the second made in three days by hand, with the use of twice as much glass. The economist will then say that the second has been inefficiently made. Now this technical term is no doubt a very valuable one in economics, and enables the economist to achieve the intellectual precision he is aiming at: it indicates clearly an idea for which he needs a term. But anyone with a literary sensitivity to words may feel uncomfortable when he hears the term used in this way; for in everyday usage the term *inefficient* often refers to the finished product, and when a non-economist hears the second glass bowl referred to as inefficiently made he will immediately think that it has a flaw, is not very strong, or is badly shaped. And even after the economic meaning of the term has been explained to him, he may not be quite satisfied. This meaning is so far from normal usage that he may find it difficult to remove from his mind the *feeling* that something must be wrong with a glass bowl if it is inefficiently made; the derogatory associations of the word are too strong to be forgotten. There is, of course, nothing wrong with this use of terms by the economist, as long as he remembers that he is achieving one form of precision at the expense of another. By making *efficient* into a technical term, without the associations which the word normally has, he has opened many possibilities of confusion, and it is his responsibility to see that he does not glide absent-mindedly from one use of the term to the other.

As an example of poetic precision let us take a line from

Hamlet. It occurs in Act I, scene 2, during the speech in which Hamlet is expressing his disgust with life:

O God, O God
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world.

Consider for a moment the word *flat*. Hamlet is not saying that he believes the world to be flat instead of round; what he is interested in about this word is its suggestion of lifelessness and futility—associations gathering to it from its use in such phrases as a ‘flat note’ in music or ‘flat countryside’. Shakespeare has chosen the word not for its denotation but because it suggests a feeling which fits in precisely with the feeling Hamlet is here expressing.

These two very simple examples should indicate the different ways in which language can be precise; more complex cases will be mentioned and illustrated in Chapter III. It can be seen that in the lines from *Hamlet* the exact suggestions of the word are made clear by the context: this is of course the only method a poet has. He can show just what a word means and suggests in a given passage by the way it fits in with the words around it. This too will be further discussed in Chapter III.

Before we leave the question of precision, we must observe that it may sometimes conflict with the first quality of good writing, already discussed: simplicity. Both legal judgments and passages of great poetry may be very complex: the author may find it impossible to say exactly what he means, or to capture the precise nature of his experience in words, without some elaboration. If this is so, simplicity must yield: writing on a difficult subject will have to be difficult.

We need to distinguish here between difficulty and obscurity. If a writer is difficult because he has something

difficult to say, we cannot blame him; if he is difficult simply because he cannot, or will not, be simple, we can and must blame him for being obscure. Let us place side by side a few lines from *Macbeth* and some from Robert Browning's *Sordello*:

And when we have our naked frailties hid
That suffer in exposure, let us meet,
And question this most bloody piece of work,
To know it further . . .

. . . Never,—I should warn you first,—
Of my own choice had this, if not the worst
Yet not the best expedient served to tell
A story I could body forth so well
By making speak, myself kept out of view,
The very man as he was wont to do,
And leaving you to say the rest for him.

The first passage is spoken by Banquo shortly after the murder of Duncan. The lords present are all in night-dress, and Banquo is suggesting that they should go and put on their clothes. Yet it is not for nothing that Shakespeare has written this apparently roundabout phrase for getting dressed. We must remember that Macbeth, who is listening, and who has just killed Duncan, is trying to control and conceal his feelings. *Naked frailties, which suffer in exposure* refers to their unclad bodies; but to Macbeth it might for a moment appear to be his feelings, weak and badly concealed: he too wishes to get away for a while, to cover his fear and guilt, so that he will be in a better position to speak to the others. It may even flash across Macbeth's mind that *this most bloody piece of work* is, not the murder (which is of course what Banquo intends), but himself. By using an apparently obscure phrase, Shakespeare has given an extra meaning to what is said, and placed

us for a moment inside the mind of Macbeth: the total effect is a more precise rendering of the whole situation.

Can we say the same of the passage from *Sordello*? Certainly not. Browning is apologizing for telling the story as narrative instead of as dramatic monologue—that is, for speaking himself, rather than letting Sordello tell his own story. He has used a very roundabout sentence to convey this, but he has not given us any fresh insight into the situation, into his reasons, or into the nature of narrative and monologue. He might as well have written ‘I would not myself have chosen this method of telling the story; I would have preferred to make the man himself speak, as he was wont to do, keeping out of sight myself. Then you could have drawn your own conclusions.’ All that he has said is contained in this simple summary; there seems no point in *if not the worst, Yet not the best expedient* (except that it provides a rhyme for *first*, a very poor excuse for writing an unnecessary line); and the twisting of the natural word-order serves to confuse the reader without rewarding him at the end.

VIGOUR

Finally vigour. It will be best to begin by explaining just what I mean by this term; for although the sense in which I am using it is quite normal, it is a narrow meaning, and we shall have to avoid confusion with other meanings of the word. By vigorous writing I mean writing which gives the impression of being in contact with real speech. It is common to speak of the spoken language as vigorous—slang, spontaneous conversation, street cries, fragments of personal letters: all these occasionally have a colourful and exciting quality that makes us feel we are in contact with a living language.

Very largely this consists in the correct use of idiom. An idiom is a phrase peculiar to a language—a phrase which will not be understood by a foreigner unless he has learnt it, since its meaning is not what we should logically expect from looking at the individual words. Thus a Frenchman, when he has no money, says that he is *à sec d'argent*: literally 'dry of money', or more colloquially *fauché*, 'reaped'. An Englishman is not 'dry' but 'short' of money, not 'reaped' but 'broke'. All readers of this book must have struggled at length with English idioms when they were learning English; but although they are so infuriating to the foreigner, it is in its idioms that the individual personality of a language lives; they are its own way of saying things.

Vigour, then, consists very largely in using the idioms of the spoken language; but it consists in slightly more than that. For in the spoken language there is a continual process of inventing and discarding phrases, a continual change and growth; and much that is used and then forgotten never even reaches the stage of becoming established idiom. And it is often exhilarating to encounter in serious literature the intimate and ephemeral atmosphere of newly-invented phrases, of vulgarisms, swearing, slang.

This quality is not an essential of good writing. It is absent from all scientific, almost all philosophical and much literary prose; but it can impart great attractiveness to an otherwise ordinary style. It is also a quality that is rather difficult to illustrate, because of the difficulty of recording examples of the spontaneity of actual speech. When speech is written down, unless this is done by a writer who possesses this quality, it loses the life which made it into speech, and becomes mere written language. When slang is written in books it has usually gone out of date; and furthermore, slang

is often confined to small groups of people: schoolboys, or even the boys of one school, may have their own slang; so may policemen, mechanics, lorry-drivers—their everyday terms, which will not be understood by others, but which are used by them with great ease and freedom. Those whose home language is not English will be both slower and faster in developing slang: slower because they lack an instinctive feeling for the language, and are more likely to invent phrases in their own language than in English; but faster because they have a rich source of colourful idiom in the literal translation from their own language into English. This latter is especially likely to develop in countries (colonies and ex-colonies, for example) where English is used as a *lingua franca*; and one form of this, known as pidgin, has in fact become famous.

It is very difficult to discuss pidgin English objectively. Partly this is because it varies so much between one part of the world to another; even more, because a social stigma has become attached to it; it was often encouraged in the past by Europeans who thought it useless to try to teach English to the natives of the country they were in, so that today it is avoided by the educated. This is probably a good thing on the whole, since pidgin is not capable of the precision and richness of English; yet in this quality of vigour it sometimes has great interest and some value. In West African pidgin, for example, degrees of size are sometimes expressed as *small*, *small-small*, *small-small-small*; off the tongue of a slightly educated African, the words roll fluently and spontaneously; and though he will and should eventually learn to speak standard English, a writer can perhaps learn something from this linguistic spontaneity.

As for native English slang, its riches are endless. When

someone is trying to teach us a job we can do perfectly well, we may send him away with the remark, *Go and teach your grandmother to suck eggs*. An event which is almost impossible happens once in a blue moon. Someone who is eccentric or mentally unbalanced has a screw loose. Phrases like this show an interest in turning the language over that is seldom dull; though the three examples quoted above are by now almost respectable—they have been used over and over, have passed into the everyday and the familiar, and are in danger of becoming clichés. The attractiveness of slang is its spontaneity: the fact that in everyday speech it is constantly being invented, echoed, and forgotten. Perhaps you can think of examples you have heard round you of phrases transliterated from the vernacular into an odd but sometimes fascinating English idiom.

Clearly this form of the language is of little use for serious intellectual discussion, which requires a fixed and clearly definable set of terms. But it is of great value to the novelist and dramatist for two reasons: it helps them to establish a feeling of contact with the actual life of the people they are writing about, and it enriches their style with an element that can be balanced against other styles. The Irish dramatist J. M. Synge has discussed this matter admirably; in the preface to his play *The Playboy of the Western World* he wrote:

All art is a collaboration; and there is little doubt that in the happy ages of literature, striking and beautiful phrases were as ready to the story-teller's or the playwright's hand, as the rich cloaks and dresses of his time. It is probable that when the Elizabethan dramatist took his ink-horn and sat down to his work he used many phrases that he had just heard, as he sat at dinner, from his mother or his children. In Ireland, those of us who know the people have the same privilege. When I was writing *The Shadow of the Glen*, some years ago, I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a

chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen. This matter, I think, is of importance, for in countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form.

Synge was himself very lucky in living among the peasants of Ireland, whose language, as he tells us frequently, was exceptionally rich and beautiful: you will find on p. 133 the story which he later made into the play he mentions here, *The Shadow of the Glen*, told in the original racy style in which he first heard it.

It will be noticed that he quotes the Elizabethan dramatists as having drawn richly from their surroundings when writing their plays; and we may illustrate this with a short speech from Ben Jonson's comedy *Bartholomew Fair*. This play is about the annual fair held upon St. Bartholomew's day and lasting sometimes as long as a fortnight: splendid material for a dramatist interested in showing the life and speech of ordinary people. Ursula, the very fat woman who sells roast pigs, is speaking: she has been cooking her pigs, and is sweating profusely with the heat:

My chair, you false faucet, you: and my morning's draught quickly, a bottle of ale, to quench me, rascal. I am all fire and fat, Nightingale, I shall e'en melt away to the first woman, a rib again, I am afraid. I do water the ground in knots, as I go, like a great garden pot; you may follow me by the SS I make.

This contains a few words we may need to look up, such as *faucet*, a tapster, one who draws ale from the barrel (actually it means the tap itself, but is here used of the man who uses it): addressed to the young man, Nightingale, who is bringing her drink; and the spoken language on which it is based

is of course that of the seventeenth and not the twentieth century, and therefore not familiar to us. Yet the vigour and inventiveness, both of Jonson and of the people he is presenting, should be apparent even through the unfamiliarity; Ursula has an endless fertility of comparison—she drips sweat as a *garden pot* (no doubt a watering-can) drips water, the trails she leaves are like SS on the ground; and an allusion to the creation of Eve, from the rib of Adam, slips easily into her colloquialism. The names she flings at Nightingale (there are more colourful examples later in the scene) have in them the feel of real speech. Jonson must have mingled among the crowds at the fair, listening, enjoying, remembering.

This passage was by an Elizabethan, and some of the finest racy writing in English is the work of the Elizabethan dramatists; but we must not fall into the error of those critics who are interested in colloquial speech only when it is safely buried in the past; and who are slightly shocked when they read the work of writers who have used the words and phrases of real contemporary speech. So here to follow is an extract from a modern novel, *Herself Surprised*, by Joyce Cary. Sara, the heroine of the book, is cook and house-keeper to Mr. Wilcher, an eccentric old gentleman whose house has just burnt down; she is speaking to the housemaid, who suspects, probably truthfully, that he started the fire himself. Sara too feels that this may be true, but she is very fond of Mr. Wilcher, and will not admit the possibility even to herself.

She meant to keep on with me, so I answered her pretty sharply:

What nonsense, a gentleman like Mr. W. didn't go in for fire-raising and she'd better keep such scandalous talk to herself. 'The fire was a fire,' I said, 'like any other and we had been due for a fire anyhow, with the bad state of

the wiring, and that old house full of treasures, and no other fire or even a robbery since it was built, eighty years.'

'Of course I wouldn't say a word,' she said, 'except to you. Didn't you see how I answered the insurance man? As if I was going to save money for the insurance, with their millions, when they take sixpence off my wages every week.'

'What a providence,' I thought, 'to send us a girl that was a very good maid and clever enough to see so far into her master; and yet so foolish that she mixed up all the insurance together, and thought a gentleman's company like Mr. W's, was all one with the Government robbers.'

It is difficult to say how Cary has achieved it, but this has the ring of real speech. Partly this lies in the choice of words, typical adjectives for someone of Sara's class and background: *pretty sharply, scandalous talk*. Sometimes her whole social attitude can be revealed in a single word, as when she calls the insurance company a *gentleman's company*: her knowledge of business is not much greater than that of the maid she is scorning, but she treats it with great respect because she associated it with Mr. W. and because it is not part of the Government, which she has been taught to dislike. Quite as important as the choice of words is the construction of the sentences, such as that beginning *The fire was a fire*: lurching on from one clause to another, joining them all together loosely with *and* or *yet*; or the housemaid's habit of beginning *As if I was going to . . .* The slight grammatical mistakes, too, (*since it was built, eighty years*) are used with skill; quite possibly people like Sara and the maid would in real life have made even more mistakes, but Cary, though not afraid to reproduce them, has done so with restraint, picking out only those which seem to capture the feel of their language.

Of course this analysis can only point to some of the means which Cary uses to achieve his effect; but really to

feel his success we need to know at first hand how Cockneys speak, we need to hear for ourselves how well he has devised sentences that shall sound convincing. Here in fact we have a case for the next chapter, which discusses what limitations there must be to a foreigner's appreciation of English literature.

Yet even here we can point out that the passage is by no means closed to the foreign reader, just as the passage from Jonson is not closed to the modern reader, who reads earlier literature somewhat like a foreigner. For we notice a paradox, that when a dramatist or novelist bases speech on this ephemeral and rapidly changing aspect of language it may retain permanent value, and be of interest to readers many centuries later or with very different backgrounds. If we were to hear the everyday, colloquial speech of Elizabethan times it would sound strange, perhaps almost incomprehensible at times; yet on even a first reading of Jonson's dialogue, before we have understood all the terms, we can feel its vigour. This is because the writer who uses the spoken language in this way does not simply copy what he hears; he allows his imagination to be set working by it, and devises a style based closely on the colloquial, but casting its flexible phrases into more permanent form. This suggests an interesting possibility for those who write English in countries where it is not the home language: that they may be able to develop a personal style incorporating some of the attractiveness, the colourful clumsiness, of those who stumble in English; but such a possibility clearly has many dangers, and could be judged only on results.

As a final example I shall take a few lines by Chaucer; written in the fourteenth century, they show even more completely the permanence of language such as this. They come

from the *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*: he is describing a monk, a worldly, irreligious man. (The spelling of this extract has been modernized. *Pulléd*—pronounced as two syllables—means ‘plucked’; *recheless* means ‘irresponsible, shirking his duties’; *thilké*—two syllables—means ‘that same’.)

He gave not for that text a pulléd hen
That saith, that hunters be not holy men;
Nor that a monk, when he is recheless
Is likened to a fish that is waterless;
That is to say, a monk out of his cloister.
But thilké text held he not worth an oyster.

Here are two homely and everyday similes introduced into Chaucer’s attack. The first, *he gave not for that text a pulléd hen*, must surely come from country speech; the second, *not worth an oyster*, may, mischievously, have been invented by Chaucer himself, but it has the flavour of real speech. Here is Chaucer condemning a cleric he despises in a casual, joking,—almost friendly—tone, and therefore condemning him all the more effectively.

Simplicity, freshness, precision, vigour. These are not the only qualities of language well used, nor is any one of them essential to any form of writing; and we have already seen that some of them may be incompatible with others. But they are all qualities which can improve literature, and which are found outside literature, in more everyday uses of the language. They are all qualities for which we may cultivate a sensitive ear, and which we may learn to recognize, judge, and appreciate. Such a feeling will help us to come to literature already looking for many of the right qualities.

As an end to this chapter, I should like to quote a few lines from T. S. Eliot’s poem *Little Gidding*. In language that

has many of the qualities he describes, he speaks of the effort to write well; and shows the sort of sensitivity to words that should be the basis of all good writing, literary, scientific, or familiar:

And every phrase
And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
Taking its place to support the others,
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
An easy commerce of the old and the new,
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
The complete consort dancing together) . . .

TAILPIECE: *Passages for Discussion*

General principles are all very well; but it is the actual reading of literature that matters, and principles take on their fullest meaning only when we discover them for ourselves in reading. So although this chapter is full of examples, here are some more. They are slightly longer, and I hope readers will read them over and think about them, perhaps even write their own commentaries, before turning to the remarks which follow.

I have chosen one passage to illustrate each of the four virtues we have discussed; but of course one virtue does not exclude others, and the precision of Collingwood does not prevent an occasional touch of vigour, just as the vigour of Faulkner is presented with freshness.

I. THE KITCHEN AT HARMONIE

It was in the kitchen that on this particular day Andrina's services were needed at the homestead. The kitchen was a big sunny room with a fire-

place resembling a low raised platform taking up one entire side of it. At one end of this platform was the door of the great brick oven, built out into the yard. At the other was a small modern stove. The stove was seldom used and most of the cooking was done in three-legged pots and pans over an open fire in the centre of the platform. This fire was lighted always between two large stones set at some distance apart, and across which, to support a big black kettle, rested the flattened-out iron rims of two old wagon wheels. In a corner, close to the oven door, stood a long wooden oven-shovel.

The shovel, the chairs against the whitewashed walls, the meal-chest, the kneading trough, the bucket-rack with its row of brass-bound wooden buckets, were all, like the ceiling of the room and its doors and window-frames, made of yellow-wood grown rich in colour with age and beautiful with the constant use of years. At one end of the room was a low brass stand, brought out from Holland by the first van der Merwe, who, as a Landrost in the service of the Dutch East India Company, had settled at the Cape. On this stood a copper jam-pot, shaped like a huge fish-kettle, in which preserves were still made. Above the lidded jam-pot was a deep wooden rack bright with polished copper baking-pots and pans, also of the old Landrost's time and still in constant use. The scoured cleanliness of the tables and racks, the dazzling polish of copper and brass, the deep rich colouring of the yellow-wood ceiling, the dark mist-smeared mud floor, and the high, wide, many-paned windows, made the kitchen at Harmonie one of the most beautiful rooms in the old gabled house.

PAULINE SMITH

This passage is taken from *The Beadle*, a novel of country life in South Africa in the earlier nineteenth century. The life of these Dutch farmers, living in remote valleys, seldom or never visiting the large towns, was one of simple customs and rich traditions. Pauline Smith has tried to reflect in her book their quiet but passionate mentality, their deep religious feeling, their kindly but stern morality. She has written simply, in a style that is calm but deeply felt.

In this extract, taken from early in the book, she is describing the kitchen at Harmonie, the great farmstead of the van der Merwes, the leading family of the district. The

description might seem at first a mere list of objects, but if we read carefully we shall see that it is composed with skill and loving care, that through this simple description the whole life of the farm is conveyed to us. Look for example at the sentence which tells us that the shovel, the chairs, the kneading trough and the bucket-rack were all *made of yellow-wood grown rich in colour with age and beautiful with the constant use of years*. This mellowing of the colour of the wood, it is being suggested, is something natural and pleasing—like growth almost, so that we can feel about the kitchen that it has something of the life of nature, that it is not simply dead or artificial. This is only a hint, of course; but there can be no doubt of the affection with which the writer is presenting these simple objects.

The next sentence contains the information that the brass stand was *brought out from Holland by the first van der Merwe, who, as a Landrost in the service of the Dutch East India Company, had settled at the Cape*. Why are we given this information, apparently unconnected with the kitchen? As we read *The Beadle*, we come to realize very strongly the continuity of life in this remote valley, the strength of traditions and habits that do not change from generation to generation. This feeling is given us by touches such as this—the constant reminders of links between past and present. Later in the description we are told that the baking-pots and pans were *also of the old Landrost's time and still in constant use*.

We can see now that the kitchen is not merely being described; it is being given, by the simplest means, a sort of personality. Another element in this 'personality' is the sense of largeness and generosity it arouses; nothing about it is mean: the windows are *high, wide, many-paned*, the pot rack is a *deep wooden rack*, the fireplace has a *great brick oven* (this

last, you will notice, contrasted with a *small modern stove*: the one thing that seems slightly out of place, and which is seldom used).

After this careful description we can feel that the writer is justified in concluding that *the kitchen at Harmonie (was) one of the most beautiful rooms in the old gabled house*. General terms like *beautiful*, or *delightful*, will not be used too often by a good descriptive writer, because they tell us nothing precise about the object; but here there is nothing vague in its use, it is simply a summing-up of the very careful account we have been given: accompanied by a further calling of our attention to her main point about life at Harmonie, in the phrase *old gabled house*.

This account is very simple; and we may conclude by pointing out why this simplicity is so appropriate. Pauline Smith is describing the simple life of simple people, and so she has used a style that is never very different from the way they themselves speak and think. Hemingway too, in the extract quoted on p. 6, is describing a simple old man: and we know that he has deliberately adopted this style, for in many of his other books his language has a sophisticated, fast-moving tone that he has dropped here. So we may conclude by repeating the warning that such a simple style is not the only way of writing well, not always the most appropriate: style should always be judged in relation to the whole intention of the book where it is used.

II. LIFE IN AMERICA

I want very much a little of your wit, my dear sister—a letter of yours just to bandy back a pun or two across the Atlantic, and send a quibble over the Floridas. Now, by this time you have crumpled up your large bonnet, what

do you wear?—a cap! Do you put your hair in paper of nights? Do you pay the Misses Birkbeck a morning visit? Have you any tea, or do you milk-and-water with them? What places of worship do you go to—the Quakers, the Moravians, the Unitarians, or the Methodists? Are there any flowers in bloom you like? Any beautiful heaths? Any streets full of corset-makers? What sort of shoes have you to put those pretty feet of yours in? Do you ride on horseback? What do you have for breakfast, dinner and supper, without mentioning lunch and bite, and wet and snack, and a bit to stay one's stomach? Do you get any spirits? Now you might easily distil some whisky, and, going into the woods, set up a whisky shop for the monkeys! Do you and the other ladies get groggy on anything? A little so-so-ish, so as to be seen home with a lantern? . . .

JOHN KEATS

This passage is taken from a letter of Keats to his brother and sister-in-law, who had emigrated to America; an America that was very different then (1819) from the America of today, as we can see from the references to Puritan places of worship, and Keats's feeling that it must all be very wild and strange. Keats is most famous as a poet, and had he not died at the age of twenty-five he might have become almost the greatest of all English poets; but his letters are in their way quite as remarkable as his poems. In this letter he is being playful, and with quite irresistible charm. He is writing to ask his sister-in-law about their everyday life in the settlement, and does so by throwing out dozens of suggestions of how she might be spending her days. I have chosen this extract because of the fertility and freshness of language with which Keats does this. Even in asking for a letter he is entertaining: *just to bandy back a pun or two across the Atlantic, and send a quibble over the Floridas*. We feel that he knows how silly their correspondence is, yet in this ability to contrast its triviality with the enormous distance between them he surely shows that he is capable of being very serious too. (We

would soon discover that this is quite true if we read other passages from the same letter.) Then comes the list of suggestions, the ways of passing one's day; each is a continual slight surprise, each has a freshness of language that prevents it from being dull. Going to bed must be described by mentioning an unexpected yet perfectly normal domestic detail: does she put her hair in papers to curl it, as she no doubt did when Keats knew her in England? His way of speaking so affectionately about small and personal things shows his intimacy with his sister; and reminds us too of the observation made earlier in this chapter that by their very informality and lack of care personal letters are often capable of a great simplicity and charm.

Keats wants the town described: first he asks the obvious questions: *Are there any flowers in bloom you like? Any beautiful beaches?*—then the gloriously unexpected *Any streets full of corset-makers?* He asks about her meals: *breakfast, dinner and supper* complete the ordinary list, then come one or two absurdities to show that he doesn't want only to be ordinary: *lunch and bite, and wet and snack*. And in the last phrase, *a bit to stay one's stomach*, perhaps one of his sister's own favourite remarks, we see that he may be hinting at a habit of hers of continually eating between meals. He asks about drink; and to show he is not too earnest, he not only suggests that they may make their own whisky but that they may *set up a whiskey-shop for the monkeys*. And do they get drunk? Here we must use a ladylike phrase so as not to use such a coarse, masculine word as 'drunk', so Keats makes fun of ladylike speech: *a little so-so-ish*.

Any piece of writing should be considered in relation to its intention; and the first thing to realize about this passage is that its intention is playful and affectionate. There may be

an occasional touch of seriousness, but Keats is never too serious, nor solemn. So his language shows no daring originality, but only a continual slight freshness. And because of the familiarity of the letter, he frequently comes close to real speech. Indeed, though I have chosen the passage as an example of freshness, it could just as well be praised for its vigour.

III. QUESTION AND ANSWER

The principle applies not merely to archaeology, but to every kind of history. Where written sources are used, it implies that any action attributed by the sources to any character must be understood in the same way. Julius Caesar, we are told, invaded Britain in two successive years. What did he do it for? The question is hardly ever asked by historians; and I can remember none who has tried to answer it scientifically, that is, by means of evidence. There is, of course, no evidence to speak of except that contained in Julius Caesar's own narrative. There he never says what he meant to effect by his invasions of Britain. It is the fact of his silence that constitutes our chief evidence as to what his intention was. Whatever he meant to bring about, his intention was one which he decided to conceal from his readers. In the light of a general acquaintance with the *Commentaries*, the likeliest explanation for this concealment was that whatever his purpose had been he had failed to achieve it. I then compared the strength of his expeditionary forces with that of the army sent over by Claudius, nearly a century later, and this settled it. Caesar must have intended no mere punitive expedition or demonstration of force, like that of his German expedition in 55, but the complete conquest of the country. Once more, this view of mine may be mistaken; but future historians will have to reckon with the question I have raised, and either accept my answer or produce a better one.

People who do not understand historical thinking, but are obsessed by scissors and paste, will say: 'It is useless to raise the question, because if your only information comes from Caesar, and Caesar has not told you his plans, you cannot ever know what they were.' These are the people who, if they met you one Saturday afternoon with a fishing-rod, creel and camp-stool,

walking towards the river, would ask: 'Going fishing?' And I suppose that if they were serving on a jury when some one was tried for attempted murder because he had put arsenic in his wife's tea on Monday, and cyanide of potassium in her coffee on Tuesday, and on Wednesday broke her spectacles with a revolver-bullet, and knocked a piece out of her right ear with another on Thursday, and now pleaded not guilty, they would press for his acquittal because as he never admitted that he meant to murder her there could be no evidence that he did mean to.

R. G. COLLINGWOOD

This comes from one of the most interesting and carefully written books of its kind in English: the *Autobiography* of the Oxford philosopher R. G. Collingwood. The 'principle' which he mentions is a theory of logic which he held: that no piece of knowledge is worth anything until we can see it as the answer to a definite question; he calls it 'the principle of question and answer'. Here he has been applying it to archaeological and historical research, and has chosen as an illustration the problem of Julius Caesar's invasion of England.

A thorough understanding of the theories behind this passage would require a reading not only of the rest of this book but also of Collingwood's book on History; we cannot in this short note explain his idea of 'scissors-and-paste' history, the unthinking acceptance of what other people have written. But I have nevertheless felt this passage to be well worth choosing, because its clarity and precision should be apparent to all. Collingwood is always a joy to read, because of the constant feeling he gives that he is using words with care, and knows exactly what he means by them. Of course, since he is writing philosophy he is interested only in the denotations of words, and his precision is of the sort we have called legal or scientific precision, but that is probably best called philosophical precision (see p. 97 in

Chapter III for a further example of the difference between the two kinds of precision).

We may take as an example the way he uses one of the most important terms in this passage: the word *evidence*. There is no doubt that he knows just what he does and does not mean by this word. The second paragraph, an attack on 'people who do not understand historical thinking', is about people who do not understand the nature of evidence. He quotes the assertion that the only kind of evidence for a man's actions is what he says himself, and then ridicules it with two examples of obviously irrefutable evidence of another kind. He does not even trouble to remark, in this paragraph, that the point he is proving is that these other kinds of evidence exist: his reasoning has been so clear that this is obvious to any attentive reader. He even permits himself a touch of humour in inserting the ridiculous question, with its touch of genuine speech, '*Going fishing?*' He can allow this vigour because it in no way detracts from the precision with which he makes his point.

IV. SOLDIERS IN THE TRAIN

Cadet Lowe raised a sophisticated eye. 'Say, what-cher drinking, anyway?'

'Brother, I dunno. Fellow that makes it was gave a Congressional medal last Chuesday because he has got a plan to stop the war. Enlist all the Dutchmen in our army and make 'em drink so much of his stuff a day for forty days, see? Ruin any war. Get the idea?' . . .

Cadet Lowe accepted the bottle, drank briefly, gagged and spat his drink. The other supporting him massaged his back. 'Come on, come on, they don't nothing taste that bad.' Kindly cupping Lowe's opposite shoulder in his palm he forced the bottle mouthwards again. Lowe released the bottle, defending himself. 'Try again. I got you. Drink it, now.' . . .

'Hell, man, I can't drink it.'

'Why, sure you can. Listen: think of flowers. Think of your poor grey-haired mother hanging on the front gate and sobbing her grey-haired heart out. Listen, think of having to go to work again when you get home. Ain't war hell? I would of been a corporal at least, if she had just hung on another year.'

'Hell, I can't.'

'Why, you got to,' his new friend told him kindly, pushing the bottle suddenly in his mouth and tilting it. To be flooded or to swallow were his choices so he drank and retained it. His belly rose and hung, then sank reluctant.

'There now, wasn't so bad, was it? Remember, this hurts me to see my good licker going more than it does you. But she do kind of smack of gasoline, don't she?'

WILLIAM FAULKNER

This comes from the first scene of *Soldier's Pay*, a novel about American soldiers returning from The First World War. It is not an easy passage. William Faulkner is not an easy novelist (though in the opinion of many critics a very fine one); but the difficulty here is less in the novelist's style than in our ignorance of American idiom and American speech habits. He is describing a meeting in a train between two drunken soldiers and a young air force cadet whom they are trying to persuade to drink with them; and his aim has been to capture the very nature of their speech, with all its irregularities, swearing, slang and occasionally brilliant touches: just as Ben Jonson aimed to catch that of the market-women of Bartholomew Fair.

Jo Gilligan, ex-soldier, the hero of the book, makes his first appearance in this chapter, very drunk. Faulkner is not simply going to tell us that he is drunk, but intends to *show* his drunkenness in his speech: even though this will entail giving his writing some of the incoherence of a drunken man's remarks. He has noticed how such men alternate

between toughness and tears, aggressive and sentimental speeches. In the first paragraph comes the kind of fantastic but entertaining scheme that a drunken mind would produce: talking of his undrinkable whisky, he suggests: *enlist all the Dutchmen in our army and make them drink so much of his stuff a day for forty days, see? Ruin any war.* Then after trying to bully the cadet into drinking, he begins to cajole him: *Listen: think of flowers. Think of your poor grey-haired mother banging on the front gate and sobbing her grey-haired heart out.* The drunken exaggeration here (*grey-haired mother, grey-haired heart*) prevents us from taking it too seriously: we are not meant to weep but to laugh, and at the same time to admire the splendid absurdity of the drunken man. We can even feel him lurching confidentially towards his hearer as he begins *Listen!* And then after this half-tearful, half-ridiculous appeal to the Cadet's mother (remember that all he is trying to do is persuade him to drink some bad whisky) he comes to the thought that is uppermost in his mind: the war has ended. *I would of been a corporal at least, if she had just bung on another year.* He does not know if he is glad or sorry that it is over. And here in the midst of all this uproariousness Faulkner has brought in the main theme of his book: soldiers after the war is over.

Faulkner is trying to capture the very note of the voice of a drunken American soldier. He has recorded the grammatical errors (more freely even than Joyce Cary) and the thick speech (*Chuesday*). His own prose, in the narrative parts, also has some of the same crude vigour: *His belly rose and bung, then sank reluctant.*

Of course Faulkner has not simply written down an actual conversation, though for all we know he may have got the idea of his scene from something he actually heard.

But to select and polish just those few sentences that shall give the feel of real soldiers really speaking is a task needing great patience and a feeling for language. And perhaps the best way to appreciate this passage is to read it aloud until we feel convinced that we are hearing the voices of the men speaking.

II

Literature and Society

LIKE almost everything that man does, literature can be viewed as a social activity. The poet, the novelist and the dramatist are members of a community, writing for the rest of that community. This fact needs dwelling on for a while, since this book is addressed to readers of English literature who do not belong to the same community as those who wrote it.

What are the drawbacks of this? What handicaps has the non-English, and especially the non-European, reader when reading English literature? Some will say that since literature is addressed to and emerges from a particular community, it can be appreciated only by members of that community: that English literature can never mean much except to the English, or at least to the English and the closely related communities of Western Europe. Others will say that since literature has a universal appeal anyone in any part of the world can without difficulty appreciate a book written in any other part of the world. Both these views seem to me false, though the second is probably truer than the first.

It is truer in this sense: that everyone who has tried knows the difficulty of appreciating a foreign literature; therefore few readers are likely to be misled by the brushing aside of these difficulties: aware of them already, they need telling of the opposite. There are, it is true, ways of misunderstanding

the literature of another society or (what is much the same sometimes) of another age without realizing it, but these occur only at a much higher level; the difficulties in the way of readers of this book are all perfectly obvious. The universal value of literature, on the other hand, may at first seem less obvious, and is therefore worth stressing. This is best done by reminding ourselves what literature is about.

The only phrase which would adequately describe the subject-matter of literature would be something very general, such as 'man's fate', or 'human life', since literature can deal with every possible human activity. Some of these activities are peculiar to one society, others, in varying forms, are more widespread, some are universal. So we should expect that literature will, according to its subject, make a varying appeal to those outside the community. I intend in the next few pages to discuss some specimens of English literature with widely differing subjects; and to consider how easily they are likely to appeal to readers in other communities.

Courting must be among the most universal of human activities, and the poetry associated with it, the love lyric, should therefore be of value to an almost unlimited audience. Here are two verses, both from love lyrics, written in very different times and places: the first by a Roman in the first century B.C.; the second by an Englishman in the seventeenth century A.D.:

Odi et amo. quare id faciam, fortasse requiris.

Nescio. sed fieri sentio et excrucior.

(I hate and love. It may be you are puzzled how that can be.

I do not know. But I feel that it is so, and am tortured.)

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may

Old Time is still a-flying,

And this same flower that smiles today

Tomorrow will be dying.

Here are two aspects of love which are found everywhere—the agony of a lover who has seen the worthlessness of his mistress, yet cannot stop loving her; and advice to maidens to find lovers while they are still young. The paradox of ‘I hate and love’—an apparent contradiction, but in fact the truest way to state the situation—should need no explanation to a reader of any society. The appreciation of the second verse depends, it is true, on the reader knowing the symbolism: that flowers are common symbols of pleasure, especially sexual pleasure, that *gather ye rosebuds while ye may* can be taken literally, but must also be taken as meaning ‘enjoy love while you can’; once we know this, however (and it is not a very abstruse symbolism), there is no cultural barrier to the enjoyment of this poem: the experience it deals with is the same the world over—there will always be young girls to give this advice to, just as unhappy lovers will always live in torture.

As an example of an apparently less universal subject for literature, I have chosen Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (the play is further discussed in Chapter V). This is the story of a Scottish nobleman whose ambition, uncovered and used by his ruthless wife, drove him first to murder his king, then to kill his friend Banquo, then to rule as a tyrant until defeated by an English army under the son of the dead king. At first we might think that such a play would depend on a knowledge of the politics of the time, an understanding of Macbeth’s claim to the throne, how he had to set about establishing his power. In fact, as we discover on reading it, the play depends on none of these things—indeed Shakespeare himself and his audience were ignorant of them. This is great drama, and deals not with the particularities of the situation, but with the fundamentals of fear, ambition and

love. Successful generals are often ambitious, and often tempted to seize power that is not theirs; murder is universal, so is the excessive love of a powerful and evil wife. In the great scenes in which Lady Macbeth is urging her husband to the murder of King Duncan, it is not difficult to perceive these universal qualities of fear and ambition under the particularities of the Scottish king and the general who, though he really lived, has been transformed by Shakespeare into quite a different figure, one suited to the purpose of his play. Lady Macbeth's phrases when she is urging on her weak husband to the murder need little comment or explanation: she fears he is not hard enough for the deed:

Yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way.

She finds his thoughts expressed in his countenance, and uses a variation on the old metaphor of 'reading' someone's thoughts:

Your face, my thane, is as a book, where men
May read strange matters.

—and she advises cunning and concealment:

Look like the innocent flower
But be the serpent under it.

One may need to have a word like *thane* (lord) explained, but such difficulties are trivial. Anyone who knows what milk is will feel how appropriately it is used as a symbol of 'human kindness', as something to which murder and cruelty are foreign; the compression of the last quotation, depending on the contrast between the beauty of the flower and the concealed danger of the serpent, and the fact that a

serpent might well in fact be found so lurking, derives from characteristics of flowers and serpents known to all; the full appreciation of the second quotation may possibly depend on seeing how a hackneyed metaphor is here developed and given new life, but very nearly a full appreciation might come simply from our realizing that an open book is exposed for all to read. Milk, book, serpent, flower are all familiar objects found in any society (books are of course confined to literate societies, but are certain to be everyday objects to any reader of Shakespeare); and in fact the greatness of Shakespeare consists very largely in the tremendous significance he can impart to trivial objects, familiar to all.

In short: it would be a very superficial reading of *Macbeth* which decided that it depends for its greatness on ideas and qualities peculiar to one society. We have seen, from an examination of the language, that Shakespeare is concerned with fundamentals, with those aspects of the situation which link it with innumerable similar situations; and nothing is needed for its appreciation save an intelligent curiosity about life and an adequate understanding of the English language.

Finally, I will select some works of literature which unquestionably contain elements peculiar to their own society, and consider how far even such works are universal in their appeal. Let us begin with a political poem: politics is by its very nature an activity of interest only within one society, since it deals with how to solve the particular problems of that society. In some periods it has been a favourite subject for poets, and never more so than today. W. H. Auden has written a poem entitled *1st September 1939* (the day on which Hitler invaded Poland and so began the Second World

War); it begins with an account of the particular time and place:

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade . . .

The most impressive verse is perhaps the second, which surveys the history of modern Europe, and wonders what has caused the present catastrophe:

Accurate scholarship can
Unearth the whole offence
From Luther until now
That has driven a culture mad;
Find what occurred at Linz,
What huge imago made
A psychopathic god:
I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done,
Do evil in return.

The power of this verse comes from its contrast between two ways of regarding the calamity *that has driven a culture mad*. Serious study and thought can suggest to us the complex causes, reaching right back to the sixteenth century; Auden is not suggesting that these theories are wrong, but he reminds us that there is another method of analysis—as a moral issue, a very simple matter of right and wrong. The former view is that of the intellectual few (*accurate scholarship*); the latter—and this makes it important—is open to everyone:

I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn.

We may in fact say of this verse that its strength lies in the way it moves from the particular to the universal, from the political and historical analysis of Western European society to the moral statement of wider, simpler implications. The poem is written for members of a particular society; yet at the same time places their interest in a wider, more important setting, and so reaches out to a fuller value.

A more difficult case is that of Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, which tells the biblical story of the Fall of Man. The professed aim of the poem is 'to justify the ways of God to men', an aim which naturally raises many theological issues; and since Milton, like all intelligent men of his time, was interested in theology, long passages of the poem deal with questions of Christian doctrine: questions of little direct interest even to the twentieth-century Christian, and of much less interest to the non-Christian, non-European reader. If we become interested in the long discussions on free-will and predestination, or in the account of seventeenth-century astronomical theories or the medieval view of man as the link between the angels above him and the animals below him, our interest is largely historical—an interest, that is, not in questions which concern us, but in questions which concerned some past age or some different society which we are studying. And a historical interest, valuable as it is, is fundamentally different from a literary interest, which always assumes that the work we are reading was addressed to *us*. Here then appears to be a great poem with no direct appeal to the twentieth-century, non-Christian reader.

Yet this is not really so. For in the first place, even a historical interest will only be aroused if the work originally had some value. To understand and appreciate certain

passages of *Paradise Lost* some study of seventeenth-century thought is necessary; but when we have made this study, when we have managed to place ourselves nearer to the position of Milton's contemporary readers, we shall still not find the work interesting unless it deals with ideas which those readers took seriously, that is, unless it is a work which they found valuable. All great writers write for their contemporaries; and we are here considering passages which have ceased to speak to those who are not contemporaries. Yet even these readers, developing a historical interest in them, will not find them rewarding unless they possessed, in the first place, some importance for contemporaries. So we are back at the immediate, non-historical value of the work.

But there is also another, and more important consideration: that these passages, which fulfil the aim of the poem by reasoning and theological discussion, do not strike us as central to *Paradise Lost*. It is comparatively easy to justify the ways of God to men in this way—nothing is needed but a clear head and a knowledge of theology. Milton has tried to do it in a more difficult and, ultimately, more convincing way: by showing us the forces at work in the Fall of Man, by putting into the poem the guile of Satan, the justice of God, the motives of Adam and Eve, not simply described, as they might be by a theologian, but actually *there* in the poem. Anyone who knew about Christianity could explain that the reward of sin was death, and could describe the terrors of death: Milton has actually created these terrors in his verse, in his unforgettable picture of Death gloating over the news that henceforth man will be his prey:

So saying, with delight he snuffed the smell
Of mortal change on Earth. As when a flock
Of ravenous fowl, though many a league remote,

Against the day of battle, to a field,
Where armies lie encamped, come flying, lured
With scent of living carcasses designed
For death, the following day, in bloody fight.
So scented the grim feature, and upturned
His nostril wide into the murky air,
Sagacious of his quarry from so far.

These lines are not simply good theology; they are great poetry. The careful comparison with a flock of vultures puts the scene in front of us as no general discussion could do; much of the horror of the scene is expressed in such words as '*with delight he snuffed the smell*', or '*murky air*'. The passage in fact illustrates many of the qualities described in the next chapter.

Milton is writing in terms not only of theology but also of mythology. By mythology I mean dogma and doctrine *in action*: embodied in stories and dramatic situations, not just described in general terms. It is possible to describe the passage of the seasons as a geographer; but such a description could never capture our imagination like the Greek myth of Proserpine, the daughter of the corn-goddess, who revisits her mother every spring from the underworld. Milton, then, is putting into his poem not only Christian dogma but also Christian mythology;¹ the story of the fall of Lucifer and the fall of man, the characters of Satan and his fallen angels, of God and Christ and the archangels, of Adam and Eve—all these are brought to life in the poem, and its main themes are enacted through the myths. Mythology is usually of far greater appeal to members of another society than is

¹ I am not by using this word meaning to suggest that these Christian beliefs are false. By 'mythology' I mean *a set of stories of religious significance, widely believed in a society*. There can be true mythologies.

doctrine, for the stories that we call myths are based on universal human attitudes and ways of behaving; and the dramatization of these attitudes is the putting before us of what we know. There has been much discussion in the last twenty years of the importance of myth in literature, and of these 'archetypal patterns' underlying poetry. All we can say with certainty is that myths carry a wider significance than the abstract statement of beliefs.

Now when we consider this aspect of *Paradise Lost* we find that it is in the same category as *Macbeth*. We need only remove some incidental obstacles to understanding, to find that Eve's motives in eating the apple, or Adam's motives in deciding to do the same, or Satan's wickedness, are conveyed to us with a dramatic impact: with the same sense that feelings which we know are being shown us with a new insight, that we got from *Macbeth*.

There is a further complication in the fact that the non-Christian reader, even when he does not misunderstand the poem, may still tend to misjudge it; finding it remote from his interests, he may pass a different judgement on the value of certain aspects than did the reader for whom it was intended. He may place a higher value on marital love than did Milton, may consider freedom more important and obedience less so, may find much that is admirable in the wickedness of Satan (many critics have in fact suggested that without realizing it Milton himself did this). We can do nothing about these differences; there is a point at which literary criticism ceases, at which we perceive the intention of a work of literature and the success with which the author has achieved it, and then say, I disapprove of that intention. Here we are on such fundamentals that we move from literary criticism to religion or philosophy, and we are

forced to consider the basis of all our beliefs. Fortunately this seldom happens. The aims of a great writer are usually such that any sympathetic reader can place a high value on them, even if he does not share the writer's beliefs in full. Our main desire in this book is to find, underneath the superficial difficulties that we shall encounter, those general qualities which give a work its value for us; and we need not worry much, at present, about the even more fundamental moral differences that may alienate us even from the best-written book.

So far we have considered the problem theoretically, examining the subjects of works of literature and asking how wide their appeal is likely to be. Let us now look at it from the other end—from the viewpoint of the foreign reader. What are the obstacles which he feels will keep him from a full enjoyment of English literature? And how much do they matter? It seems to me that there are three questions which may worry such a reader: language, environment, and the lack of a literature in his own language.

By language difficulties I do not mean an inability to read English fluently. I assume that ability in the reader of this book, which is written for those who have mastered the language but are unfamiliar with literature. But mastering the language is a matter of degree; and knowing the meanings of all the words one meets may not be enough for a full response to poetry. For a poet, as we shall see, is constantly trying to use the full resources of a word—its central meaning plus its wealth of associations—choosing just what he wishes it to convey in a particular context; and he hopes that his perfect reader will be sensitive even to the most delicate shades of meaning, will attach to important words those

feelings which constant use since childhood has made part of their meaning.

Now the non-English reader who reads English fluently may have no difficulty over the denotations of words; but he may often find that they bring to him very different associations from those intended by the writer. The way a poet uses the associations of words will be further discussed in Chapter III; here in the meantime is a simple example from Shakespeare's *Henry V*. The king is comparing his own position, with its ceremony and its heavy responsibilities, with that of one of his humbler subjects, whom he calls

—the wretched slave,
Who with a body filled and vacant mind
Gets him to rest crammed with distressful bread.

The meaning of that is not difficult; it is clear that the life of the *wretched slave* is one of poverty and squalor. But what may not be so clear to the non-English reader is the powerful sense of unpleasantness conveyed by the passage. It is chiefly the words *crammed* and *distressful* which suggest this unpleasantness; and the feeling is carried over to the word *bread* as well. Bread is so familiar a word to the English reader, it represents something so commonplace, that it is not difficult to see how in this passage it can be made to sound unpleasant. Shakespeare achieves much the same effect with this word in *Hamlet*. Hamlet is talking of the wickedness of his uncle, who secretly murdered his father:

He took my father grossly, full of bread.

(By *took*, of course, he means 'took his life'.) Here again, the unpleasantness of the death of Hamlet's father, already suggested by the word *grossly*, is made stronger by the sense of overeating and discomfort in *full of bread*. In each case,

Shakespeare has added suggestions of unpleasantness to the word *bread* by the way he has used it in relation to the other words; and for a full response an attitude towards the word is needed that will enable one to be sensitive to such suggestions.

What does all this mean in practice? It means that the non-English-speaking reader is likely to miss, at any rate for a time, some of the overtones and extra meanings of words. Very largely, this is a question of experience: if one of the Shakespeare quotations above is explained, the other will be much clearer. And the more literature we have read and understood, the more we shall become sensitive to even the slightest overtones of a word skilfully used. This difficulty will in fact decrease and disappear as we read: perhaps that applies to most difficulties.

By difficulties of environment I refer to a less important aspect of the previous discussion of the subject-matter of literature. Not in subject but in details there may be references and descriptions which are strange to the foreigner. This happens most obviously in nature poetry. For the last 150 years there has been a strong tradition in England of poetry dealing with the beauty and influence of forests, mountains, animals, flowers, the sea. Much of this has been written by poets with the eye of a naturalist, who observed with careful accuracy the shape of a tree, the colour of a flower, the sound of a bird's song. Those who have never seen a daffodil or a crocus, a peacock or a hare, never heard a nightingale or seen Lake Windermere, often feel in consequence that such poetry is closed to them, that it is written for those with actual knowledge of the objects described.

It is surprising, in practice, how little this is so: how easy it is to appreciate the poems of a countryside one has never

seen. English-speaking readers in America, Canada, Australia, South Africa do not seem greatly handicapped by this drawback; and indeed, there must be many English readers of poetry who have never heard a nightingale, yet lose nothing when reading the poems of Crashaw, Keats and Bridges about this bird. The reason for this is rather difficult to explain, but very interesting: to Keats, when writing his *Ode to a Nightingale*, the bird was something very different from the nightingale of the zoologist or the naturalist, even of the bird watcher. The poem is about a nightingale; but in a fuller sense of the word *about* it is about the thoughts and feelings of Keats as he listens to the bird's song, and in the poem itself he has hardly described the song. To the naturalist, the meaning of the word *nightingale* is 'a certain bird, of such-and-such a shape, colour, size, with a song of such-and-such notes, recognizable by the following characteristics'. A careful reading of Keats's poem suggests that the meaning of the word in the poem would be better described by something like the following: 'a bird whose song is here deeply moving and causes us to reflect on the miseries of our present situation as human beings; a bird often celebrated by previous poets, to which a certain literary tradition has clung; a symbol of happiness and freedom, etc.' One could define this 'meaning', this statement of what the word *nightingale* means in this poem, more and more carefully, and it would become apparent that the actual appearance of the bird and the sound of its song is an unimportant element in it. And the poem is consequently open even to those who have never heard it sing.

So much for the actual details; the attitude which most nineteenth-century poets have towards nature presents a rather different problem. Though there has always been

nature poetry in English, the Romantic attitude towards nature, which finds in it a source of inspiration and almost a substitute for religion, does not go back much earlier than Wordsworth and Coleridge, who wrote at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. This is the time of the Industrial Revolution, when the transformation of England and English life had become strong enough to influence every aspect of the people's thought; and though it would be an oversimplification to say that the Industrial Revolution caused the poets' fondness for nature, there is likely to be some connexion between the two. The attitude towards nature of most nineteenth-century poets is an urban one: though Wordsworth himself, and several others, lived most of their lives in the country, they are largely expressing the attitude of a town-dwelling society: nature to them is seldom hostile, is considered more as a source of spiritual influence, or of relaxation, than of food; man's attitude towards her is one of reverence and contemplation, rather than the memory of his struggle for existence. Thus Wordsworth was able to contrast, in his poem *Tintern Abbey*, the depressing effect of town life with what seemed to him the fuller life he could lead among mountains and rivers. He tells of his love for nature as a young man:

For nature then . . .
To me was all in all . . .
The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite.

Varying forms of this attitude to nature are found, more or less consciously, in many, perhaps most, of the great

writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Arnold, Ruskin, Hardy, Lawrence. The case of Lawrence is particularly interesting, since he felt that modern European society had lost an important form of experience through concentrating on intellectual activity at the expense of the 'life of the sense', the 'dark gods', more primitive, often sexual, feelings; and in consequence he was very interested in other societies, feeling that those who were less civilized, leading a less intellectual life, had preserved the richness of a more natural because more unthinking form of experience. He idealized primitive societies, but with a perverse form of idealization, which many representatives of those societies would no doubt have rejected as insult. Lawrence's analysis of modern Europe is invaluable; but Africans or Mexicans who read his work often feel that in his enthusiasm to draw a contrast with what he disliked in his own environment he has attributed to them 'virtues' which they do not possess and do not want to possess. Lawrence seems to have despised the intellect, and his message can so easily be distorted that his version of the 'life of the senses' has been misunderstood and abused excessively.

Here in fact is a European writer describing communities outside his own—describing, it may be, the society of a reader of this book. Yet the standard by which he describes and judges them is his own, and even in his accounts of Mexico he may be said, indirectly, to be writing about Europe; the contrast with his own community is never wholly absent from his mind. His attitude is as much a product of the world of modern politics, psychology and town life, as Wordsworth's was of the corresponding movements of 120 years earlier.

It is difficult to generalize on the reactions of the foreign

reader to such writers as Wordsworth and Lawrence. They are probably expressing attitudes which are present in most of the world's religions, but it may be that their explicit statement of these attitudes is something rare and sophisticated. No modern reader, however different his background, is likely to find such writers incomprehensible: the influence of European ideas, and the common element already present in all possible attitudes to nature, are strong enough to prevent that. But such readers may perhaps meet them with a shock greater than, and different from, the shock with which they strike the English reader; and they may well set upon them a lower valuation than the English do, and certainly a very different valuation.

Then finally there is the question of vernacular literature. Here again it is impossible to generalize, because the nations of the world have literatures at such varied stages of development. Most of the artistic genius of African peoples, for example, has gone into music and sculpture, leaving a comparatively simple and unsophisticated literature: a modern literature, based on a combination of native and imported sources, is in most African countries only just beginning to emerge. India, on the other hand, has a very ancient and highly respected literature. The matter is of some importance, since a lack of knowledge of literature in one's own language is a serious handicap when beginning the study of English literature.

A Frenchman or an Italian may speak far worse English than the average educated African; he may hardly be able to express himself in a kind of Italianized pidgin; yet he may have an immediate and genuine response to English literature. If he has read poetry and novels, if he has seen plays and perhaps written something himself in his own language,

then he knows what to expect. English literature may be strange to him, but not literature: he is prepared to be sensitive to words. He will have a natural sympathy with what the writer is trying to say, and this sympathy will carry him over many language difficulties. There are, similarly, Englishmen who read and enjoy Latin literature. Their knowledge of Latin, learned at school and perhaps for a year or two at University, would shock an ancient Roman. Yet they read Vergil and Tacitus with pleasure, because they are interested in literature: because they have read and appreciated similar works in their own language.

The only way to overcome the disadvantage of not having a literature of one's own is by reading. If literary experience has to be acquired, and can be acquired only from English literature, then it is clearly necessary to read English literature. If reading poetry is an unfamiliar experience, then it is necessary to read poems. Clearly this is a difficulty that for the individual will decrease and then disappear in time.

For the society it will disappear only with the development of a native literature. And here is, of course, an additional reason for the study of European literatures—as a model for the growth of one's own. For an African writer (it is Africa that one thinks of particularly here) the use of such foreign influence is something very delicate and difficult to control: he must try to develop something genuinely modern and at the same time genuinely African. The dangers are, on the one hand, a slavish imitation that will write about daffodils and nightingales and give heroines rosy cheeks; and on the other hand a development from native models, from folk tale and saga, that shall fail to deal with the world today. Since it is not possible to avoid all contact with English literature, it seems necessary for the

young writer in Sotho, Yoruba or Swahili to acquire a thorough enough knowledge to select his influences, and reject what is irrelevant to his own situation. I presume that is why some readers are reading this book.

III

Poetry

READ this poem through, and see if you can discover what it is about.

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands;
Ringed with the azure world he stands.
The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

The poet did not intend it as a puzzle, but when the title is omitted it is not easy to see at first what he is describing. Let us see if we can find that out by careful reading.

Look first at the fourth line: 'The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls.' The words *wrinkled* and *crawls* may seem odd at first; but if you realize that the sea is being looked at from a great height, you will see how appropriately they describe the movement of the waves, reduced in appearance to mere wrinkles. The creature, then, which the poem is about must be high up on a cliff face, overlooking the sea. We could have discovered the idea of height from the third line too: 'Ringed with the azure world he stands.' *Azure* is another word for blue; the *azure world* is the sky; and the creature is therefore ringed—surrounded—by sky. —

The first line provides another clue. *Crooked hands* (that is,

claws) suggest a bird; the last line, too, probably refers to something which can fly, since it falls through the air *like a thunderbolt*. So the poem is about a bird that makes its nest high up on the cliff face; that is, an eagle.

This poem provides quite an interesting puzzle if its title is left out; but that is not the main reason why it is quoted here. Now that we know what it is about, we should be able to see how accurate some of the words are. *Wrinkled* and *crawls* have already been remarked on. *Clasps* is much better than *holds*, for it suggests the strength and the fierce nature of the eagle. *Crooked hands*, by its literalness, reminds us of the actual appearance of claws.

Here already we have encountered one of the most exciting things about poetry: the unusual, but very appropriate and accurate words which a poet is able to find. You will notice that most of the words we have so far commented on are metaphors; and it is perhaps best to begin our discussion of poetry with this idea of a metaphor: for metaphor is the heart of poetry. It is not easy to define a metaphor; perhaps the most helpful thing to say is that when one is used there is always a comparison at the back of the mind of the writer. *The foot of the hill*, *The head of the nail*, *The head of the school*, *Greed is the root of all evil*: those are a few familiar metaphors and in each of them a comparison is implied. In the first, the hill is being compared with a man; and since the bottom part of a man is his foot, so the bottom of the hill is called the foot. In the second and third the comparison is also with a man. The two obvious characteristics of the human head are first, that it is situated at the top of the body, and second, that it is the centre of control. The phrase *the head of a nail* refers to the *top part* of a nail; *the head of the school* is the person who *controls* the school. In each case, the word *head* is

appropriate if we realize that the nail and the school are being compared to a human being. In the fourth example, *Greed is the root of all evil*, evil is being compared to a tree; and just as a tree *grows from* the root, so evil is said to grow from greed.

It is, of course, only a very limited comparison which is being made. To refer to the *head of a nail* is not to suggest that nails are like men; it is simply to compare them on this one point, that they both have a top part.

All these are very simple metaphors, common in everyday speech and writing. The metaphors in good poetry are never common, and often not at all simple. They are fresh and exciting. Here are a few examples from Shakespeare: When a storm is raging round him, King Lear calls out

Blow winds and crack your cheeks.

Here Shakespeare is thinking of a wind as a person, puffing out his cheeks and blowing. Perhaps you have seen old maps on which the winds are so depicted, as faces with inflated cheeks.

In *Romeo and Juliet* occur the lines

Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.

There are two metaphors here. *Night's candles* are of course the stars; and day is being compared to a man, perhaps a young man, *standing tiptoe* where the light of dawn is appearing in the east.

But look, the morn in russet mantle clad
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill.

In these lines from *Hamlet* the basic comparison is the same: between day and a man. This time he is walking over the

eastern hill, not standing on it; but the atmosphere of fresh and lively youthfulness is still there. His *mantle* (or cloak) is *russet*—a kind of reddish brown; no doubt Shakespeare is thinking of the reddish light of dawn.

Sitting on a bank,
Weeping again the King my father's death,
This music crept by me upon the waters.

Reading these lines from *The Tempest* you may not notice at first the very successful metaphor they contain. It is the word *crept*, which compares the music to a living thing, and suggests very well the gradual and unexpected way it struck Ferdinand's ear.

If you can look into the seeds of time
And see which grain will grow and which will not,
Speak then to me.

Those very fine lines are spoken by Banquo to the witches in *Macbeth*, asking them to utter a prophecy to him. Notice that the metaphor in the word *seeds* is continued by *grain* in the next line. Banquo is thinking of the future as a crop; and foretelling the future is like *looking into the seeds* to see from them what will happen.

Here is a metaphor from a modern poet, T. S. Eliot:

The Memory throws up high and dry
A crowd of twisted things.

This metaphor is influenced by modern psychology. Eliot is thinking of Freud's theory of the subconscious: that beneath the surface of the conscious mind lies the vast mass of unconscious thoughts and desires which we think we have forgotten, but which are still present in the mind, influencing all our actions. So he compares the memory to the sea, throw-

ing up forgotten thoughts on to the beach from its invisible depths. Notice too how by the single word *twisted* he has suggested that these thoughts are unpleasant and repulsive.

Most schoolboys know the difference between a metaphor and a simile: that whereas in a metaphor the comparison remains at the back of the writer's mind, in a simile it is openly admitted. *As heavy as lead, as wise as Solomon, he has eyes like a hawk's*: these are common similes. Poets are fond of using similes too; often with great effect. Here is a verse from Coleridge's poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, describing a ship becalmed at sea:

Day after day, day after day
We stuck, nor breath nor motion,
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.

It is almost impossible to forget that comparison; it is so simple, yet so memorable. Here is another simple but fine simile, from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, describing Satan addressing the rebel angels:

He above the rest
In shape and gesture proudly eminent
Stood like a tower.

This next simile, also from *Paradise Lost*, is longer and more elaborate. It is describing Satan's first sight of the earth:

As when a scout
Through dark and desert ways with peril gone
All night; at last by break of cheerful dawn
Obtains the brow of some high-climbing hill,
Which to his eye discovers unaware
The goodly prospect of some foreign land
First seen, or some renowned Metropolis
With glistening spires and pinnacles adorned,
Which now the rising sun gilds with his beams . . .

That simile is so elaborate that it has become a little story on its own, and we may forget all about Satan, forget who is being compared to the scout whose adventure is so fully described. That sort of simile is common in epic poems --that is, long narrative poems on a grand scale. A large-scale simile like that fits the scale of the poem as a whole. It is called a Homeric simile, after Homer, the Greek poet who was the first great writer of epics. Notice incidentally that inside this long simile there are several metaphors: for example, *gilds* in the last line.

Most definitions of metaphor and simile are concerned to point out the difference between the two. But when we are reading poetry, it is more important to remember their very great resemblances. Both of them are comparisons; and in both the comparison is almost always made with something concrete. That is why poets are so fond of using them; for a good poet is often dissatisfied with an abstract account of something; he will try to make it concrete, to write of things we can see or feel or hear. In everyday speech we may say, 'I feel very happy.' In a poem by Christina Rossetti we read

My heart is like a singing bird.

In everyday speech we say, 'It is midnight.' But Shakespeare meant us to *bear* the clock striking when he wrote

The iron tongue of midnight hath tolled twelve.

It so happens that the first of these quotations is a simile, the second a metaphor; but that difference is unimportant. What matters is that both are examples of concrete and therefore vivid writing. So in the rest of this chapter I shall drop the words *simile* and *metaphor*, and use the single word *imagery* in their place.

Here is one last quotation to illustrate the beauty of good imagery—perhaps the finest example of all. Keats writes of a glass of sparkling wine

With beaded bubbles winking at the brim.

The brilliance of those two words *beaded*, describing the appearance of the bubbles, and *winking*, describing the way they are seen and then vanish, creates an unforgettable image.

You may remember the scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* where Macbeth is plotting to kill his king; and he is so tortured by feelings of ambition, remorse and guilt that he actually *sees* a dagger in the air before him, reminding him of what he is plotting; or the later scene when he has had Banquo murdered, and turns to his chair at a banquet to find Banquo's ghost sitting there.

Here we have two things being combined by Shakespeare in one very fine passage: on the one hand, the hallucinations of an unbalanced mind, and on the other, the concreteness of poetry. Under the stress of fear and ambition, Macbeth begins 'seeing things'; and Shakespeare, in presenting this to us, has taken the opportunity of bodying forth in imagery what he wishes to tell us about Macbeth's thoughts.

Lady Macbeth, too, when she is overcome by guilt, does not think of her crime in abstract, general terms: she thinks of the blood on her hands: 'All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.' This grasp of the concrete partly explains the hold poetry can have over the reader, for the concrete always affects us more deeply than the abstract.

So much for imagery. Next among the qualities of poetry let us consider sound. Delight in the actual sound of words is a very common thing, found in all parts of the world. It

is one of the bases of singing. When a baby gurgles with delight, it too is enjoying the noises it makes. Often the sound of words appeals to feelings very deep down in our minds. In a scene of *The Tempest* Caliban, a half-human monster, and two clowns he has met sing a drunken song. Caliban sings

Ban, ban, Cacaliban
Has a new master, get a new man.

The words in that first line have no meaning; but when the actors are dancing round the stage chanting them, the noise will often fill the audience with feelings deeper than they can understand.

But sound divorced from meaning has very little interest; it is when the two are joined, when 'the sound is an echo to the sense', that poets can produce skilful effects which compel our admiration. Tennyson is particularly good at this. One of his most famous lines runs:

The murmuring of innumerable bees,

where the line is meant to sound like what it is describing. Some books describe this effect as onomatopoeia; a much simpler, if less accurate, term is 'echo-words'. Here is a longer passage from Tennyson in which the sound echoes the sense. It is from *Morte d'Arthur*, and describes Sir Bedivere carrying the body of his wounded king over rocky ground. They are wearing armour, and this is the noise they make:

Dry clashed his harness in the icy caves
And barren chasms, and all to left and right
The bare black cliff clanged round him, as he based
His feet on juts of slippery crag that rang
Sharp smitten with the dint of armed heels.

Those lines must be read aloud; and if they are, their effectiveness should become immediately apparent.

And here finally are two lines by Dryden which attempt to sound like what they are describing:

The double double double beat
Of the thundering drum.

But even these uses of sound in poetry, though they are linked to meaning, are of a very limited value. They are after all only decoration; the deeper purpose of using sound to help convey the full meaning of a poem on all its levels is served by rhythm.

Those who are not English often find difficulty in understanding English metres and appreciating rhythmic effects; and it is true that a full sensitivity to rhythm depends on a sensitivity to every subtlety in pronunciation. But the principles of metre, if clearly stated, are not at all difficult; and none of the rhythmic effects that follow should be beyond the power of readers of this book to enjoy.

The basis of metre and rhythm is regularity of movement. There is no doubt that regular movement is capable of causing us pleasure: it is part of the beauty of music; it is the basis of dancing. Poetry too may for some purposes be thought of as a dance, its units being not movements of the feet but the speaking of syllables.

Not all syllables in English are pronounced with the same force. Words of two syllables always contain one that is stressed and one that is unstressed; longer words contain at least one stressed syllable and perhaps one other which is fairly strongly stressed, the others being very lightly pronounced; monosyllables will be pronounced with stress if they are important words, without stress if they are not. Here

for example are a few ordinary English words with the stresses marked ($\times$ = unstressed syllable; / = stressed syllable). We must not forget that in actual sentences many stressed syllables may lose their stress because the word that contains them is not important in the sentence.

$\times$ /	/ $\times$	/ $\times \times$	$\times$ / $\times$	$\times$ / $\times \times$
above	suffer	terrible	disaster	political
$\times$ /	/ $\times$	/ $\times \times$	$\times$ / $\times$	$\times$ / $\times \times$
around	standing	massacre	procession	intelligent
$\times$ /	/ $\times$	/ $\times \times$		
excite	pavement	injury		
$\times$ /	/ $\times$			
beyond	shelter			

And here are a few sentences:

$\quad$ / $\times \times$ /
 How do you do?
 $\times$ / $\times \times$ / $\times$
 The Lord is my shepherd.
 $\times$ / $\times$ / $\times$ / $\times \times$ /
 He could not see the green of the shore.

Metre is created by arranging stressed and unstressed syllables in a regular pattern. The simplest way to do this is alternately, one unstressed followed by one stressed syllable. Here are a few such lines:

$\times$ / $\times$ / $\times$ /
 And all the boards did shrink . . .
 $\times$ / $\times$ / $\times$ / $\times$ /
 Around, around flew each sweet sound . . .
 $\times$ / $\times$ / $\times$ / $\times$ /
 My heart is like a singing bird . . .
 $\times$ / $\times$ / $\times$ / $\times$ / $\times$ /
 But see, what light through yonder window breaks? . . .

This alternating pattern, beginning with an unstressed syllable, is by far the most common in English, and is called iambic. An iambic line of course can vary in length: the first of the lines above has three stressed syllables (i.e. six

syllables in all). The next two each have four stressed syllables, the last has five.

Sometimes the lines may begin with a stressed syllable: they are then called trochaic:

 / × / × / × / ×
Heard a carol, mournful, holy,
 / × / × / × / ×
Chanted loudly, chanted lowly . . .

Of the two following lines the first is iambic, the second begins as if it was going to be trochaic, but then reverts to the iambic pattern:

 × / × (/) × / × / × /
And spirits of the nethermost abyss,
 / × × / × / × / × /
Chaos and ancient Night, I come no spy . . .

The result of this is a strong emphasis on the first syllable of *Chaos*.

Other more complicated patterns of syllables are possible, and very elaborate names have been evolved by some critics, and even rules for their use. It is common to divide a line into 'feet', each foot being a unit of one stressed syllable plus one or more other syllables: there is then a special name for each type of foot—for /×× for example, or for ××/. But it is probable that this method does as much harm as good, because it causes us to break a line down into artificial units instead of regarding it as a whole, and it also encourages a mechanical fashion of counting syllables that may blind us to the true nature of rhythm. Indeed, as we shall see later, the terms *iambic* and *trochaic* themselves are of very limited value, and we shall discover how good poetry very seldom fits exactly into a pattern. There are critics who maintain that it is not worth the trouble of learning to count syllables; but since it is very little trouble, and since we need to have some

terms with which to discuss metre and rhythm, it will probably do us no harm as long as we do not set too much store by it.

Here as a further example is a verse by Tennyson with the stressed syllables marked. I have not tried to split up the lines into feet, and will simply point out that the general pattern is iambic, but there are several irregularities (trochaic feet at the beginning of a line, or stresses missing where the word that would be stressed is unimportant, or extra stresses). You should have no difficulty in spotting these and perhaps, after reading the subsequent discussion, turning back and deciding if there are good reasons for any of them.

/ / / /
 Deep on the convent roof the snows
 / /
 Are sparkling to the moon:
 / / / /
 My breath to Heaven like vapour goes
 / / (?) / /
 May my soul follow soon.
 / / / /
 The shadows of the convent-towers
 / / / /
 Slant down the snowy sward,
 / / / /
 Still creeping with the creeping hours
 / /
 That lead me to my Lord.

The pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, then, can vary greatly, as can the length of a line, which may contain from two up to seven stressed syllables. We are now able to describe and name the chief metrical patterns in English. Here are examples of some, followed by a description:

(i) *Ballad Metre*

O Brignall banks are wild and fair,
 And Greta woods are green,

And you may gather garlands there
Would grace a summer queen.
(SCOTT)

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove;
A maid whom there were none to praise,
And very few to love.
(WORDSWORTH)

(ii) *Heroic Couplet*

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,
The proper study of mankind is man.
Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,
A being darkly wise, and rudely great.
(POPL)

At Quincey's moat the squandering village ends,
And there in the almshouse dwell the dearest friends
Of all the village, two old dames that cling
As close as any true-loves in the spring.
(EDMUND BLUNDEN)

(iii) *Octosyllabic Couplet*

And may at last my weary age
Find out the peaceful hermitage,
The hairy gown and mossy cell
Where I may sit and rightly spell
Of every star that heaven doth show,
And every herb that sips the dew.
(MILTON)

Midas, we are in story told,
Turned everything he touched to gold:
He chipped his bread; the pieces round
Glittered, like spangles on the ground.
(SWIFT)

(iv) *Blank Verse*

To hold you in perpetual amity,
To make you brothers, and to knit your hearts
With an unslipping knot, take Antony
Octavia to his wife; whose beauty claims
No worse a husband than the best of men . . .

(SHAKESPEARE)

So saying, through each thicket dank or dry
Like a black mist low creeping, he held on
His midnight search, where soonest he might find
The Serpent: him fast sleeping soon he found
In Labyrinth of many a round self-rolled.

(MILTON)

(v) *Spenserian Stanza*

And after all came Life, and lastly Death;
Death with most grim and grisly visage seen,
Yet is he nought but parting of the breath;
Nor ought to see, but like a shade to ween,
Unbodied, unsouled, unheard, unseen.
But Life was like a fair young lusty boy,
Such as they feign Dan Cupid to have been,
Full of delightful health and lively joy,
Decked all with flowers, and wings of gold fit to employ.

(SPENSER)

What makes a metrical pattern? First and most obviously, the length of the lines: either all the lines are of the same length, or else lines of the same length recur at regular intervals. The stress-pattern is almost always iambic, with variations according to the author's intention and skill. Then the rhyme scheme: successive lines may rhyme, or alternate lines, or there may be no rhyme, or it may be arranged in a complicated pattern, or irregularly. And we may add that certain metrical patterns have through long use shown them-

selves best suited to certain types of poetry, so that the reader feels this to be part of their nature.

The first of the examples is ballad metre: lines of four stressed syllables alternating with lines of three, rhyming A B A B (first example). A B C B is also common. (This method of indicating rhymes should present no difficulty: the repetition of a letter represents a rhyme.) This is one of the simplest and most used metres, and very suitable for story-telling in verse, particularly straightforward story-telling. Most of the Border Ballads, the rough and often very moving narrative poems of the English/Scottish border in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, are written in it: hence the name.

The next is the most famous of all measures: the heroic couplet—pairs of rhyming lines, five stressed syllables in each. This metre can give an impression of balance and regularity, and was especially popular with the polished, witty poets of the eighteenth century.

The next example is the shorter couplet, called octosyllabic because it usually has eight syllables to each line. This too is a measure capable of great polish, but instead of the slower, measured, even weighty movement of the heroic couplet it often seems faster and lighter. It is frequently used for light verse, but the lines of Milton above show that it can be used with great seriousness.

Next we have blank verse—lines of five stressed syllables without rhyme: and thus not split up into regular units like the heroic couplet. In considering blank verse, we see the importance of the use to which a metrical pattern is put. For blank verse is used both in drama and in non-dramatic poetry. The plays of Shakespeare, Jonson and other Elizabethan dramatists are written for the most part in this

measure; and Tennyson, Keats, Wordsworth, Milton and others have all written non-dramatic poetry in it. And though the metrical pattern does not change, a sensitive reader might possibly be able to tell the difference between the two, might know that the first of the two passages quoted is dramatic, the other (from *Paradise Lost*) non-dramatic.

Finally, we come to the many complicated stanza-patterns which have been evolved from time to time by English poets. I give only one of these, the Spenserian stanza, invented by Edmund Spenser for his long narrative poem *The Faerie Queene*, and suitable among other purposes for the drowsy, slow-moving effect Spenser is fond of, or for the solemnity of the stanza here quoted, with its long, slow close. It consists of eight five-stress iambic lines followed by one with six stresses, rhyming A B A B B C B C C.

This then is the principle on which metrical patterns are built: the regular recurrence of lines of equal length. And those lines are made into verse by the regular placing of stressed and unstressed syllables. But why should one bother to do all this? What is metre for?

It is easier to understand than to explain its importance. Its regularity probably adds to the pleasure we derive from hearing poetry, in the same way as we enjoy the regular pattern of a dance. Besides this, metre gives control to what the poet is saying; he may be arousing very violent feelings by what he writes, and the underlying regularity gives us a certain reassurance. And metre arouses our expectation too. We are so used to poetry being written in metre, that its presence immediately arouses our awareness, and causes us to give to the language the increased attention which, as we are seeing, poetry demands and deserves.

All this is true: but there is something yet more important.

So far we have been discussing metre as if it was a mere pattern of sounds; we must remind ourselves that in poetry as in all language what matters is the meaning. To develop this point, it will be useful to distinguish between two terms which we have so far been using as if they meant the same thing: metre, and rhythm. 'Metre' comes from a Latin word meaning measure, and it is as we have seen a way of measuring lines and syllables. In order to fit individual poems into metrical patterns, however, we have to ignore the subtleties of movement that give a good poem its individual quality: we have to ignore its rhythm. For rhythm is the particular movement of an individual poem, metre a more general description of the class it belongs to. We may say that rhythm is what a poet does with metre, the way in which he handles heroic couplets or blank verse to fit them exactly to what he wants to say, the variations and subtleties he gives them.

Clearly rhythm is going to be more difficult, but also more interesting to discuss than metre. We shall find ourselves much more concerned with the poem as a whole, with its meaning and intention and how the movement contributes to that. We shall make use of some of the terms we have already used in describing metre, but we shall need to go beyond them. For it is possible for two iambic lines to have very different rhythms. One may stress each of its five stressed syllables equally, another may throw an especially heavy stress on one or two; one may have no pause, another may have a pause in the middle, a third may have several pauses scattered through it. And if such a difference can exist between single lines, how much greater may be that between long passages written in the same general metrical pattern!

This can be illustrated by comparing the pairs of examples

given above for each of the main patterns. Look for example at Pope's heroic couplets:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,
The proper study of mankind is man.
Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,
A being darkly wise, and rudely great:
With too much knowledge for the sceptic's side,
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride.

He is writing a philosophical poem on the nature of man. In this passage he is making a series of statements about man's condition. Each statement occupies one couplet. Each couplet falls into two balancing halves, and many lines, such as the fourth, are further divided into two balancing halves. Sometimes Pope uses yet a further subdivision, inside the half-line, as in the following famous line describing the character of Addison:

Willing / to wound // and yet afraid / to strike.

The result of this is an impression of pondered, balanced statement. Pope is giving weight to his argument by his use of couplets.

Blunden, on the other hand, has used the couplet more loosely, and instead of polish and regularity he has got an effect of freer movement by sometimes forsaking the iambic pattern, and by not pausing at the end of every line, and not placing such emphasis on the rhymes. The extra unstressed syllable of *squandering*, for example, deliberately spoils the smooth movement, so that the line sprawls rather like the village it is describing.

We can similarly compare the two passages of blank verse, metrically similar but rhythmically different. The Shakespeare passage, from *Antony and Cleopatra*, begins with

a fairly regular and rapid movement. The first line has no pause, the second has only a short pause after *brothers*, the third likewise. The first pause of any length comes in the fourth line, after *wife*. The speaker seems to be moving steadily over these introductory remarks so that he can slow down and emphasize the important part:

whose beauty claims
No worse a husband than the best of men.

The passage from *Paradise Lost*, in contrast, is slow and tortuous in movement from the start: as befits the description of Satan's slow and tortuous search for the serpent. The first line has a long pause after *saying*, and another, shorter pause after *thicket*. The second line, with its long monosyllables, is even slower. And we may notice in passing how effectively the alliteration of the last line suggests the complicated twistings of the serpent.

Even in this short discussion we have had to introduce one or two further terms: we have referred to pauses and long syllables. Before dealing with any further passages we had better say a word about these.

Two pairs of contrasting ideas are needed in discussing rhythm: smooth and irregular, fast and slow. These can of course be applied to any rhythm, to that of music or dancing as well as that of poetry. In poetry speed and regularity depend on pauses, on the number of unstressed syllables, and on the length of the stressed syllables.

In speaking almost any line of four or more stressed syllables we shall find ourselves pausing somewhere: probably near the middle of the line, but exactly where we pause will depend on the meaning: thus if a sentence ends somewhere in the line we shall probably pause there. Sometimes a poet

may put his pause almost at the beginning, or almost at the end; or there may be two or more pauses, of varying length.

The more pauses there are, and the more irregularly they are placed, the more jerkily the poem will move. Contrast these two passages of blank verse, in which the pauses have been marked. I have tried, very approximately, to indicate the length of the pause: / short, // longer, /// still longer. I have also tried to indicate whether the pause which we normally make at the end of the line has been observed, since ignoring this will of course increase the effect of irregularity:

Now sit thee here / and tell a heavy tale. //
Sad in thy mood, / and sober in thy cheer, //
Here sit thee now, / and to thyself relate /
The hard mishap ; of thy most wretched state. ///
In Thessaly I lived / in sweet content, //
Until that fortune / wrought my overthrow; //
For there I wedded was , unto a dame . . .
(PEELE)

Lead me from hence. ' ' '
I faint. ' O Iras, Charmian! ; 'tis no matter. //
Go to the fellow, good Alexas; // bid him
Report the feature of Octavia, / her years, /
Her inclination; // let him not leave out
The colour of her hair: / bring me word quickly.
(SHAKESPEARE)

The verse of Peele is almost as regular as verse can be. There is a pause after every line (only after the third line does the sense suggest that we might move on without pausing, but there there is a rhyme to hold us up a moment); there is a pause inside every line, always short, always near the middle, usually after the fourth syllable. The passage from Shakespeare, however, once more from *Antony and Cleopatra*, has none of this smooth movement. The first pause is so long

that half the line has been left out; twice there is no pause at the end of a line; the pauses inside the lines are more frequent, more irregular, and longer than those in Peele. Of course this is not because Shakespeare is incompetent, but the contrary. The irregular movement of the verse shows perfectly the unsettled, almost hysterical state of mind of Cleopatra, who has just learned that Antony, whom she loves, is married.

Variation in speed is achieved in two ways: by the length of the stressed syllables, and by varying the number of unstressed syllables. The length of a syllable is an idea we have not mentioned, but it is quite simple. Not all stressed syllables in English take the same time to pronounce. The reasons for this are too complicated to go into fully: mainly it depends on the vowels, some English vowels taking longer to pronounce than others. The vowels in *food*, *peace*, *bird* are all long vowels; those in *but*, *bit*, *pot* are short. The vowel in *man* is of moderate length. Clearly a lot of long syllables will slow up the movement of a line of poetry. Tennyson is fond of this; listen to these lines from the *Song of the Lotos-Eaters*: a poem describing the feelings of the sailors of Odysseus after they have eaten the magic plant that saps all one's energy and brings utter indolence:

Music that gentler on the spirit lies
Than tired eyelids upon tired eyes;
Music that brings sweet sleep down from the blissful skies . . .
All things have rest and ripen towards the grave
In silence; ripen, fall and cease:
Give us long rest or death, dark death, or dreamful ease.

All the rhyme words have long vowels; the slow movement of the second line is largely due to the very long vowel of *tired*; the last line is slowed down by the long vowels of *dreamful ease*. (Note the sign $\bar{}$, sometimes used to indicate

a long vowel. All long syllables, of course, are stressed.) The appropriateness of this slow movement to the spirit of the poem should be obvious.

Long syllables slow a line down; a good way of speeding it up is to insert extra unstressed syllables. Here is a verse by Byron which moves rapidly because there are two unstressed syllables instead of one between many of the stressed syllables:

The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold,
And the sheen of his spears was like stars on the sea
When the blue waves roll nightly on deep Galilee.

Reading it aloud, one notices that the last line is much slower. Some of its unstressed syllables have been replaced by long, stressed syllables:

× × — — — × × — × × —
When the blue waves roll nightly on deep Galilee.

This effect is well illustrated in some attractive lines from Coleridge's *Christabel*. Christabel, the heroine, has just heard a witch moaning, alone in a wood at night:

Is it the wind that moaneth bleak?
There is not wind enough to twirl
The one red leaf, the last of its clan,
That dances as often as dance it can
Hanging so light and hanging so high
On the topmost twig that looks up at the sky.

The first line, still describing the mysterious atmosphere of the forest, is slow; notice the long syllables in *moaneth bleak*. Then as Coleridge describes the leaf his verse moves lighter and faster, until the last line, as gay as the leaf itself, dances in the wind with its crowding unstressed syllables:

× × / × / × × / × × /
On the topmost twig that looks up at the sky.

(Notice, too, that all the stressed syllables are short in this line.)

By now we have acquired enough terms to be able to discuss most rhythmic effects fairly precisely; and we may leave general principles and turn to the analysis and discussion of actual passages of poetry, trying to understand and enjoy their rhythm.

Here is the opening of Browning's poem called *How They Brought the Good News*, describing an exciting ride on horseback:

I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he;
I galloped, Dirk galloped, we galloped all three.
'Good speed!' cried the watch, as the gatebolts undrew;
'Speed!' echoed the wall to us galloping through.

Clearly he has tried to make the sound of the verse suggest the galloping of horses; this is done by the large number of unstressed syllables and by the heavy regular beat of the stresses. At the beginning of the last line he wanted to suggest the single cry echoing round the town, so he has left out the preliminary unstressed syllable and begun with a single long emphatic syllable, *Speed*.

The following lines from *Paradise Lost* use all the effects of sound we have described; it is difficult (and fortunately unnecessary) to sort out where rhythm ends and onomatopoeia begins: both combine to suggest the noise and confusion of the angels falling through space, and the tremendous power of God wielded against them:

Him the Almighty power
Hurled headlong flaming from th' ethereal sky
With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In adamant chains and penal fire
Who durst defy th' Omnipotent to arms.

Here is a verse from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*:

Calm is the morn without a sound,
Calm as to suit a calmer grief,
And only through the faded leaf
The chestnut pattering to the ground.

Here the movement is calm and slow; the first three lines, full of long vowels, move regularly and solemnly. Only in the last line is the silence broken by the falling chestnut, and so the movement of the verse is broken by the short syllables of *pattering*.

These rhythmic effects are all used to describe and render physical movement: horses galloping, nuts falling, etc. The profoundest purpose of rhythm, however, is its use to render not only movement but feelings and states of mind. Keats has done this with great skill in the *Ode to a Nightingale*. In the first verse he feels heavy and drowsy; and so the rhythm is sluggish:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk.

The opening is slowed up by the two successive long, stressed syllables *heart aches*; the word *my*, too, unstressed according to the metrical pattern, is given a certain stress by the meaning. The first line ends in the middle of a sentence: this imposes an unexpected slight pause where the meaning would not have suggested one, and slows us up further. And in the second line, the pause comes near the beginning, to prevent the line ever achieving a smooth or rapid movement.

Later in the poem Keats feels himself carried away by the bird's song; he has expressed a wish for wine (a line from this part was quoted in the discussion of imagery), but now

he decides that the way to attain to the bird's happiness is through poetry (poesy, as he calls it). Now the rhythm has a more buoyant and happy movement:

Away, away, for I will fly to thee
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards.

Even here, you will notice that the fourth line, which introduces a doubt, has a slower, less excited movement, with its two successive long syllables *dull brain*, and the involved consonants of *perplexes and retards*.

Still later in the poem Keats admits that he has sometimes wished for death:

I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Called him soft names in many a mused rhyme
To take into the air my quiet breath.

He is uncertain of himself in these lines (*half* in love) and the rhythm moves with hesitation, slowly and quietly. And in the last line of the poem, when he has awoken from the trance into which the nightingale's song had thrown him, he gets the effect of bewilderment by the short sharp questions, followed by pauses:

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

It is possible that Keats intended the lines to be read even more jerkily, to make this effect stronger:

Was it a vision? Or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—do I wake? or sleep?

Finally, here is a song by Ben Jonson:

Slow, slow, fresh fount, keep time with my salt tears;
Yet slower, yet, O faintly gentle springs:
List to the heavy part the music bears,
Woe weeps out her divisions, when she sings.
Droop herbs, and flowers;
Fall grief in showers;
Our beauties are not ours:
O, I could still
(Like melting snow upon some craggy hill)
Drop, drop, drop, drop, drop,
Since Nature's pride is now a withered daffodil.

Here again it is difficult to disentangle the effect of rhythm from that of onomatopoeia and association; the total impression is built up from the interrelation of all these with the meaning.

The long stressed syllables are so frequent that it is hardly necessary to point them out. In the first line there is no completely unstressed syllable until the seventh (*with*), the result being of course a slow, heavy movement that fits with the grief. Pauses are frequent in the first two lines, but they are not sudden and do not break up the movement; afterwards they are less frequent but still regular. Many small devices prevent us from reading too fast: thus the fourth line begins with a combination of sounds (*woe weeps*) which it is almost impossible to say quickly. The boldness of the second last line is very effective—its monotony of meaning and movement contrasting with the delicacy of the lines before and after.

But we must end with the reminder, which cannot be repeated too often, that a poem is a unity. In describing imagery and rhythm, we cannot help making it seem more mechanical, more contrived, than it really is. We should in

our appreciation of a poem feel the influence of the rhythm: analysis may help us to do this, or may help us to understand what has moved us, but it can never be a substitute for appreciating a poem ourselves. A poem is a total vision communicated to us, and to disentangle the means by which this is done is only a means to perceiving the poem clearly.

Other uses of sound in poetry, less important, are rhyme and alliteration. Rhyme we have already discussed, and have shown how it can emphasize the metrical pattern of a poem. Alliteration is the repetition of the same consonant sound at the beginning of different words:

O Sweet strong sister, O shifting swallow
The heart's division divideth us.

(SWINBURNE)

Many Victorian poets used alliteration for ornament, much as they used onomatopoeia. In Old English poetry, however (that is, poetry written before the twelfth century), it served the structural purpose later served by rhyme: it marked the metrical pattern by regular repetition. These few lines, translated from the Old English poem *The Wanderer*, show this regular use of alliteration:

the joyless man
Sees the grey green waves, the seagulls diving,
Frost and snow, frost and hail falling.
Then the heavy heart's wounds are heavier
After slumber; sorrow returns.

Many modern poets have felt that rhyme was overworked in the last century, and that our ears have become so used to it that we cease to notice it or to derive any pleasure from it. To cure this deadening effect of rhyme they have begun to

write unrhymed verse, and some, including W. H. Auden, have returned to the more or less regular use of alliteration. One poem of Auden's begins

Happy the hare at morning, for she cannot read
The hunter's waking thoughts, lucky the leaf
Unable to predict the fall.

After imagery and sound, one more quality of poetry remains to be considered: suggestion, or the poet's use of associations, a way of handling language of which the Romantic poets of the last century were very fond. The difference between the denotation of a word, or what in a narrow sense may be called its meaning, and its associations, has already been explained in Chapter II; here I shall give some examples of how the latter can be used in poetry.

Some words have very powerful associations. Think, for example, of the word *mother*. It is very hard to do this without remembering affections and thoughts which go back to our earliest childhood, and may move us deeply. Here is a reservoir of feeling on which the poet can draw—on which in fact both good and bad poets do draw, placing such words in prominent positions and calling attention to them. We may perhaps compile a list of such words, rich in associations, ready for the poet to exploit them: *child, home, love, fire, death, earth*—there are many others. They are the simple words we have always known. There are of course other and equally interesting forms of associations—literary associations, for example, that have grown up around a word like *nightingale* or *melancholy*, which have been so frequently used in poetry that whenever we meet them in a poem today we are likely to remember the works they have been used in before.

The word *West* has interesting overtones. It is closely bound up, in the English mind, with the sunset; and sunset, in its turn, is closely associated with the idea of dying. And so the slang expression *to go west* means to die. W. E. Henley wrote a poem which compared his death to the setting of the sun; it ended

So be my passing!
My task accomplished and the long day done,
My wages taken, and in my heart
Some late lark singing,
Let me be gathered to the quiet west,
The sundown splendid and serene,
Death.

In these famous lines, almost every significant word has been chosen for its associations of peace, fulfilment and dying: *passing, the long day done, my wages taken, the quiet west, the sundown splendid and serene*: it is by the associations of these phrases that the poet builds up the atmosphere of a happy, peaceful and contented death.

Another word of powerful associations in English is *moon*. In the midst of the sufferings which the Ancient Mariner undergoes in his enchanted ship, when he is overcome by heat and thirst, the moon brings him a sense of deep peace:

The moving moon went up the sky
And nowhere did abide.
Softly she was going up,
And a star or two beside.

To Shelley the moon had associations of mystery:

And like a dying lady, lean and pale . . .
The moon arose up in the murky east,
A white and shapeless mass.

To other poets it has suggested loneliness or majesty. These feelings must go far back in the history of the human race. For thousands of years men have been struck by the peacefulness of the moon when compared with the sun, or by its beauty, or its changeableness, or its loneliness. The good poet can arouse these feelings in his readers. By the way he uses a word he will determine which of its associations are to be thought of, and so fit it into the total effect of his poem. In the lines from Henley quoted above we have seen how he brings into our minds the associations of calm and restfulness that can go with the word *death*. Contrast his lines with these from *Paradise Lost*:

I fled, and cried out Death;
Hell trembled at the hideous name, and sighed
From all her caves, and back resounded Death.

There the associations of death are fierce and terrible.

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so.
And those whom thou thinkest thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

And in these lines by Donne, death is the Christian idea of death, and its associations are of its unimportance, and the unreality of its terror. There are three poets, all using the word *death* with very powerful, but very different associations.

Of course poets are at least as interested in the denotations of words as they are in their associations; indeed, it is dangerous for a poet to be interested *only* in the associations of words, since he may tend to forget the meaning of his lines. Further, we should remember that a good poet is always master of what he is saying: he uses words carefully and precisely, neither denotations nor associations are loose

or vague. Here in conclusion are two quotations to illustrate this.

Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.

This is a verse from *Little Gidding*, a poem by the living poet T. S. Eliot: a difficult but very fine poem about religious and philosophical beliefs. This verse is discussing Christian love, and the familiar paradox that that love causes us suffering, so that we shall be purified of sin. Because love and suffering are seldom associated, love is called an unfamiliar name. I have chosen this verse to show the care with which Eliot has stated and illustrated the meaning of the word *love*. In the first place, we notice how carefully he has placed it: out on its own at the end of the first line, after a pause—a position of great prominence. Then he continues by describing the torments which this love brings, in terms which suggest spiritual penance—*shirt of flame*; and he indicates the divine nature of this torment in the line *which human power cannot remove*. This description of the suffering has included the idea of fire; and in the last couplet Eliot states another Christian paradox—that fire is a symbol both of lust and of purification, so that our choice is simply between being *consumed by either fire or fire*.

Here then is a verse remarkable for the clarity and vision with which it explores one meaning of an important and complex word, the word love. The lines which follow, by Coleridge, are just as carefully written; but in them the skill

has gone into choosing words for their associations, to build up what some critics would call atmosphere.

Weave a circle round him thrice
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

These are the last lines of Coleridge's poem *Kubla Khan*, which describes a vision he saw when asleep, of the palace built by the emperor Kubla Khan and all its wonders. Coleridge tells us of his longing to revive within him the song which he heard sung at this palace; if he could do that, all who heard him would be able to imagine the marvels of the palace, and all would salute him as inspired. These lines are what the listeners might then say of him.

Clearly then the lines are meant to suggest to us a feeling of awe at the mysterious powers of the poet; and if we read them carefully and let the words linger in our minds we shall realize that almost every word carries associations of mystery or of supernatural powers. A *circle* is an age-old magical symbol, and the number three (*thrice*) constantly associated with magic. The first line thus suggests a ritual ceremony conferring mysterious powers on the poet or saluting him for possessing these powers; this suggestion is helped by the word *weave*, which conveys the idea of steady, regular movement—perhaps of dancers moving round him in circles. The second line is concerned with the awe of the listeners; the phrase *holy dread* is a most effective combination of associations, for if we think about the words we shall realize that they convey almost opposite associations, and so combine together to suggest a tense mixture of the feelings aroused by *holiness* and those aroused by *dread*—and this mixture of feel-

ings is in fact what we call awe. Each of the last lines achieves its effect by the choice of one dominating, mysterious phrase: *honey-dew*, *milk of Paradise*. We may not be able to say what these foods in fact consist of (we may, that is, have no clear idea of the denotations), but we cannot be blind to the feelings of wonder, the idea of inspiration, that they suggest.

It is of course difficult to draw a clear boundary between the denotations and associations of a word, and it would no doubt be possible to point to examples of carefully chosen denotations in *Kubla Khan*, and certainly possible to point to carefully chosen associations in *Little Gidding*. But on the whole we may say that in these two passages we have two great poets each writing with precision, but with different kinds of precision.

The first part of this chapter has been a discussion of some of the things which make poetry interesting. Inevitably we have had to quote short extracts from many different poems, and it has been impossible to give any idea of the experience of reading a poem as a whole. So the rest of the chapter will be devoted to discussing a few complete poems. Some may be familiar to you already, others you may be reading for the first time. Once again, I hope readers will read them several times and think about them before beginning to read the commentary. A poem is meant to be a communication from the poet direct to the reader. Criticism and commentary can help us to understand and enjoy poetry, but it can never replace the experience of appreciating a poem ourselves. It is always best to form one's own impressions of a poem first; then when we read critical works we are able to compare our reactions to a poem with the critic's; perhaps we may admit that he has understood the poem better than we have, or perhaps we may disagree with him.

Heaven-Haven

A nun takes the veil

I have desired to go
Where springs not fail,
To fields where falls no sharp or sided hail
And a few lilies blow.

And I have asked to be
Where no storms come,
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb
And out of the swing of the sea.

G. M. HOPKINS

This poem has two titles. The second, *a nun takes the veil*, is of course the *explanatory* title: it tells us what the poem is about. But the first title is really more interesting, for it suggests to us the idea which Hopkins has put into his poem. *Haven* is another word for 'harbour', but it has been used so much in English poetry that it has acquired much stronger associations than 'harbour': associations of peace, attainment, rest after labour. Hopkins has been thinking of the feelings of a nun when she decides to go into a convent. Her aim is *heaven*, and at the same time it is peace and shelter from the world, or a *haven*. The similarity in sound between the two words attracted him, and made him think of the similarity in meaning. So he set out to write a poem showing the nun's feelings of longing for shelter and rest.

Hopkins is writing poetry; and cannot be content to speak about the longing for shelter in general terms. He has chosen to symbolize it by two carefully chosen images: that of a field free from storms and winter, and of a haven, sheltered from the storms of the sea. Each of these is rich with traditional associations of rest and shelter: indeed, the word *haven* differs

from *harbour*, not in denotation, but in possessing these associations; and as a result of frequent use, the associations now cling to the words as part of a poetic tradition. Hopkins is reminding his readers of a whole wealth of previous writing and thinking in which these words are concerned.

The harshness that the nun is leaving behind is suggested in the first verse by the *sharp and sided hail*. Hail, of course, is rain that has been frozen to ice: *sharp* so as to cut the skin, *sided* because driven sideways by the wind or (it is not quite certain how this word should be taken) because each hail-stone has sharp sides.

What makes the second verse impressive is the rhythm. The third line, *Where the green swell is in the havens dumb*, gathers strength as the unstressed syllables change into the long slow movement of *grēen swēll*, and seems to move like the tide itself. And if the last line is read properly its swing is unmistakable:

And out of the swing of the sea.

The more often the poem is read, the more evident is its mixture of art and simplicity. The simplicity with which each verse opens suggests the apparently simple feelings that have led the nun to take her decision. Yet the suggestions of the storms and troubles she is leaving are there too. It is interesting to learn that Hopkins was himself a monk, and so must have understood these feelings well.

Meeting at Night

The grey sea and the long black land
And the yellow half-moon large and low
And the startled little waves that leap
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,

As I gain the cove with pushing prow
And quench its speed in the slushy sand.

Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;
Three fields to cross till a farm appears;
A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
And blue spurt of a lighted match,
And a voice less loud, through its joys and fears,
Than the two hearts beating each to each.

ROBERT BROWNING

This is an episode from a story; but Browning, in telling it, does not seem interested in the rest of the story. His aim has been to bring a situation vividly before our eyes: to describe the scene, and reproduce the mood of the man concerned. We gather that this is a night visit which a man is making to the woman he loves; we are not told anything more, and we do not need to know anything more to enjoy the poem. It does not matter who these people are, or what happened before and after; if we knew, it might distract our attention from the single scene Browning is describing, so he has not told us.

But he has created the scene unforgettably. Nothing is described fully; only a touch here and a hint there. This is very appropriate of course to the darkness. A walk by the seashore at night would soon convince us of the skill with which Browning has selected his details. The most vivid image is probably

And the startled little waves that leap
In fiery ringlets from their sleep.

The sudden movement of the waves is perfectly suggested in that word *startled*. In the second verse, notice the lines

The quick sharp scratch,
And blue spurt of a lighted match.

The touch of accuracy in the word *blue* brings the scene before our eyes; and the short, jerky rhythm adds greatly to the effect.

Many critics have found the last two lines less vivid and more commonplace than the rest of the poem. Do you agree?

The Zulu Girl

When in the sun the hot red acres smoulder,
Down where the sweating gang its labour plies,
A girl flings down her hoe, and from her shoulder
Unslings her child tormented by the flies.

She takes him to a ring of shadow pooled
By thorn-trees: purpled with the blood of ticks,
While her sharp nails, in slow caresses ruled,
Prowl through his hair with sharp electric clicks.

His sleepy mouth, plugged by the heavy nipple,
Tugs like a puppy, grunting as he feeds:
Through his frail nerves her own deep languors ripple
Like a broad river sighing through its reeds.

Yet in that drowsy stream his flesh imbibes
An old unquenched unsmotherable heat—
The curbed ferocity of beaten tribes,
The sullen dignity of their defeat.

Her body looms above him like a hill
Within whose shade a village lies at rest,
Or the first cloud so terrible and still
That bears the coming harvest in its breast.

ROY CAMPBELL

The subject of this poem is one familiar to all Africans: a young negro mother feeding her child. The setting is African; the very first line depicts the heat and dust of Africa:

When in the sun the hot red acres smoulder.

The poet has had two aims in this poem. The first is descriptive: he has tried to recreate this typically African scene and bring it before our eyes. He begins by describing the surroundings (verse 1, and the opening of verse 2). Then he moves towards the girl and her child, describing how she cleans and feeds it (rest of verse 2, verse 3). Some of his metaphors are worth noting:

—While her sharp nails . . .

Prowl through his hair with sharp *electric* clicks

—His sleepy mouth, *plugged* by the heavy nipple.

At the end of the third verse comes the interesting simile of the river; the languors (that is, drowsy feelings) of the girl flow into her son,

Like a broad river sighing through its reeds.

This simile has been carefully chosen for its associations. A river is something that goes on unchanged for generations, and that has no consciousness, no desires, no thoughts. This prepares us for the second, non-descriptive part of the poem in the last two verses.

The poet is a European; and he has tried to put down in the poem his feelings about the whole Zulu nation. For a while the girl ceases to be an individual, and he sees her as a symbol of the Zulus. He has tried to see them without sentimentality—that is, without pretending not to notice their faults. He has also tried to see them without hostility: setting down his admiration for their fine qualities. What strikes him most is that, although the Zulus have been defeated in battle, their warlike fire is still there, under the surface. He sees this fire as

An old unquenched unsmotherable heat.

It is this heat which the Zulu girl is conveying to the child she is feeding. In the last two lines he tries to describe the feeling as accurately as he can:

The curbed ferocity of beaten tribes,
The sullen dignity of their defeat.

The phrase *sullen dignity* may seem at first like a contradiction. But in fact it is carefully chosen by Roy Campbell to indicate exactly how he sees the Zulu: he admires them, but is not sentimental about them.

It is important to note that when discussing a poem like this, and trying to understand what the author is saying, we are not necessarily agreeing with him. The question of whether we agree with Roy Campbell's picture of the Zulu is an interesting one which many of us will try to answer; but it is not the same question as whether we appreciate his poem. It is possible to disagree with his idea of the Zulu, to believe for example that they no longer have any warlike feelings, yet to be moved by the way he has put his thoughts and feelings into words.

Drummer Hodge

They throw in Drummer Hodge to rest
Unconfined --just as found:
His landmark is a kopje-crest
That breaks the veldt around:
And foreign constellations west
Each night above his mound.

Young Hodge the Drummer never knew--
Fresh from his Wessex home- -
The meaning of the broad Karoo,
The Bush, the dusty loam,
And why uprose to nightly view
Strange stars amid the gloam.

Yet portion of that unknown plain
Will Hodge forever be;
His homely Northern breast and brain
Grow to some Southern tree,
And strange-eyed constellations reign
His stars eternally.

THOMAS HARDY

Another poem about Africa. This time, about a young English soldier who was killed in the Boer War, fought between the English and the Afrikaners between 1899 and 1902. What has struck Hardy deeply is the strangeness of the surroundings in which Hodge died. Hodge was an Englishman, and the only land he knew and loved was Wessex. Yet he died in the huge, strange, dusty veld of South Africa.

The first verse tells us of Hodge's rough-and-ready burial: *uncoffined—just as found*. The Afrikaans words *kopje* and *veldt* remind us where it happened. The last two lines strike a deeper note:

And foreign constellations west
Each night above his mound.

West, you will notice, is here used as a verb, and means 'pass from east to west across the sky'. But it also retains some of the associations of *west* discussed earlier, and reminds us of the idea of passing away and dying. The first suggestion of the strangeness of Hodge's new surroundings is made in the word *foreign*.

This suggestion is developed in the next verse, which is about the contrast between Hodge's home and his death place. Once again Hardy uses the stars to symbolize this strangeness. Hodge must have known what the night sky of Wessex looked like; but in South Africa he saw *strange stars*.

We are now prepared for the last verse, in which a new

idea is introduced. Hardy suggests that perhaps the strangeness will not last. Now that Hodge has been buried in the Karoo his body will become part of it, and it is now his home. In other words, there is a reconciliation in the third verse of the puzzlement and strangeness shown us earlier. Hodge is reconciled to his new home. To present this reconciliation in verse, Hardy has to join together what seem like opposites; he does this in each couplet. Notice how the pairs of italicized words suggest opposite ideas to one another, yet are joined by the poetry into a new unity:

Yet *portion* of that *unknown* plain
Will Hodge forever be;
His homely *Northern* breast and brain
Grow to some *Southern* tree,
And *strange-eyed* constellations reign
His stars eternally.

This power of reconciling opposites is one of the greatest of poetic gifts.

MacFlecknoe

[the opening lines]

All human things are subject to decay,
And when Fate summons, monarchs must obey:
This Flecknoe found, who, like Augustus, young
Was called to empire and had governed long:
In prose and verse was owned, without dispute
Through all the realms of nonsense, absolute.
This aged prince now flourishing in peace,
And blest with issue of a large increase,
Worn out with business, did at length debate
To settle the succession of the state;
And pondering which of all his sons was fit
To reign, and wage immortal war with wit,

Cried, 'tis resolved; for Nature pleads that he
Should only rule who most resembles me:
Shadwell alone my perfect image bears,
Mature in dullness from his tender years;
Shadwell alone of all my sons is he
Who stands confirmed in full stupidity.
The rest to some faint meaning make pretence,
But Shadwell never deviates into sense.
Some beams of wit on other souls may fall,
Strike through and make a lucid interval
But Shadwell's genuine night admits no ray,
His using fogs prevail upon the day.

JOHN DRYDEN

This splendidly entertaining poem is a satire: that is, a poem written to attack. The great age of English satire is the last years of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century: and this is also the age in which the heroic couplet was the favourite verse form. From these lines we can see that this is not mere coincidence; the balance and regularity which, as we have seen, can be achieved with the couplet, are well suited to the succession of scornful points which Dryden is scoring against Shadwell, the bad poet he is ridiculing.

The spirit of this attack is more good-humoured than is often the case with satire; we feel that Dryden did not hate Shadwell but merely despised him, and is content to hold him up to ridicule, and make his poem into an enormous joke. The theme of the poem is the death of Flecknoe, universally acknowledged to be the world's worst poet, and the succession of Shadwell to the vacant place of monarch of Nonsense. Dryden presents this ridiculous story with all the pomp and grandeur of a real succession, so that we feel he has not only made fun of Shadwell but has created a whole

world—of nonsense, but of unforgettable and impressive nonsense.

The poem begins solemnly, and the high-sounding terms (*Fate summons, like Augustus*) lead us to expect a high and majestic ode; only in the sixth line do we learn the truth, and the atmosphere is completely overturned when we are told that he was

Through all the realms of nonsense, absolute.

We know now that the intention of the poem is to mock, but Dryden is determined to mock magnificently, and so for another six lines he resumes the heroic and majestic style, treating Flecknoe like a real king. Like a real king he wages war, and now comes the second revelation of the truth: he wages 'immortal war' (still high-sounding)—*with wit*.

And now Dryden turns to his true subject, the successor, Shadwell; and here he makes full use of his metrical effects. For couplet after couplet he laughs at him, one point in each couplet, mentioning him by name once in each couplet, rounding each one off with the neatness of the rhyme. And all the time there is something almost sublime about the finality of the phrases that dismiss Shadwell so decisively: *mature in dullness; genuine night; stands confirmed in full stupidity*. Dryden is trying to sound as if he is *praising* Shadwell: complimenting him with a sort of enthusiasm on the completeness of his dullness. And as we listen to this splendid nonsense of Flecknoe's we are almost convinced that he must be right, that Shadwell must deserve all this, must be the worst of all writers. Which is what Dryden wants us to think.

These are only the opening lines of a poem which is well worth reading in full.

Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown

And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed;

And on the pedestal these words appear:
‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

P. B. SHELLEY

The power of this poem lies largely in the fact that it never states its theme openly, but presents us with a description from which, if we read carefully, we can find its intention. Here again we see the value of poetry in *showing* us what the author is getting at, not just telling us about it.

Why does Shelley tell this tale of a traveller who has seen the wreckage of a huge statue in the desert? Of the traveller we learn nothing, except, from the phrase *antique land*, that a vague association of mystery and authority attaches to him. The first part of the poem is taken up with a description of the statue: how completely it is wrecked (*shattered lip*) and, in contrast, the expression of scorn that can still be seen on its face.

Then we are given, without comment, the inscription.

Clearly this was meant to impress all beholders: the statue, in its size and grandeur, is intended by Ozymandias as a monument to his power. Reading the inscription we cannot fail to catch the high-sounding arrogance: this is created by the reverberating sound of the name, *Ozymandias*, and by its being overloaded with such ringing phrases, *king of kings, ye Mighty, despair*. The statue and its inscription were a monument to human pride.

The last three lines are Shelley's own comment on the inscription. This may sound an odd thing to say, since they do not say a word about it. But Shelley is too good a poet to make his comment explicit. Instead of telling us what he thinks of Ozymandias' pride, he has simply presented, as vividly as he can, a picture of the surrounding desert. It is *lone*—without marks of any human works; and *level*—in contrast with the huge bulk of the statue when it stood. Most important about the desert is that it completely ignores both statue and inscription. By letting this contrast work in the reader's mind, Shelley has given a judgement on the arrogance of this self-styled *king of kings*, and perhaps on all human pride. However much it may boast, its works in the end just lie ignored on the *lone and level sands*.

The next few pages are intended as a short anthology of poetry. The poems selected are all good, none is very difficult, and none should be particularly strange to the foreign reader. Although they are not discussed in such detail as the previous poems, a few remarks are added to each to assist in the reading. You may find it helpful to write your own commentary on some of these poems; but do not do this until you have read the poem many times and feel that you know it well and enjoy it.

Snake

This poem illustrates well the difference between metre and rhythm. It is written in free verse (that is, there is no regular metrical pattern), yet it is obviously different from prose; and some of the rhythmic effects are very good.

The poet's attitude towards the snake may seem strange to us at first. There has been a struggle in his mind between *the voice of his education*, telling him to kill the snake, and a deeper feeling which filled him with love and admiration for it. Perhaps snakes are too serious a menace in Africa or India for some readers to indulge in such feelings; but it is clear that to Lawrence it was almost a symbol of his own better nature, and he admires even the way it ignores him. Whether or not we share his attitude towards nature, we must realize how skilfully he has presented it.

A snake came to my water-trough
On a hot, hot day, and I in pyjamas for the heat,
To drink there.

In the deep, strange-scented shade of the great dark catob-tree
I came down the steps with my pail
And must wait, must stand and wait, for there he was at the trough
before me.

He reached down from a fissure in the earth-wall in the gloom
And trailed his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied down over the edge of
the stone trough

And rested his throat upon the stone bottom,
And where the water had dripped from the tap, in a small clearness,
He sipped with his straight mouth,
Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack long body,
Silently.

Someone was before me at my water-trough,
And I, like a second comer, waiting.

He lifted his head from his drinking, as cattle do,
And looked at me vaguely, as drinking cattle do,
And flickered his two-forked tongue from his lips, and mused a moment,

And stooped and drank a little more,
Being earth-brown, earth-golden from the burning bowels of the earth
On the day of Sicilian July, with Etna smoking.

The voice of my education said to me
He must be killed,
For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous.

And voices in me said, If you were a man
You would take a stick and break him now, and finish him off.
But must I confess how I liked him,
How glad I was he had come like a guest in quiet, to drink at my water-
trough
And depart peaceful, pacified, and thankful,
Into the burning bowels of this earth?

Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him?
Was it perversity, that I longed to talk to him?
Was it humility, to feel so honoured?
I felt so honoured.

And yet those voices:
If you were not afraid, you would kill him!
And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid,
But even so, honoured still more
That he should seek my hospitality
From out the dark door of the secret earth.
He drank enough
And lifted his head, dreamily, as one who has drunken,
And flickered his tongue like a forked light on the air, so black,
Seeming to lick his lips,

And looked around like a God, unseeing, into the air,
And slowly turned his head,
And slowly, very slowly, as if thrice adream,
Proceeded to draw his slow length curving round
And climb again the broken bank of my wall-face.

And as he put his head into that dreadful hole,
And as he slowly drew up, snake-easing his shoulders, and entered farther,
A sort of horror, a sort of protest against his withdrawing into that horrid
 black hole,
Deliberately going into the blackness, and slowly drawing himself after,
Overcame me now his back was turned.

I looked round, I put down my pitcher,
I picked up a clumsy log
And threw it at the water-trough with a clatter.

I think it did not hit him,
But suddenly that part of him that was left behind convulsed in undignified
 haste,
Writhed like lightning, and was gone
Into the black hole, the earth-lipped fissure in the wall-front,
At which, in the intense still noon, I stared with fascination.

And immediately I regretted it.
I thought how paltry, how vulgar, what a mean act!
I despised myself and the voices of my accursed human education.
And I thought of the albatross,
And I wished he would come back, my snake.

For he seemed to me again like a king,
Like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld,
Now due to be crowned again.

And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords
 Of life.
And I have something to expiate;
 A pettiness.

D. H. LAWRENCE

Lucy

The simplicity of this poem has made it a favourite for many generations. The similes in the second verse, though not startlingly original, are very memorable; and the understatement with which the poem ends is more impressive than an outburst of passion. It is a poem which seems to grow lovelier every time we read it.

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove,
A maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love.

A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye
—Fair as a star when only one
Is shining in the sky.

She lived unknown and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

Song

This is one of the many lovely songs of Shakespeare; and being meant for singing, it has little that is startlingly original, or that requires careful reading and pondering before we can understand it. The images which are used to contrast youth and age are simple and traditional; but there is no doubt about the charm of the poem, which does not fade however well we know it. (*Crabbed*, by the way, must be pronounced as two syllables for the sake of the metre.)

Crabbed Age and Youth
 Cannot live together;
 Youth is full of pleasance,
 Age is full of care;
 Youth like summer morn,
 Age like winter weather,
 Youth like summer brave,
 Age like winter bare:
 Youth is full of sport,
 Age's breath is short,
 Youth is nimble, Age is lame:
 Youth is hot and bold,
 Age is weak and cold,
 Youth is wild and Age is tame:—
 Age, I do abhor thee,
 Youth, I do adore thee;
 O! my Love, my Love is young!
 Age I do defy thee—
 O sweet shepherd, hie thee,
 For methinks thou stay'st too long.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

Edward FitzGerald's translation of this eleventh-century Persian poem is among the most famous translations in English. It is in fact less of a translation than an original poem by FitzGerald, inspired by the original: and we are told by Persian scholars that the melancholy, meditative, pleasure-loving tone of the work is due as much to the translator as to Omar Khayyam. I have chosen a few of its seventy-five verses: since there is no connected argument, they lose little by being read out of their context. The philosophy they contain is superficial; but the poem has long been a favourite for the grace with which it is expressed—particularly for the

lovely images of, for example, the first or sixteenth verse. A Caravanseraï is an inn: a place where no one lives permanently. To compare the earth to one is of course to emphasize the shortness of life.

Many of the verses will repay a careful and full analysis.

I

Awake! for morning in the bowl of night
Has flung the stone that puts the stars to flight:
And Lo! the Hunter of the East has caught
The Sultan's turret in a noose of light.

2

Dreaming when dawn's left hand was in the sky,
I heard a voice within the tavern cry,
'Awake, my little ones, and fill the cup
Before life's liquor in its cup be dry.'

II

Here with a loaf of bread beneath the bough,
A flask of wine, a book of verse—and thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
And wilderness is Paradise enow.

16

Think, in this battered Caravanseraï
Whose doorways are alternate night and day,
How Sultan after Sultan with his pomp
Abode his hour or two, and went his way.

50

The ball no question makes of Ayes or Noes,
But right or left, as strikes the player, goes;
And He that tossed thee down into the field,
He knows about it all—He knows—HE knows.

Alas, that Spring should vanish with the rose,
 That Youth's sweet-scented manuscript should close!
 The nightingale that in the branches sang,
 Ah, whence, and whither flown again, who knows!

Ah, moon of my delight who know'st no wane,
 The moon of Heaven is rising once again:
 How oft hereafter rising shall she look
 Through this same garden after me—in vain!

E. FITZGERALD

Daffodils

Here are two poems on the same subject. The first, by Wordsworth, is an account of an episode in the poet's life of which he has retained joyful memories.

The second, by Herrick, is a reflective poem. The daffodils have set the poet thinking about one of the favourite subjects of poets: the shortness of human life. Notice how much better this poem is than a mere general, abstract lament on the subject. But using the image of the early-dying daffodils to represent the ending of man's life, he has achieved the moving concreteness of good poetry. Notice the metrical pattern too: it is complicated but very attractive.

I wandered lonely as a cloud
 That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
 When all at once I saw a crowd,
 A host, of golden daffodils;
 Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
 Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

To Daffodils

Fair daffodils, we weep to see
You haste away so soon;
As yet the early-rising sun
Has not attained his noon.
Stay, stay,
Until the hasting day
Has run
But to the even-song;
And, having prayed together, we
Will go with you along.

We have short time to stay, as you,
We have as short a spring;

As quick a growth to meet decay,
As you, or anything;
We die,
As your hours do, and dry
Away
Like to the summer's rain
Or as the pearls of morning dew,
Ne'er to be found again.

ROBERT HERRICK

The above discussions were all fairly brief, and aimed merely at pointing out the main intention of the poems and indicating how it has been achieved. The introductory remarks to the poems which followed were even briefer, and it therefore seems worthwhile to end by giving a full and careful study of at any rate one poem. The poem chosen is by the American, Robert Frost:

Out, Out—

The buzz-saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behind the other
Under the sunset far into Vermont.
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half-hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
His sister stood beside them in her apron
To tell them 'Supper'. At the word, the saw,
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap,

He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,
As he swung toward them holding up the hand
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—
Since he was old enough to know, big boy,
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—
He saw all spoiled. 'Don't let him cut my hand off—
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him sister!'
So. But the hand was gone already.
The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.
No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.
No more to build on there; and they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

ROBERT FROST

This is a narrative poem, and the story is not difficult to follow. But the straightforwardness is deceptive, and should not prevent us from observing and enjoying the skill with which every detail has been chosen.

We may begin with some general observations on the style. Although the incident of the boy losing his hand in the saw is gruesome and tragic, the language is restrained and ordinary. There is no mention of blood; some of the most tragic statements are terse and almost casual—*He saw all spoiled*, or the reference to his death when still so young, *No more to build on there*; there are colloquial, almost slang phrases—*big boy*, and *that ended it*. Frost has in fact chosen to tell a deeply moving story in a style marked by restraint and understatement; and has thus avoided the dangers of exaggeration and sentimentality (that is, needless display of

emotion) which it is so easy to slip into in such a poem. Instead of overemphasizing his points, he has chosen to hold back and hint at his feelings, and has so produced a tension, a feeling that strong emotions are being controlled, which eventually, when we get to know the poem well, we shall find more deeply moving than exaggeration.

The first nine lines create the setting for the story. They are leisurely, there is no sense of hurry, for the atmosphere in the saw-yard was quiet and leisurely. They contain no hint of the tragedy which is to come. We may go further, and say that they deliberately suggest an atmosphere far removed from tragedy, showing us the distant mountains with the sense of peace and permanence they convey, the pleasant smell of the newly-cut wood. Their atmosphere may be summed up by the casual remark at the end, *and nothing happened*. All this is of course intentional on the poet's part. The boy's accident was completely unexpected; and we, reading the poem, are to be lulled into the same happy, peaceful security on which the tragedy will impinge with such a shock.

The next three lines yield their fullest meaning only after we begin to know the poem well. Frost wishes that they could have stopped work early,

To please the boy by giving him the half-hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.

These lines establish the boy as any boy—as typical and young, with the feelings one would expect a boy to have in those circumstances—delight at being let off early. This youthfulness and ordinariness, as we shall see, later recurs very impressively.

But there is a further significance in these lines. The

reason Frost gives for calling it a day is an ordinary enough one; reading on, we perceive a far deeper reason, which he was not aware of at the time—that if they had stopped then the boy would not have been killed. This is an example of Frost's irony—his ability to make a statement with another meaning besides the obvious one. He was right in wishing they had said *Call it a day*, but for an altogether more terrible reason than he realized at first.

The next six lines, telling of the accident, seem straightforward narrative. But once again not a touch is wasted. The sisters calling him not only continues the ordinariness of evening, it was also the cause of the accident: the boy must have been distracted just enough to let his hand slip under the saw. Describing what he actually saw, Frost says that the saw leapt at him, and for the moment allows himself a touch of anger, even bitterness, as he suggests that the saw, like a human being, may have had a motive for this:

As if to prove saws knew what supper meant.

But the restraint which runs through this poem soon returns, and he admits that he had been imagining all this by continuing—

or seemed to leap,
He must have given the hand.

Yet even this is not his final attitude; he realizes that the matter of who was to blame is after all trivial, what matters is that the disaster happened. So he dismisses the last three lines in the phrase *However it was*, and writes the very simple and memorable half-line with its suggestion of something irreversible and inevitable having happened:

Neither refused the meeting.

The next three words mark the nearest which the language

of the poem comes to violence. They are an exclamation, of pity or horror or both, and might suggest that it is going on to describe the mangled and bloody sight. But he never loses control: he is determined not to bully us into feeling sorry for the boy, but to let the situation move us not by his exaggerated comments, but by the skill with which he places the most moving details before us. So after exclaiming *But the hand!* he says no more.

A bad poet might have made the boy scream or weep at this stage. But Frost is writing a completely truthful poem, and knows that shock will be the first reaction, before pain or fear, and that this will be expressed by his rueful laugh. Then comes the vivid picture of the boy *As he swung towards them holding up his hand*, a gesture which might have two motives, each of which is suggested: but neither of which can be attained. The boy's helplessness, now that the tragedy has happened, is what these lines impress on us. We may notice too the use of the word *life*, when it would of course be more obvious to say *blood*. This has two advantages: it helps Frost to avoid even the slightest touch of exaggeration in his language (we have already remarked that the word *blood* is never used); and it reminds us of what the watchers must have been thinking at the time, that the spilling of this blood meant, in fact, his death.

Later in the same line comes the change in the boy: he recovers from the shock, and becomes afraid. Now we get the only piece of direct speech in the poem, the boy's frantic, terrified appeals. At this stage come what are perhaps the two most moving lines of all:

Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart.

The boy has been feeding logs into the saw—*a man's work*

Someone may have praised him for this in the past, calling him, half in joke, half in admiration, *big boy*: perhaps he had added that of course he was still *a child at heart*, and Frost has already, in line 12, reminded us that he is like any boy in that he would have been delighted with a half-hour off. But now we discover that these lines are tragically ironical: at a crucial moment the boy shows that he was in fact not capable of doing a man's work, that he *was* a child at heart, for this childishness, causing him to look round eagerly and unthinkingly when called, caused his death. The praise which may have caused the boy to glow with pride when given, now turns out, tragically, to have been unjustified.

The poem now moves rapidly towards its end. Lines 28-32 do not pause, and their hurry suggests the suddenness with which the end came. Here Frost becomes so terse as to be almost brutal: *and that ended it* may seem a very callous way to describe his death. But he is preparing us for the simple sentence that follows, which holds such a wealth of meaning as we think about it: *No more to build on there*. All through, Frost has been emphasizing both the boy's typicalness (we notice that he is not even given a name) and his youth. And so when he has died we must make the obvious comment—what a waste!—what a loss of a future that he had no doubt been looking forward to, a life he had been *building* his hopes on. The sentence in fact directs our attention to the most tragic aspect of the disaster, that it happened to a boy. But it has another even more important meaning; it refers not only to the boy but also to the watchers. They, now that the boy is dead, cannot *build* their hopes and their sympathy on him, and so we are led on to the concluding sentiment:

And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

I have already remarked that this is a very honest poem. We are not told what the relationship was between the boy and the other workmen—friendly, we may guess, but not intimate. And now, Frost is telling us, let us face the fact that the world cannot stop working just because someone has died. Sorry as they no doubt are for the boy, they will before long put the thought of him aside and resume their normal life. These men are not presented to us as callous or exceptional: that, says Frost, is the way men behave. He is trying, in this small poem, to do what Matthew Arnold praised the Greek dramatist Sophocles for doing: ‘to see life steadily and see it whole’. If you think Frost is being cynical here, make quite sure that it is not you who are being sentimental—pretending, that is, that things are pleasanter than they really are.

This commentary has not been able to indicate all the subtleties of the poem, nor has it done full justice to the strong feeling that lurks under the apparently casual lines. But it may help to explain the very powerful impression which it makes, and which it perhaps made on you before you paused to analyse its effects. And it will also, I hope, show how full an appreciation can be derived from a constant re-reading of it.

Suggestions for Reading

I. Some Books about Poetry

CECIL DAY LEWIS: *Poetry for You*.

Written for children but full of interest.

P. GURREY: *The Appreciation of Poetry*.

ELIZABETH JENNINGS: *Let's Have some Poetry*.

These three books are all simple. More ambitious readers might like to try the following:

MIDDLETON MURRY: *The Problem of Style*.

BROOKS and WARREN: *Understanding Poetry*.

HUGH KENNER: *The Art of Poetry*.

ELIZABETH DREW: *Poetry: a Modern Guide to its Understanding and Enjoyment*.

M. L. ROSENTHAL: *The Modern Poets: A Critical Introduction*.

The Pelican Guide to English Literature, edited by Boris Ford (seven volumes).

An attempt to show how much of English literature is of permanent interest.

II. *Anthologies of Poetry*

G. B. HARRISON: *A Book of English Poetry*.

Palgrave's Golden Treasury, with additional poems.

JOHN HAMPDEN: *Great Poems*.

Longer anthologies are:

A. T. QUILLER-COUCH: *The Oxford Book of English Verse*.

BOTTRALL: *Collected English Verse*.

AUDEN and PEARSON: *Poets of the English Language* (five volumes).

Anthologies of modern poetry:

MICHAEL ROBERTS: *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*.

HEATH-STUBBS and WRIGHT: *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Verse*.

JAMES REEVES: *The Modern Poets' World*.

III. Individual Poets

One begins, naturally, with anthologies, to get a picture of the variety of English poetry, and to be able to decide gradually which are the poets who interest you particularly.

When going on to read the works of a single poet more systematically, it is best to buy his complete works in such a series as the Oxford Editions of Standard Authors; but there are several good series of selections, such as the Penguin Poets, or the Clarendon English Series.

Perhaps the best poets to start with are Wordsworth, Tennyson, Keats and Matthew Arnold; after them, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Goldsmith, Shelley, Browning and Hardy. Bolder readers may try some of the great but difficult 'metaphysical' poets of the seventeenth century, beginning with Grierson's anthology *Metaphysical Poems and Lyrics of the Seventeenth Century*, or else with Helen Gardner's *The Metaphysical Poets*, before going on to the works of Donne, Marvell and Herbert. Those who are not deterred by the difficulty of the language should also read Chaucer; most of the best parts of his *Canterbury Tales*, such as the *Prologue*, the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, or the *Pardoner's Tale*, can be bought in separate volumes, with notes. As for modern poets, the most celebrated poets of the century, writing in English, are T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats; as well as them, all the following are worth study, and some are easier than these two masters: Wilfred Owen, Walter de la Mare, Edward Thomas, Robert Graves, W. H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, R. S. Thomas, D. J. Enright, Philip Larkin; and the following Americans: Robert Frost, E. A. Robinson, John Crowe Ransom, Edgar Lee Masters.

IV

The Novel

READING LIST

IN this chapter, the reading list is at the beginning. Literary criticism (this cannot be said too often) is intended for those who have already read the works criticized; only then can the reader compare the critic's judgement with his own, see if he has missed anything, and re-read the work with deeper understanding. Reading someone's criticism of a novel we have not read is like reading a language we only imperfectly understand.

In the last chapter, on poetry, this difficulty was not very serious: it is possible to quote a poem and then discuss it. But a novel of several hundred pages cannot be quoted; and it is therefore necessary to read a few of the novels discussed in this chapter before reading the chapter itself. So this reading list tells in advance what novels are going to be discussed.

The discussion which follows is so arranged that it is possible to follow it without having read the novels; but readers who have not will derive less profit from it and, I trust, feel an appropriate sense of guilt.

Those most suitable to read first, and most necessary to the complete understanding of the chapter, are marked *.

JANE AUSTEN: **Pride and Prejudice*; **Sense and Sensibility*;
Emma; *Mansfield Park*; *Persuasion*.

ARNOLD BENNETT: *The Old Wives' Tale*; *Anna of the
Five Towns*.

SAMUEL BUTLER: *The Way of All Flesh*.

JOYCE CARY: **Mr. Johnson*; *The African Witch*.

WILLA CATHER: *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

W. V. T. CLARK: **The Ox-Bow Incident*.

JOSEPH CONRAD: *Typhoon*; *The Shadow Line*, *Victory*;
Youth, and other stories.

STEPHEN CRANE: **The Open Boat*.

DANIEL DEFOE: *Moll Flanders*; *Robinson Crusoe*.

CHARLES DICKENS: *Great Expectations*; *Hard Times*;
Martin Chuzzlewit; **Oliver Twist*.

GEORGE ELIOT: **Adam Bede*; **The Mill on the Floss*.

JAMES T. FARRELL: the *Studs Lonigan* books.

E. M. FORSTER: *A Passage to India*.

MRS. GASKELL: *Cranford*; *Mary Barton*.

WILLIAM GOLDING: *Lord of the Flies*.

GRAHAM GREENE: *The Heart of the Matter*; *Our Man in
Havana*; *The Quiet American*.

THOMAS HARDY; *Far from the Madding Crowd*; *The Mayor
of Casterbridge*; *The Return of the Native*; *Tess of the
D'Urbervilles*; *The Woodlanders*.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY: **The Old Man and the Sea*.

RICHARD HUGHES: *In Hazard*.

D. H. LAWRENCE: *Sons and Lovers*; *The Fox*; *The Virgin
and the Gypsy*.

ALAN PATON: **Too Late the Phalarope*.

JOHN STEINBECK: *Of Mice and Men*.

JONATHAN SWIFT: *Gulliver's Travels*

ANTHONY TROLLOPE: *The Warden; Barchester Towers; The Last Chronicles of Barset*.

MARK TWAIN: **Huckleberry Finn*.

H. G. WELLS: **The History of Mr. Polly; Kipps*.

Fairly cheap editions of most of these books can be found in one or other of the following series: Everyman's Library, St. Martin's Library, Penguin Books, The World's Classics.

THE NOVEL

A novel is a story: that is the simplest way to look at it.

Perhaps it is the best way to look at it at the beginning: for story-telling is practised and popular the world over. And if we think of a novel as a book which tells us a story it will not seem anything strange or startling.

Few can resist a good story. Before a child goes to sleep it asks its mother to tell it a story. Children who are promised a new book usually ask for a story book. Many civilizations have supported professional story-tellers, who travelled from village to village, drawing the whole population each evening to listen to them. This is how E. M. Forster, perhaps the finest living English novelist, writes of story-telling:

It is immensely old—goes back to neolithic times, perhaps to paleolithic. The primitive audience was an audience of shockheads, gaping round the

camp fire, fatigued with contending against the mammoth or the woolly rhinoceros, and only kept awake by suspense. What would happen next? The novelist droned on, and as soon as the audience guessed what happened next, they either fell asleep or killed him.

Many of the world's stories are very, very old; they are called folk-tales—the traditional story-telling heritage of a nation that may have survived almost unchanged for centuries. The African peoples are very rich in folk-tales, especially the Bantu of South Africa. They have stories about Tikoloshe, a mischievous little man very like the English Puck. Sometimes he makes the milk go sour, or twists the cow's tail, or hides the farmer's whip or his saddle. At other times he is kind and helpful, sweeps the floor for the housewife during the night, or dusts the tables and cleans the blankets.

These and many other stories have been collected by a number of African writers in books which are the beginnings of modern Bantu literature: *Raphepheng*, by Segoele, and *Libatana le Linvamatsane*, by Mangoaela, both about the Sotho people. Mangoaela describes his aim thus:

To keep for our people some of our own stories, to make a Basotho love what is his own, and to bring about a love for books and reading in our nation.

Among the peoples of the British Isles, it is probably the Irish who are richest in folk-tales; and one of the greatest of Irish writers, J. M. Synge, who was poet, dramatist and story-teller, has admitted that he drew both his material and his language from the people round him. We have already discussed, in Chapter I, the use he made of the language; here I wish to say something of the stories he learned from the country people of Ireland. In one of his books he has

recorded the story on which he based his play *The Shadow of the Glen*. It was told him by an old Irishman on a remote island. The language seems slightly odd to us because of the Irish idiom, but it is easy to follow. We cannot tell how much of the credit for the final version belongs to the old man who told the story, and how much to Synge, who wrote it down. Whoever the credit is due to, its simplicity, its restraint, and above all its sense of reality, make it a masterpiece of story-telling.

One day I was travelling on foot from Galway to Dublin, and the darkness came on me and I ten miles from the town I was wanting to pass the night in. Then a hard rain began to fall and I was tired walking, so when I saw a sort of a house with no roof on it up against the road, I got in the way the walls would give me shelter.

As I was looking round I saw a light in some trees two perches off, and thinking any sort of a house would be better than where I was, I got over a wall and went up to the house to look in at the window.

I saw a dead man laid on a table, and candles lighted, and a woman watching him. I was frightened when I saw him, but it was raining hard, and I said to myself, if he was dead he couldn't hurt me. Then I knocked on the door and the woman came and opened it.

'Good evening, ma'am,' says I.

'Good evening kindly, stranger,' says she. 'Come in out of the rain.'

Then she took me in and told me her husband was after dying on her, and she was watching him that night.

'But it's thirsty you'il be, stranger,' says she. 'Come into the parlour.'

Then she took me into the parlour—and it was a fine clean house—and she put a cup, with a saucer under it, on the table before me, with fine sugar and bread.

When I'd had a cup of tea I went back into the kitchen where the dead man was lying, and she gave me a fine new pipe off the table with a drop of spirits.

'Stranger,' says she, 'would you be afear'd to be alone with himself?'

'Not a bit in the world, ma'am,' says I; 'he that's dead can do no hurt.'

Then she said she wanted to go over and tell the neighbours the way her

husband was after dying on her, and she went out and locked the door behind her.

I smoked one pipe, and I leaned out and took another off the table. I was smoking it with my hand on the back of my chair—the way you are yourself this minute, God bless you!—and I looking on the dead man, when he opened his eyes as wide as myself and looked at me.

‘Don’t be afeard, stranger,’ said the dead man; ‘I’m not dead at all in the world. Come here and help me up, and I’ll tell you all about it.’

Well, I went up and took the sheet off of him, and I saw that he had a fine clean shirt on his body, and fine flannel drawers.

He sat up then, and says he:

‘I’ve got a bad wife, stranger, and I let on to be dead the way I’d catch her goings on.’

Then he got two fine sticks he had to keep down his wife, and he put them at each side of his body, and he laid himself out again as if he was dead.

In half an hour his wife came back, and a young man along with her. Well, she gave him his tea, and she told him he was tired, and he would do right to go and lie down in the bed-room.

The young man went in, and the woman sat down to watch by the dead man. A while after she got up, and ‘Stranger,’ says she, ‘I’m going in to get the candle out of the room; I’m thinking the young man will be asleep by this time.’ She went into the bedroom, but the divil a bit of her came back.

Then the dead man got up, and he took one stick, and he gave the other to myself. We went in and we saw them lying together with her head on his arm.

The dead man hit him a blow with the stick so that the blood out of him leapt up and hit the gallery.

That is my story.

One of the best story-tellers among English novelists is Daniel Defoe. *Colonel Jack*, a typical Defoe novel, relies for its interest mainly on the story. The hero is an illegitimate child who never knows his parents. He grows up in miserable poverty in the streets of London, becomes a pick-pocket, narrowly escapes being caught by the police, travels to Scotland, is hired on a boat bound for the colonies, sold

into servitude, gains his freedom, becomes rich, returns to England, gets married, gets divorced, joins the army—and so on, and so on. He is a man telling the story of his life; he assumes that the hearers would like to know what happened next. And the book is interesting—especially the earlier part—because we really are curious to know what happens next.

Yet even in this book Colonel Jack is something of a character. Defoe has not been able to refrain from trying to bring him to life, to give him some characteristics that will distinguish him from others, that would help us to recognize him if we met him in the street. For example, he has given him a conscience: for when he lost most of the money he had got by stealing, he rejoiced. Yet Defoe wanted to give us a still clearer understanding of what Colonel Jack was like; and so he shows us the way that conscience was formed, and its absence when Jack was a child. Defoe believes that a young child with no parents, no home and no friends will not develop any moral sense; and so he makes Jack say of his childhood

I looked on picking pockets as a kind of trade, and thought I was to go apprentice to it. It is true this was when I was young in the society as well as younger in years, but even now I understood it to be only a thing for which, if we were caught, we ran the risk of being ducked . . . but I never understood till a great while after that the crime was capital and that we might be sent to Newgate for it, till a great fellow, almost a man, one of our society, was hanged for it: and then I was terribly frightened, as you shall hear by-and-by.

This is very convincing. The innocence with which the child is unable to distinguish right from wrong until he learns that there is a punishment attached; the respect with which he speaks of a *great fellow, almost a man*; the earnestness

with which he assumes that we want to hear what happened to him—all this brings him to life, makes us believe that he is a real child, a living person, not just a creature in the story.

This simple novel, in short, is more than a story: and in fact no good novelist can be satisfied with writing a good story and nothing else. For though every novel tells a story, the story is in fact the lowest, most elementary aspect of a novel.

A good novel is good by virtue of more interesting, more valuable things: characterization, plot, culture or atmosphere. And we have already seen that the consideration of a good story like Defoe's has led us on to the question of character.

Most novelists (almost all novelists in the nineteenth century, from which most of our examples will come) try to write a novel in which the people are real people: in which we believe in their existence, understand their natures, speculate how they will behave in a given situation. Hardly any ability is more precious to a novelist than this power of characterization, or bringing people to life.

Some excellent characterization is to be found in Anthony Trollope's novel *Barchester Towers*. It is a story of life in an English Cathedral town to which Trollope gives the imaginary name of Barchester. As we read on in the book the people begin to seem to us real human beings, whom we know and understand: especially Dr. Proudie the bishop, Mrs. Proudie, his dominating wife, and Mr. Slope, his fawning and scheming chaplain. Dr. Proudie, who is appointed to the bishopric of Barchester in the beginning of the book, is ambitious but weak; and both his wife and his chaplain are able to dominate him and run his affairs as they please. But Mrs. Proudie and Mr. Slope are themselves enemies: and through the book there is a struggle between

them for influence over the bishop: each of them, Trollope remarks, had determined that he (or she) would in effect be Bishop of Barchester. It is difficult to quote from *Barchester Towers*, for Trollope brings his characters to life as a result of the cumulative impression of many scenes and incidents. The following extract is from a scene in the bishop's room in which the hostility between the wife and the chaplain comes into the open. They have begun to quarrel about who the bishop should appoint to a vacant post, but the quarrel has now moved (as they both know) to a more fundamental point: who should control the bishop?

'Mr. Slope,' she repeated, 'I wish to be alone with my lord.'

'His lordship has summoned me on most important diocesan business,' said Mr. Slope, glancing with uneasy eye at Dr. Proudie. He felt that he must trust something to the bishop, and yet that that trust was so woefully ill-placed. 'My leaving him at the present moment is, I fear, impossible.'

'Do you bandy words with me, you ungrateful man?' said she. 'My lord, will you do me the favour to beg Mr. Slope to leave the room?'

My lord scratched his head, but for the moment said nothing. This was as much as Mr. Slope expected from him, and was on the whole, for him, an active exercise of marital rights.

'My lord,' said the lady, 'is Mr. Slope to leave this room, or am I?'

Here Mrs. Proudie made a false step. She should not have alluded to the possibility of retreat on her part. She should not have expressed the idea that her order for Mr. Slope's expulsion could be treated otherwise than by immediate obedience. In answer to such a question the bishop naturally said in his own mind, that as it was necessary that one should leave the room, perhaps it might be as well that Mrs. Proudie did so. He did say so in his own mind, but externally he again scratched his head and again twiddled his thumbs.

Mrs. Proudie was boiling over with wrath. Alas, alas! could she but have kept her temper as her enemy did, she would have conquered as she had ever conquered. But divine anger got the better of her, as it has done of other heroines, and she fell.

'My lord,' said she, 'am I to be vouchsafed an answer or am I not?'

At last he broke his deep silence and proclaimed himself a Slopeite. 'Why, my dear,' said he, 'Mr. Slope and I are very busy.'

This is vigorous writing; and it is so observant that Trollope convinces us that he is writing about real people. This is done by a series of small touches. The *uneasy eye* of Mr. Slope in the second paragraph tells us both of the shifty nature of Mr. Slope himself and also of the unreliability of the bishop, unable to take a stand against either of them. This weakness of the bishop is mentioned several times: e.g. *my lord scratched his head and for the moment said nothing. This was as much as Mr. Slope expected from him.* Even the *twiddling of his thumbs* is a sign that he has not the courage to speak out. In fact the bishop does make a decision in the end: this extract is the climax of a long scene. But even when he decides, he is not able to speak boldly to his wife; and the weak words '*Why, my dear, Mr. Slope and I are very busy*' are the nearest he can come to defiance.

Trollope has shown us the bishop's character partly by what he says, partly by his own comments, and partly by letting us see him through the eyes of the other two. Mrs. Proudie, too, comes to life; her personality is obviously dominating, but her impetuosity is her downfall, as Trollope tells us.

Even isolated from its context this passage should show Trollope's powers of characterization, though they need the space of the whole novel to be seen at their best. Those who enjoy *Barchester Towers* may like to read the other novels Trollope wrote about life in Barchester, in which many of the same characters recur. Two of the best are *The Warden* and *The Last Chronicle of Barset*.

The next extract is from one of the strangest novels in English: *Tristram Shandy*, by Laurence Sterne. The book as

a whole is very difficult to read, but such a passage as that quoted below is quite straightforward. Most of the story of *Tristram Shandy* takes place before the narrator is born; the time scheme is incredibly involved, so that the last two books take place several years earlier than the rest; and the digressions, some fascinating, others absurd, are almost as long as the story: at one point Sterne devotes several pages to a long Latin curse. Yet an odd book can be a great book: and the wit and human sympathy of *Tristram Shandy* make it certainly a great book. The greatest of its characters is Uncle Toby, a kindly and simple-minded old man, a retired soldier, who has built himself a set of model fortifications, and spends his days re-enacting in his garden the campaigns taking place on the battlefield of Europe. It is hard not to laugh at Uncle Toby, for he is so simple; yet it is equally hard to laugh, for he is so lovable. Sterne lays his whole nature before us in a ridiculous yet revealing incident.

My Uncle Toby had scarce a heart to retaliate upon a fly. Go—says he, one day at dinner, to an overgrown one which had buzzed about his nose, and tormented him cruelly all dinner-time,—and which, after infinite attempts, he had caught at last, as it flew by him;—I'll not hurt thee, says my Uncle Toby, rising from his chair, and going across the room, with the fly in his hand,—I'll not hurt a hair of thy head:—Go, says he, lifting up the sash and opening his hand as he spoke, to let it escape; go, poor devil, get thee gone. Why should I hurt thee?—This world is surely wide enough to hold both thee and me.

This is not merely a description of an incident: it is a character study. The slightly pompous absurdity of My Uncle Toby is revealed, his simple-mindedness, his kind heart. And the author's attitude is revealed too: slightly scornful and very affectionate.

Some novelists tell us about their characters: explain them

to us, give us a sketch of their nature. Jane Austen writes thus of Mrs. Bennet in the first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*.

She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news.

But such explicit explanation by the novelist is not enough to bring a character to life. It is easier to describe someone than to show him in action: easier, but less effective. Those lines by Jane Austen are so memorable and so devastating, chiefly because of the vigour with which Mrs. Bennet lives in the rest of the book. We see her fussing round her daughters, getting angry with her husband, fancying herself ill. We see her and believe in her, and therefore read the author's commentary with more interest. Indeed, though this passage comes in the first chapter of the book, Jane Austen is wise enough to put before it a conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet which already reveals her to us.

Often there may be one character in a novel through whose eyes we look: so that we see that person from the inside, the rest from the outside. This is so in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, where we are shown the secret thoughts of Maggie Tulliver, and follow the struggles by which she reaches her decisions: whereas so interesting a person as Maggie's Aunt Glegg is shown us purely from the outside, and it is only by observing what she says, what she does and what others say of her, that we discover what she is like. Mrs. Glegg is a well-drawn character; she has one quality many good characters have—the ability to surprise us. When Maggie runs off with a young man and returns home in deep disgrace, her Aunt Glegg, who has hitherto appeared the most hard-hearted and proud of all her family, is the

only one to take pity on her. This is unexpected; yet as we read on we realize that it is perfectly consistent: her family pride causes her to look after her niece when in trouble, and she continues to behave like the Mrs. Glegg we know. A successful surprise like this is a triumph of the novelist's art. A character who never surprises us may have no depths to his nature; whereas one whose surprises leave us with the feeling that such a person would never really have behaved like that is inconsistent.

Characterization brings sympathy; for 'to know all is to forgive all'. A novelist who can bring to life an unattractive figure may, by so doing, stop us from disliking him. George Eliot does this in *Middlemarch* with the character of Bulstrode. Bulstrode is a prosperous business man with a family and a respected position in the town. In his youth he had committed a crime, but he has managed to conceal it, and hypocritically refuses to think about the past. By an unfortunate chance he is exposed, loses his position in the town, and is forced to atone for his previous guilt. Bulstrode is not an attractive man: his downfall is deserved. But his unspeakable grief, his slight touches of conscience, his terror of losing his position, his almost hysterical aggressiveness when he is found out: all these are so convincingly portrayed that we cannot help understanding—and sharing—his grief. Brought to life in the book he wins our sympathy in a way he might never have done in real life.

The next aspect of the novel to be considered is plot. Plot is not the same as story, though the two are often confused. A story tells us what happened, one event after the other. A plot fits events together into a pattern, leads us up to future happenings, and holds them together by showing the causes

that link them. The story of a man's life will put down everything that happened to him, as long as it is interesting; a good plot will select only those happenings which turn out later to be significant, so that in the last chapter of the book we shall feel 'Oh yes, now I understand why he acted like this in Chapter Six.' A well-constructed plot gives the reader a deep sense of satisfaction as he sees it fitting together at the end.

Perhaps the most perfect plot ever constructed is that of the ancient Greek play *King Oedipus*, by Sophocles. Oedipus was the child of Laius and Jocasta, King and Queen of Thebes. At his birth it was foretold that he would kill his father and marry his mother; he was therefore left to die on a hillside but was rescued and brought up as a prince in a nearby city. When he was a man he found his way back to Thebes, unknowingly killing King Laius on the way in a roadside quarrel. He saved the Thebans from a great danger that threatened their city, and in reward was given Jocasta as a wife and made King.

Sophocles begins his play some years after these events. A plague is raging at Thebes. Oedipus sends to the god Apollo to ask how he can save his people from it, and the answer comes that the murderer of King Laius must be found and punished. Oedipus fails to find the man (naturally, for, although he does not know it, it is himself) and pronounces a curse on him.

Then his downfall begins. Slowly, as he makes investigations and uncovers the past, he realizes that he is the murderer. Worse is to come. He is so deep in his searching that he cannot abandon it, though Jocasta, who glimpses the truth, begs him to do so. He finds the old shepherd who had rescued him, and learns that he is the son of Laius

and Jocasta. He has killed his father and married his mother; the prophecy is fulfilled. In grief, Jocasta kills herself and Oedipus tears out his eyes.

Notice that Sophocles has not presented this story in chronological order. He has begun at the end: the audience know everything, the characters nothing. Then he has, step by step, revealed the past: producing powerful emotional effects from each new revelation. We see the proud and confident Oedipus crumbling before our eyes. As we read and re-read *King Oedipus*, every line, every remark, becomes more and more significant, takes its place in the gradual unfolding of the truth. At the end we have an overpowering feeling of inevitability: it had to happen. Out of a simple story Sophocles has constructed a great plot.

No English novel, perhaps no novel, has so perfect a plot as *King Oedipus*. And unfortunately most of those which have good plots—such as Meredith's *The Egoist* or Conrad's *Nostromo*—are very difficult; for plot-construction is a highly sophisticated art. Good plots are often very complicated, and their appreciation is the reward of the experienced novel reader.

A note of warning is perhaps in place here. Plot is not an isolated element in a novel or play. The pattern of what happens is of course made up of events and the characters who take part in them; perhaps the best way to think of plot is not as a separate element, but as the way story, characterization and atmosphere are put together to form a whole. For if we read *King Oedipus* carefully, we shall realize that its greatness is largely due to the interdependence of plot and character. Because Oedipus was the man he was, he obstinately went on unravelling his past; and because he did that, the final result had to happen.

Nevertheless, novelists can be classified by their attitude towards the constructing of plots. Some build their plots very carefully, balancing the incidents one against the other, explaining, anticipating everything of importance. As often as not the story will not be told in chronological order, so that something which happens can invite an explanation from the past. Such novelists are Henry James and Joseph Conrad (both difficult, though *The Turn of the Screw* and *Typhoon* form reasonably simple introductions to their work); the novel to them is a work of art, and must be made with care.

In contrast to this, there is the belief that a novel is a slice of life. In real life actions are not anticipated by earlier actions. We meet people, and then never meet them again. We lay plans, and nothing comes of them. We expect something to happen, and it doesn't. A novel too, say some writers, should have this air of purposelessness. It must be true to reality; and the character described so carefully in Chapter Two and then forgotten must *not* reappear to give us satisfaction at the end. He would not in real life have done so. The early novels of Dickens are written in this way, so are many of those of the eighteenth century, and among modern novelists those of D. H. Lawrence. A book like *Pickwick Papers* has no beginning, middle or end. It could have begun earlier or finished later. No incident is carefully led up to by earlier chapters, no character appears with the inevitability of fate. It is the unplanned story of Mr. Pickwick's adventures.

This difference between the carefully constructed novel and the novel as a 'slice of life' is illustrated by the way Trollope wrote *The Last Chronicle of Barset*. This is one of the series of novels mentioned on p. 138, and like *Barchester*

Towers it contains the characters of Dr. and Mrs. Proudie. Trollope was one day sitting in his club working on his novel when he overheard two people discussing his work; they were grumbling at his habit of introducing the same character into several novels, and cited Mrs. Proudie as an instance. Trollope interrupted their conversation, and told them that he would go home and kill her before the week was over. And in the next chapter he wrote, Mrs. Proudie died suddenly.

Trollope was not very interested in plot; his novels are realistic, and meant to resemble real life as much as possible. Their merit lies mainly in characterization, and they are not carefully planned. And so it was possible for him to change his mind in the middle of the book and kill Mrs. Proudie. To such a writer as Conrad, who constructed his books with great care, and balanced every person and incident against every other, this would have been quite impossible.

Neither of these views, of course, is 'right'. There is no formula for creative writing, and some novelists prefer to work in one way, some in the other. Most fall half-way between the two extremes. George Eliot does in *The Mill on the Floss*. On the whole, this is a realistic novel. There is no careful planning of what will happen, no sense of the craftsman arranging it all. We meet many people in the same inconsequential way as we do in real life. Yet in at least two points the writer has taken trouble over her plot: the introduction of Philip Wakem, the death of Maggie and Tom.

Much of the book hinges on the love of Maggie and Philip. They are grown up when they fall in love, and we know that in fact we seldom fall in love with those we have

known much earlier in life. But George Eliot makes Philip the school companion of Maggie's brother Tom, and when the three are still children we can already see the emotions of later life growing up between them. Philip then disappears from their lives for several years; when he reappears we can sense before it happens that Maggie will grow to love him and Tom to hate him.

The end of the book is even more carefully anticipated. The book begins when Maggie and Tom are children (these early chapters are, incidentally, one of the finest accounts of childhood in English literature). Maggie loves her brother deeply; Tom, though scornful of girls, is very attached to her. In later life they drift apart, and the hardness of Tom's nature is revealed: he is unforgiving to Maggie when she commits the fault of running off with Stephen Guest. Yet, in the end, when the river Floss rises and the floods come in which they are drowned, together and embracing, we realize that we have been prepared for this. Even the flood is not really a surprise: we did not expect it; but when it comes we realize the significance of many earlier accounts of the weather. And the final burst of fondness which brings the brother and sister together is equally unexpected, and is equally convincing. We realize—and believe—that their childhood love has remained, beneath the later estrangement.

Finally we come to what is perhaps the most interesting aspect of the novel, though certainly the most difficult to analyse and explain. I have used the term *atmosphere* to describe it. This is a controversial term, and is so often used loosely by students of literature that it is perhaps dangerous to use it at all. But there seems to be no other word to describe this particular characteristic of the novel, and it is

perhaps quite safe to use it if its meaning in this context is made clear.

In discussing poetry, atmosphere is often used to mean 'the type of association that the poem is arousing'. Thus the conclusion of Henley's poem quoted on p. 95, with its suggestions of rest, fulfilment and peace would be said to create an *atmosphere* of restfulness. The verse from *The Ancient Mariner* describing the moon (p. 95) adds a touch of peace to the atmosphere of the poem at that point.

In discussing the novel, the term is here used in quite a different sense: that of 'mental or moral environment'. When a group of people live together in society, they develop a common attitude to life. They value some things more highly than others; they tend to think alike on certain topics; they develop a group character, a not wholly conscious philosophy of life. I am tempted to use the term *culture* to describe this rather vague concept of the group character: using *culture* partly in the anthropological sense of 'social and intellectual characteristics of a group' and partly in the more general sense of 'finely developed intelligence, taste, and sensibility'. But *culture* too is a term with many meanings that slide into one another, and it will probably be best if we confine ourselves to only one controversial term. Many novels portray these common ways of thinking and behaving so convincingly that we feel we have understood that particular social group better than ever before. This is what is meant in this chapter by the atmosphere of a novel.

This point of atmosphere will attract both the native and the foreigner. We may love a novel because it seems to us to embody the spirit of the society we live in: or because it has revealed to us a way of social behaviour we had previously known little about. English novels will, of course, generally

have the latter attraction for foreign readers. This section will discuss the culture and atmosphere of four English books: *Cranford*, by Mrs. Gaskell; *The Ox-Bow Incident*, by W. Van Tilburg Clark; *A Passage to India*, by E. M. Forster; and *The Return of the Native*, by Thomas Hardy.

The world of *Cranford* is that of a quiet English village in the mid-nineteenth century, untouched by modern industrial civilization. Most of the leading inhabitants of *Cranford* are poor, but they are well-descended; and they conceal their poverty, and live with 'elegant economy'. The society of the book is the quietest element in that quiet village: the heroine, Miss Matty, has never travelled, has met no one outside her narrow circle, has not married, and until the end of the book has never had to earn her living. The charm of the book is its capturing of the gentle conservative spirit of this small village; and modern sophisticated readers, used to the bustle of towns, recognize the truth of the atmosphere and love it. Here are a few typical sentences:

So we talked softly and quietly of old times through the long November evening. . . .

One morning as Miss Matty and I sat at our work Martha came up and asked if Miss Betty Barker might speak to her mistress. Miss Matty assented, and quickly disappeared to change the yellow ribbons, while Miss Barker came upstairs. . . .

The next evening we were all in a little gentle flutter at the thought of the gaiety before us. . . .

Even a visit to a conjuror is *gaiety* to the ladies of *Cranford*, and excites them greatly; yet their *flutter* must of course be *little and gentle*.

The great event of the story is the crash of the company in which Miss Matty has invested her money. As a result, she has to earn a living, and she opens a small shop. This

momentous decision causes her friends many worries; the shop is as quiet as everything else in Cranford, but they are afraid the strain will be too much for her. She is nervous at first, but though she insists on giving the children extra sweets when they come to her, she manages her shop very well.

It may seem to you that there is little of interest in these trivial events, and that the attitude to life of the villagers is too silly, or too sentimental, to hold much interest for the novelist who wishes to understand the complexities of human behaviour. What gives the book its merit is the attitude of Mrs. Gaskell herself towards the village. She does not accept its standards uncritically; she loves the life of Cranford, but is able to laugh at it, or to treat it with a mock-serious exaggeration. This is done most notably in what is perhaps the best chapter in the book, the first. Gossip is described in a phrase which almost gives it the dignity of scientific study: *obtaining clear and correct knowledge of everybody's affairs in the parish*. The following description of the parties of Mrs. Forrester, one of the poorest of all the ladies, hovers continually on the absurd, but never ceases to be touching and friendly. The writer has succeeded in keeping a very skilful balance between identifying herself with the villagers, and standing completely apart from them:

When Mrs. Forrester, for instance, gave a party in her baby-house of a dwelling, and the little maiden disturbed the ladies on the sofa by a request that she might get the tea-tray out from underneath, everyone took this novel proceeding as the most natural thing in the world, and talked on about household forms and ceremonies as if we all believed that our hostess had a regular servants' hall, second table, with housekeeper and steward, instead of the one little charity-school maiden, whose short ruddy arms could never have been strong enough to carry the tray upstairs, if she had not been assisted in private by her mistress, who now sat in state, pretending not to know what cakes

were sent up, though she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knew, she had been busy all the morning making tea-bread and sponge-cakes.

The story of Cranford does not matter in the slightest; its interest derives from the village coming to life in its pages. The next novel on our list, *The Ox-Bow Incident*, has a more important story, and raises more important moral issues: but it too depends largely for its effect on the creation of atmosphere.

The book is set in the 'Wild West' of America about eighty years ago; it is the story of a lynching (that is, unofficial hanging). Cattle thieves have been at work in the district; and a party of citizens is organized to find and hang them. A few people, led by the local shopkeeper, oppose this, and want to wait for the officers of the law, but they are outvoted. Three men are found, and after some discussion hanged; then it is discovered that they were not the thieves.

There are two main scenes: outside the bar in the late afternoon, when the lynching party forms, deliberates, almost dissolves, and finally sets off; and in the woods that night, when three men have been caught with what seem to be stolen cattle, and are pleading for their lives, with the help of some of the captors. Each of these scenes raises moral problems—what is justice, and should it be left to the officers of the law or executed by outraged citizens? And each scene is unforgettable: for before our eyes we see not merely a collection of individuals but a whole civilization—that of the Wild West of America at the end of the nineteenth century. No history book could give so clear an understanding of its natural violence, its desire for fair play but no softness, its insensitivity, its courage. Even Davies, the storekeeper, who

opposes the lynching, belongs to the same civilization: his defence of Law has a mental ruggedness about it that could hardly come from a town dweller. The most typical figure is the narrator—an ordinary cowboy, caught in the whirl of the lynching, not liking it but not sure enough of himself to oppose it, ashamed of himself for fainting when wounded, disliking the fuss made by Davies yet feeling in his heart that Davies may be right. He is not really an individual character, like some of those mentioned earlier in this chapter: he is rather an epitome of the culture he belongs to. Quotation is hardly possible from this book, for its effects are built up by skilful dialogue over many pages.

The world of *A Passage to India* is very different. It is a study of race relations in India before the achievement of self-government, and in particular of Anglo-Indian Society. Two women come to India with none of the racial prejudices of their countryfolk, and immediately become unpopular at the European club. The older woman, Mrs. Moore, forms a deep friendship with a young Indian doctor called Aziz, whom she is very fond of, though they meet seldom. The young lady, Miss Quested, lacks her deep sympathy, and her generous feelings towards Indians are more theoretical, less deeply felt. She has a strange nervous breakdown, and accuses Aziz of assaulting her. Forster's point here is that a theoretical desire to help 'India' is less valuable than a genuine love of the actual people, and does not go so deep. Whether or not you agree with this, you will find his portraits of the two ladies valuable and fascinating.

But the aspect of the book I wish to mention here is its portrait of the English in India. The narrow, intolerant atmosphere of the Club is brilliantly portrayed. (The book

was written in 1924, and we may leave to those with knowledge the question whether the racial attitudes of the English have since improved.) Forster is a close and subtle observer of people; and he captures—what is most difficult of all—the unconscious remarks and gestures which reveal so much of the attitudes of those who utter them. Because he is so subtle and so careful, Forster is not easy reading to some; we have to examine his sentences with as much care as he examines people. Here is an example of his writing.

Mrs. Moore has been telling her son about her first meeting with Aziz; and he, thinking she has met a European, is wondering who it is.

Thereupon the truth struck him, and he cried, 'Oh, good gracious! Not a Mohammedan? Why ever didn't you tell me you'd been talking to a native? I was going all wrong.'

Ronny was ruffled. From his mother's description he had thought the doctor might be young Muggins from over the Ganges, and had brought out all the comradely emotions. What a mix-up! Why hadn't she indicated by the tone of her voice that she was talking about an Indian? . . .

Why is Ronny so upset? Because he has *brought out all the comradely emotions*; but since these are reserved for Europeans, he has lost them, and feels let down. And because his mother has spoken of an Indian as if he was a European. Notice that Forster does not simply say 'Ronny believed that Indians were inferior to Europeans'. He shows us Ronny's belief through his thoughts and words, creates it for us instead of just talking about it.

And, incidentally, it is not only the English who are ruthlessly depicted by Forster, with all their faults. The book is quite impartial, and the follies of the Indian community are equally exposed: their stupidity and obstinacy, as absurd

as the arrogance and intolerance of the English. If we were discussing the total effect of Forster's novel, we should need to remark as well on the deep human sympathy that he feels even for those he satirizes so frankly; but for the moment we are pointing to the power that enables a novelist to put social attitudes and beliefs before us better, in some ways, than a sociologist.

The atmosphere of these three books is that of a society of people. Our last example, *The Return of the Native*, contains an atmosphere that goes beyond people and includes Nature itself. Hardy can create for us the society of the farmers and villagers of Wessex (the south-west of England, in which all his novels are set); in such a book as *Far from the Madding Crowd* the gatherings of rustics are unforgettable. But in *The Return of the Native* he raises what seem to him huger issues.

All the characters in the novel live on or around Egdon Heath, a huge expanse of waste land that has remained almost unchanged for many thousands of years. Egdon Heath affects the story (one of the characters dies when walking across it); but it is even more important for the atmosphere of fate which it throws across everything. In contrast with it, the human beings whom the story is about seem petty and trivial. It is the greatness of Egdon Heath which dominates the book, and descriptions of its hostile grandeur set the atmosphere of the events. The most elaborate of these descriptions occurs in the very first chapter:

The untameable Ishmaelitish thing that Egdon now was it always had been. Civilisation was its enemy; and ever since the beginning of vegetation its soil had worn the same antique brown dress, the natural and invariable garment of the particular 'formation' . . . The sea changed, the fields changed, the rivers, the villages, and the people changed, yet Egdon remained.

The next chapter is headed *Humanity appears upon the scene, hand in hand with trouble.*

Story, characterization, plot and atmosphere. This classification of the material out of which a novel is built is perhaps no worse than many others, and no better. Such classifications have no final authority. When a novelist begins a new novel, he does not usually say 'How much importance shall I give to characterization, and how much to atmosphere?' More often, he sees what he has to say as a whole, and is occupied with finding the words for it. A good novel is a whole, and any splitting up into parts, as in this chapter, may be helpful in thinking about it, but it is, in a sense, artificial. Plot and character overlap, so do character and atmosphere. The plot and the characterization of *A Passage to India* are almost as notable as its atmosphere, and it is difficult to be sure where one begins and the other ends.

This chapter is written in the hope that it will help readers to appreciate the novels discussed, and to think generally about the novel. But the most important thing is to see the novels as a whole: that is, to read them.

TAILPIECE: *Four Opening Paragraphs*

Novels, as remarked earlier, cannot be quoted, like poems; and every discussion of the novel must use examples in the hope that the reader has read them, or will read them. The nearest one can come to quotation is to quote an extract; and since the most important part of a novel is often the opening, here as a tailpiece to the chapter are the openings of four English novels.

Each is followed by a short discussion: but there is a

great deal more to be said about them, and readers may find it worthwhile to discuss them further as an exercise. In particular, there are two important questions that can always be asked: What sort of novel does this lead me to expect? and, Does it make me want to go on reading the book?

I. *Gulliver's Travels*

My father had a small estate in Nottinghamshire; I was the third of five sons. He sent me to Emmanuel College, in Cambridge, at fourteen years old, where I resided three years, and applied myself close to my studies; but the charge of maintaining me, although I had a very scanty allowance, being too great for a narrow fortune, I was bound apprentice to Mr. James Bates, an eminent surgeon in London, with whom I continued four years; and my father now and then sending me small sums of money, I laid them out in learning navigation, and other parts of the mathematics useful to those who intend to travel, as I always believed it would be, some time or other, my fortune to do. When I left Mr. Bates I went down to my father, where, by the assistance of him and my uncle John, and some other relations, I got forty pounds, and a promise of thirty pounds a year to maintain me at Leyden; there I studied physic two years and seven months, knowing it would be useful in long voyages. Soon after my return from Leyden I was recommended by my good master, Mr. Bates, to be surgeon to the *Swallow*, Captain Abraham Pannell, commander; with whom I continued three years and a half, making a voyage or two into the Levant and some other parts. When I came back I resolved to settle in London; to which Mr. Bates, my master, encouraged me, and by him I was recommended to several patients. I took part of a small house in the Old Jewry; and being advised to alter my condition, I married Miss Mary Burton, second daughter to Mr. Edmund Burton, hosier, in Newgate Street, with whom I received four hundred pounds for a portion.

JONATHAN SWIFT

Nothing could appear more undistinguished than this paragraph. It is a brief and dull biography; hurries through what it is saying, and gives us nothing but facts. Yet this is

quite deliberate on Swift's part. He is about to tell us an utterly impossible story—a voyage to Lilliput, a country whose inhabitants are only a few inches tall. And so that our disbelief in this story will not get in the way of our enjoyment of the book, he wants to present it as if it was quite real. To do this, he will describe everything meticulously and in complete accuracy of detail; and here in the opening paragraph he sets the style of matter-of-factness that will be maintained throughout the book. He further adds to the air of verisimilitude by making it clear that Gulliver is a man of commonplace, undistinguished mind: from such a mind the account of all these marvels will sound all the more convincing, since he seems not to have imagination enough to invent them. This paragraph has already suggested to us the meanness of Gulliver's mind—it tells us such ordinary things about his life, in such an ordinary way. This explains, too, the sense of hurry. Swift dare not continue this sort of writing for long, or the reader may lose interest: he must get Gulliver to Lilliput as soon as possible.

II. *Mansfield Park*

About thirty years ago, Miss Maria Ward, of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of a handsome house and large income. All Huntingdon exclaimed on the greatness of the match; and her uncle, the lawyer, himself, allowed her to be at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it. She had two sisters to be benefited by her elevation; and such of their acquaintance as thought Miss Ward and Miss Frances quite as handsome as Miss Maria did not scruple to predict their marrying with almost equal advantage. But there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world as there are pretty women to deserve them. Miss Ward, at the end of half a dozen years,

found herself obliged to be attached to the Rev. Mr. Norris, a friend of her brother-in-law, with scarcely any private fortune, and Miss Frances fared yet worse. Miss Ward's match, indeed, when it came to the point, was not contemptible, Sir Thomas being happily able to give his friend an income in the living of Mansfield; and Mr. and Mrs. Norris began their career of conjugal felicity with very little less than a thousand a year. But Miss Frances married, in the common phrase, to disoblige her family, and by fixing on a Lieutenant of Marines, without education, fortune, or connections, did it very thoroughly. She could hardly have made a more untoward choice. Sir Thomas Bertram had interest, which, from principle as well as pride, from a general wish of doing right, and a desire of seeing all that were connected with him in situations of respectability, he would have been glad to exert for the advantage of Lady Bertram's sister: but her husband's profession was such as no interest could reach; and before he had time to devise any other method of assisting them, an absolute breach between the sisters had taken place. It was the natural result of the conduct of each party, and such as a very imprudent marriage almost always produces. To save herself from useless remonstrance, Mrs. Price never wrote to her family on the subject till actually married. Lady Bertram, who was a woman of very tranquil feelings, and a temper remarkably easy and indolent, would have contented herself with merely giving up her sister, and thinking no more of the matter: but Mrs. Norris had a spirit of activity, which could not be satisfied till she had written a long and angry letter to Fanny, to point out the folly of her conduct, and threaten her with all its possible ill consequences. Mrs. Price, in her turn, was injured and angry; and an answer, which comprehended each sister in its bitterness, and bestowed such very disrespectful reflections on the pride of Sir Thomas as Mrs. Norris could not possibly keep to herself, put an end to all intercourse between them for a considerable period.

JANE AUSTIN

The surface of Jane Austen's style is deceptively calm. This summary of the early history of the elderly characters of the story is far more skilfully written than may appear. To appreciate just how much it tells us, it is perhaps best to look back at it after having read the book; for Jane Austen, like any good novelist, improves on a second reading.

This paragraph tells us a great deal about the characters

of the ladies. Mrs. Norris is a selfish, domineering, interfering woman, constantly pretending that she wishes to do justice to everyone, to excuse her interference. We can begin to suspect this from her writing *a long and angry letter to Fanny* for a deed which has harmed no one but Fanny herself; or from the revealing remark, 'such very disrespectful reflections on the pride of Sir Thomas as *Mrs. Norris could not possibly keep to herself*'. Perhaps you can guess from this paragraph what the other two sisters are like.

The very first sentence tells us what sort of a world we are in. Why was it so surprising that Miss Maria Ward should marry Sir Thomas? Because she had *only seven thousand pounds*. In this world of the country gentry and lesser aristocracy, position seems to be valued more than personal merit; a lady's claim to marry a baronet is judged by the size of the dowry she can bring. This is not a world of traders and businessmen either: money is not thought of as something to be made. One's fortune is fixed, and that fixes one's position. No one must marry a wife in a lower social class; no one must change her social class, upwards or downwards.

Yet the tone of this first paragraph might suggest to us—what becomes clear as we read Jane Austen carefully—that her picture of this society is satirical. She is attacking it. The mention of money in the first two sentences is so outspoken that we wonder if Jane Austen is deliberately showing us its absurdity. The misfortune of Miss Ward in being '*obliged to be attached to the Rev. Mr. Norris, a friend of her brother-in-law, with scarcely any private income*': this is surely ironical—Jane Austen does not really believe it to be such a misfortune. Her satire is sometimes so subtle that we do not realize unless we read carefully that she is exposing the

faults of the society she writes about; here we see the first faint touches of it in the opening paragraph.

III. *The Virgin and the Gipsy*

When the vicar's wife went off with a young and penniless man the scandal knew no bounds. Her two little girls were only seven and nine years old respectively. And the vicar was such a good husband. True, his hair was grey. But his moustache was dark, he was handsome, and still full of furtive passion for his unrestrained and beautiful wife.

Why did she go? Why did she burst away with such an éclat of revulsion, like a touch of madness?

Nobody gave any answer. Only the pious said she was a bad woman. While some of the good women kept silent. They knew.

The two little girls never knew. Wounded, they decided that it was because their mother found them negligible.

D. H. LAWRENCE

This is a startling opening. It does not lead up to its subject but plunges straight in; and in so doing it packs many of the author's beliefs into the first few lines.

We know immediately that Lawrence does not like the vicar; he makes that clear by his use of the word *furtive*. And there is a suggestion that he does not like *the pious* either. This is not going to be a novel that is afraid to attack conventional ideas.

What did the 'good women' know? The faults of the vicar? Partly it is that, but it is something more important as well: they knew what can make a woman want to leave her husband. Here already Lawrence has struck the keynote of his book. He is a novelist concerned with the secret places of the heart, the deeper feelings of men and women for each other. He tries to know and to put into his novels the sort of thing the 'good women' knew intuitively.

Most remarkable about this opening is that it deals with someone of no apparent importance in the book. The vicar's wife never reappears in the story, which is only about her daughters. But as we read on, we realize how important, in their upbringing, is the lack of a mother, and we realize how the spirit of the unknown mother lives on in her younger daughter, Yvette, the heroine of the book.

IV. *The History of Mr. Polly*

'Hole!' said Mr. Polly, and then, for a change, and with greatly increased emphasis: "ole!" He paused, and then broke out with one of his private and peculiar idioms. 'Oh! *Beastly Silly Wheeze* of a hole!'

He was sitting on a stile between two threadbare-looking fields and suffering acutely from indigestion.

He suffered from indigestion now nearly every afternoon in his life, but as he lacked introspection he projected the associated discomfort upon the world. Every afternoon he discovered afresh that life as a whole and every aspect of life that presented itself was 'beastly'. And this afternoon lured by the deceptive blueness of a sky that was blue because the March wind was in the east, he had come out in the hope of snatching something of the joyousness of spring. The mysterious alchemy of mind and body refused, however, to permit any joyousness in the spring.

He had had a little difficulty in finding his cap before he came out. He wanted his cap—the new golf cap—and Mrs. Polly must needs fish out his old soft brown felt hat. "Ere's your 'at," she said, in a tone of insincere encouragement.

He had been routing among the piled newspapers under the kitchen dresser, and had turned quite hopefully and taken the thing. He put it on. But it didn't feel right. Nothing felt right. He put a trembling hand upon the crown, and pressed it on his head, and tried it askew to the right and askew to the left.

Then the full sense of the offered indignity came home to him. The hat masked the upper sinister quarter of his face, and he spoke with a wrathful eye regarding his wife from under the brim. In a voice thick with fury he said, 'I s'pose you'd like me to wear that silly Mud Pie for ever, eh? I tell you

I won't. I'm sick of it. I'm pretty near sick of everything comes to that. . . . Hat!"

He clutched it with quivering fingers. 'Hat!' he repeated. Then he flung it to the ground, and kicked it with extraordinary fury across the kitchen. It flew up against the door, and dropped to the ground with its ribbon band half off.

'Shan't go out!' he said, and sticking his hands into his jacket pockets, discovered the missing cap in the right one.

There was nothing for it but to go straight upstairs without a word, and out, slamming the shop door hard.

H. G. WELLS

This is clearly going to be a novel of character; and those who are familiar with Dickens may detect that touch of humorous exaggeration by which Dickens makes his characters slightly impossible but very memorable. The first chapter of this novel is the story of Mr. Polly's youth; yet Wells has begun it with a short scene from his later life, so that we may know something of Mr. Polly the adult before we begin his story. And even in the few lines quoted here he has told us a great deal about him.

Wells finds Mr. Polly slightly ridiculous, yet there is no doubt that he likes him. His cockney accent ('ole instead of 'Hole') is simply Wells's attempt to be realistic; but his *private and peculiar idioms*, his constant indigestion, his rather absurd fuss about the hat: all this makes Mr. Polly funny, robs him of all dignity at the very beginning. He seems almost like a child when he says 'Shan't go out!'

Yet underneath the humour and exaggeration there is real seriousness. Mr. Polly touches something deeper than our sense of humour when he says 'I'm pretty near sick of everything, comes to that.' And *in a voice thick with fury* is a disturbing phrase, not just one from a humorous novel. We are not really surprised when the author says two pages

later, 'perhaps it was not simply indigestion that troubled him'.

This is a perfect preview of the whole novel. It is the life story of Mr. Polly and it is very entertaining and intermittently funny all through, for Mr. Polly is an amusing character. Yet underneath the humour it is a deeply serious novel: a study, and a criticism, of the social environment that produced Mr. Polly. Mr. Polly, who Wells thinks did not have a fair chance in life, blunders into happiness in the end; but we are reminded, every now and then, of the millions of others who do not reach happiness. The book is a story; and it is also a study of the English lower middle-class culture about 1900.

Mr. Polly is well worth reading; and those who like it will probably also like *Kipps*, by the same author.

V

Drama : Shakespeare

DRAMA is a composite art: it does more than one thing at a time. When we see a good production of a good play, our satisfaction results from two things: the language, and the spectacle. The language—what the actors say—is the more important: but the appearance of the stage, the design of the scenery, the grouping of the actors, and above all their mime (their use of the human body): these are essential parts of drama.

In a scene near the beginning of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Hamlet is sitting in deep gloom thinking of his father's death and his mother's remarriage. Horatio (his greatest friend, who he thinks is many miles away at Wittenberg) comes in. Here are the next few lines:

HORATIO: Hail to your Lordship.

HAMLET: I am glad to see you well:
Horatio, or I do forget myself.

HORATIO: The same, my lord, and your poor servant ever.

HAMLET: Sir my good friend, I'll change that name with you.
And what make you from Wittenberg, Horatio?
Marcellus.

MARCELLUS: My good Lord.

HAMLET: I am glad to see you: good even sir.
But what in faith make you from Wittenberg?

When reading these lines we may find them very ordinary and unexciting; but when they are enacted before us on the stage, we cannot help seeing Hamlet's joy and affection, so skilfully contained in them.

Horatio gives Hamlet a conventional greeting, and Hamlet thinking that it is some courtier speaking, replies conventionally *I am glad to see you well*. Only then does he realize it is Horatio, whom he is very fond of, and whom he had not expected to see. Immediately his whole manner changes: he is overjoyed and excited, and cries *Horatio, or I do forget myself*. He will almost shout the name *Horatio*. Previously he has been sitting down gloomily: he will almost certainly jump up now.

Since Hamlet is a prince, Horatio is respectful to him: *your poor servant ever*. But Hamlet, in his joy, insists on the word *friend* instead of *servant*. His next feeling is curiosity: why is Horatio here unexpectedly? still excitedly he questions him: *And what make you from Wittenberg, Horatio?* Only then does he notice that there is someone else with Horatio; out of politeness he greets Marcellus, but very formally: *I am glad to see you, good even sir*—none of the excitement he shared when greeting Horatio. And as soon as he has finished, he returns to questioning Horatio: *But what in faith make you from Wittenberg?*

A good actor could convey this excitement and pleasure of Hamlet at seeing his friend by his voice, his gestures, the way he turns from one person to the other; that is, by his performance he would make such a commentary as this unnecessary. This is why it is so valuable to *see* a good play, instead of just reading it—a great deal of significance in the lines will come across to us, that we might have missed in the reading. Here is an even clearer example:

The scenes in *Macbeth* in which Macbeth and his wife plot to murder King Duncan are among the finest in Shakespeare: and more will be said of them later in the chapter. What concerns us here is the end of those scenes—after the murder has been done. For some time we have been seeing into the depths of Macbeth's mind and his wife's: understanding their deepest thoughts, plotting their great crime with them. The tension has grown greater and greater; Macbeth has come back from killing Duncan with the daggers in his hand; Lady Macbeth has gone to take them back to the scene of the crime and kill the grooms, and for a moment Macbeth is left alone. Suddenly there is a knocking outside. Macbeth starts violently, and cries *Whence is that knocking?* For the rest of the scene, when Lady Macbeth is hurrying her husband off to put on his nightgown, the knocking continues, growing stronger. In fact it is Macduff and Lennox, two noblemen come to call on Duncan.

Many critics have remarked on the wonderful effect of this knocking on the stage. It brings us violently back to life, reminds us of the outside world that we have forgotten about when seeing the plotting of Macbeth and his wife. And the very moment when something from that outside world reaches our consciousness is the moment when we realize most deeply how far away we have been. The suddenness of the knocking seems to light up the intensity and evil nature of all the scenes that have passed.

Now all this is the effect of what we hear and see in front of us; reading it in a book, we cannot have the same experience. The tremendous surprise, the mingled feelings of fear (with Macbeth), understanding (of how we have come back almost from another world) and relief, are feelings that we

get from the actual experience of hearing the knocking, an experience we share with Macbeth himself.

An experienced and intelligent reader can, of course, often learn from the printed text what the play would be like on the stage; and much of the subtlety and significance of a great play can be grasped only on reading, since on the stage it moves past us too quickly for us to linger on the full value of the language. But there is also much which comes home to us with its full impact only when we actually see it.

With this preliminary warning, we may move on to the business of this chapter, which is to discuss drama as literature: those effects of a play, and these are fundamentally the most important, which we can appreciate by reading. It is in his words that a dramatist indicates his meaning, and all other effects are simply to reinforce and make clear that meaning.

It would be possible to discuss the aims and characteristics of plays under the same—or similar—headings as were used for the novel: story, characterization, plot (or construction), culture (or atmosphere). We might point out that every play tells a story, contains people, must be constructed, and will have an atmosphere of its own. But after we have discussed this in such detail for the novel, it hardly becomes necessary to go over the same ground again. It will be more interesting, and more profitable, to show which of the points made in the last chapter do *not* apply to plays, or do not apply in the same form: to discuss, that is, the differences between the novel and drama.

1. Story is the basis of drama as it is of the novel; and in drama too it is not the most interesting thing: its value is in the structure and situations that can be built on it. Telling the story is slightly more difficult for the dramatist than it is

for the novelist, as we must realize as soon as we remember that plays are meant to be performed. How do you tell the audience what has happened before the play starts? For the novelist this is easy—he describes past events in his opening chapter, or at any other point in the book he may choose. But the dramatist cannot walk to the front of the stage and explain to us what has happened; he has got to convey the necessary information to us in the play itself—that is, one or some of the characters must tell it to others. The opening of a play is for this reason rather difficult to write: the telling of what has already happened has to be inserted naturally and convincingly into the action. If we look at some of the opening scenes of Shakespeare's plays, we shall see the extraordinary skill with which he has done this.

The Tempest opens on a desert island, where live Prospero, a magician, once Duke of Milan, and Miranda, his daughter. We have to be told that twelve years ago Prospero was driven from his dukedom by his wicked brother, and he and Miranda left to perish in a small boat; that luckily they reached the island they are now on; and that a ship containing all Prospero's enemies is now passing the island. The play begins with a storm, raised by Prospero's magic art; Miranda begs him to save the ship which she sees is being wrecked; and to pacify her Prospero explains that no one on the ship will drown, and begins to tell her the story of their lives. Miranda, who was only three when she left Milan, cannot of course remember much of her origin; and Prospero has postponed telling her about it until the present. And when he tells her he of course tells the audience too.

In *Hamlet* Shakespeare is even more skilful. The ghost of Hamlet's father has been appearing on the castle walls. The first scene is a cold dark night, when the soldiers are

wondering if it will reappear; and the cold and the suspense are wonderfully suggested by the language before we are told what is happening. Then the soldiers are joined by Horatio, whom they have brought along so that he can see the ghost. Horatio is sceptical, and does not believe in ghosts; to convince him, the soldiers tell him what they have seen—and thus tell the audience about the ghost and, incidentally, about the present state of the country. And then—most natural touch of all—while they are talking to him, the ghost appears again! Shakespeare has used this necessity of telling us the story to put us into a state of excitement and suspense; and that in turn prepares us carefully for the unexpected reappearance of the ghost.

For the rest, the story of a play need not differ greatly from that of a novel except in two points. It must be shorter, and so instead of going right through the life of his hero, the dramatist may concentrate on a short period of his life that seems to sum up all that he did of importance. Shakespeare does this in *The Tempest* and *King Lear*, among other plays; T. S. Eliot does it in *Murder in the Cathedral*. And of course the dramatist cannot tell us *about* the people and events—all our information must come from what they say and do.

2. The question of character in drama is a fascinating one, but raises many difficult points, some of them too difficult to be discussed fully here. Characterization in drama is not the same as characterization in the novel. A novelist can describe the appearance, the mannerisms and the mind of his characters; he can devote many pages to an episode which lasted only five minutes, or he can summarize the events of five years in five lines; he can tell us what his characters were like before the story began, or can even pause in his narrative and narrate events which happened much earlier. He can tell us

the thoughts of a character, and contrast them with what he says. A character in a play, on the other hand, has no existence except when he is on stage. He is created when the play begins, and ceases to exist when it ends. We only see him for an hour or two, we can discover his thoughts only from what he says and does, and he takes part only in episodes that come into the play. The dramatist, as a result, can hardly tell us all about him, make him appear a living person whom we know as we know our friends, in the way a novelist may do. He is forced to be more selective than the novelist. Because he can tell us so much less about his characters, he must show us, with as profound understanding as possible, *some* things in their minds, and ignore the rest. This limitation was recognized by the medieval dramatists, who turned it into a source of strength. They wrote morality plays in which the actors were called Pride, Envy, Wrath, Knowledge, and so on. Envy was not meant to be a portrait of an individual human being, with his complicated and unique combination of qualities; he was a portrait of the envy in all of us, a sort of cross-section of every human being, an abstraction from many different people. It is not really possible to show Mr. Charles Smith, or Mr. Kwaku Osei, with all their individual traits, on the stage, since we do not see enough of them, and since we see only the important things about them. But it is quite possible to show Envy: the stage is ideally suited to the short, concentrated, profound insight that will show us just one quality in action.

This representation of moral qualities in plays was normal in the Middle Ages; and it is much more present than we sometimes realize in Shakespeare. Such a character as Iago, in *Othello*, has puzzled many readers who have not realized this. Iago hates his master Othello so bitterly that he lays an

elaborate and evil plot to make him jealous of his wife, Desdemona, so that Othello eventually murders her. Many readers have felt that the jealousy of Iago is unconvincing; though it is true that Othello has failed to give him promotion, this hardly seems sufficient reason for such deep and lasting hatred. They have pointed out too that since everyone else in the play believes Iago to be honest and virtuous, he cannot have been wicked in the past; it seems incredible, then, that this tremendous hatred should suddenly have seized upon him. In short, they say, he is not a convincing character.

Iago is not meant to be convincing—in that way. These criticisms result from a misunderstanding of what Shakespeare is trying to do. He is not creating a character in a realistic novel; he is creating something much more like a character in a morality play. Iago has a name, and has some superficial resemblances to a human being: but at bottom he is the old medieval character of Envy. When we see him on stage we get, not a representation of a particular individual, but an insight into the evil in men's minds. If we understand this we shall cease to speculate about what Iago was like before the play began; he did not exist then. And we shall also appreciate the wonderful understanding Shakespeare shows of evil. When Iago says exultingly, as his plot succeeds, *Work on, my medicine, work*, it is not just an individual talking; there is a universal truthfulness about it.

Very similar remarks could be made of most of Shakespeare's great tragic characters: Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, Cordelia in *King Lear*, Ophelia in *Hamlet*. They are not simply 'moralities', for they have touches of individuality, and Shakespeare may combine more than one moral quality in them; but they are not 'characters' either.

And—of course—they live not by how the author describes them, but by what they actually do and say on the stage. If Shakespeare wants to create a character by describing him from the outside he can, but then the description must be given by the other people on the stage. He does this in *Julius Caesar*. The real hero of *Julius Caesar* is Brutus, and the most important thing about Brutus is his uprightness, his sincerity and nobility of purpose. Shakespeare wants to leave no doubt in our minds that Brutus is noble, and that everyone realizes this. So he causes all who know Brutus to remark—again and again throughout the play—*the noble Brutus; well, Brutus, thou art noble; no enemy shall ever take alive the noble Brutus; this was the noblest Roman of them all*. In this way the actors are a sort of chorus, telling us of the nobility of Brutus quite as effectively as would the descriptions of a novelist.

3. Plot, or structure, is, as we have seen, not necessarily important in the novel: it depends on what sort of novel the author is writing. In a drama plot must be important. A play is not as well suited as a novel to the 'slice of life' treatment; there is neither time nor opportunity on the stage to put in everything that happened, just as it happened, in the way Dickens or Thackeray or Defoe sometimes give the impression of doing. A play must be a selection of those events that can profitably be put on the stage; and a good play will be a careful selection. One masterly piece of dramatic structure, Sophocles' *King Oedipus*, has already been discussed; to get away from Shakespeare for a moment, let us take as another example T. S. Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral*.

It is a play about Thomas a'Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury who was killed in Canterbury Cathedral by servants of King Henry II on 29 December 1170 and has

since become a saint. Contemporaries said that when Thomas was attacked he refused to lock the doors of the Cathedral, and died a willing martyr. Eliot wrote his play to set down his view of Thomas's motives and the temptations he has to overcome, and to raise the question of the power of the State over the Church.

Thomas had been a servant of King Henry in his youth; but when he was made Archbishop he devoted himself to asserting the power of the Church against the State; and it was this that brought on the quarrel with Henry, and his death. There were many important and exciting episodes in this struggle, which culminated in Henry banishing Thomas for seven years. In the end a reconciliation was patched up, and Thomas returned to England in December 1170. But he had not given up his attempt to assert the power of the Church, and continued to defy the King. As a result, he was murdered less than a month after his triumphant return into Canterbury.

Eliot's play deals only with the last month of Thomas's life. This is perhaps surprising, but it is very wise: for the lifelong struggles of Thomas's career are summed up in the climax of this last month. Everything Eliot wants to say about Thomas can be said with reference to this month, and he will have the advantage of a short, compact, single episode to build his play out of. When earlier events need to be mentioned, they are brought in in two ways: by the chorus of the poor women of Canterbury, telling us what their life has been like while Thomas was away; and by the Tempters, bringing before Thomas visions that he has cherished in the past of pleasure, or of wordly power, or of alliance with the barons: thus reminding us of the important events in his past life.

The play contains two scenes, which are carefully balanced against one another. The first is Thomas's return to Canterbury: it shows us the rejoicing of the priests and the congregation, and Thomas's struggle to prepare himself for the martyrdom he knows is coming in order to approach it in the right spirit of humility. There is a short interlude, consisting of the sermon Thomas preached on Christmas day, from which we learn that he has overcome all temptations; and the second scene is the actual murder of Thomas. This is presented almost as a ritual murder, with the chorus singing and Thomas standing at the altar, so that we shall be impressed by the religious significance of the martyrdom. This forms a fine climax to the religious struggles of Thomas, and a careful sequel to the first scene. By building his whole play in this way on two all-important scenes, Eliot has eliminated everything unnecessary, so that each action moves towards the final martyrdom.

If we think about the construction of almost any of Shakespeare's plays we shall see the same skilful balance and development. *Macbeth*, for example, divides itself into three movements, which we may call *Duncan*, *Banquo* and *Macduff*; if you know *Macbeth* well you will find it valuable to try to decide on the divisions between these three parts. *Othello* divides itself more naturally into two: Othello the loving husband, and Othello the jealous husband. The dividing point is Act III, Scene 3, a wonderful scene in which Iago manages to instil suspicion of Desdemona in Othello's mind. At the beginning of the scene Othello says of Desdemona:

Perdition catch my soul,
But I do love thee! and when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again—

—happy and affectionate lines. By the time Iago's poison has worked on his mind his love has changed to hate:

Look here, Iago;
All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven.
'Tis gone . . .
Damn her, lewd minx! O damn her.

The contrast between the violence and unreasonableness of that, and the love of the earlier lines, is the contrast between the Othello of the beginning of the play and the Othello of the end. And on that contrast Shakespeare has based the entire structure of his play.

4. Finally, atmosphere. Here the drama is utterly different from the novel, and we are reminded very forcibly that it is a composite art, and comes fully to life only on the stage. For the novelist can create atmosphere by his descriptions (like Hardy) or by showing us the thoughts of his characters (like Forster) or even by commenting on what happens (like Fielding). In drama atmosphere is created very largely by the grouping, movement and general behaviour of the actors, or by scenery and costumes, even perhaps by incidental music. A play must pass through the hands of the producer before it takes final shape: and this applies particularly to the creation of atmosphere. A good dramatist will of course make it clear what sort of atmosphere is needed, and a good producer will follow the dramatist's intention.

The Cherry Orchard, a comedy by the Russian writer Chekhov, is extremely baffling on a first reading, yet becomes quite clear and very impressive on the stage, if the atmosphere is successfully rendered. There are an enormous number of characters (whose long Russian names do not make them easier to remember!) and though everything centres on one

main event—the sale of a cherry orchard by a landowner who has lost her money—there are complications that are not at all easy to follow. Almost everyone seems beset by a sense of futility, an inability to act at the crucial moment. Some of the characters seem to have nothing to do with the rest of the play.

When we see the play performed, or try to perform it ourselves, we realize what only a very careful reading can show us: that all this confusion and futility is deliberate. Chekhov is trying to portray the state of mind of the Russian aristocracy towards the end of the Tsarist régime: he finds them undecided, uneasy and helpless. This atmosphere can and should be shown to the audience: people wandering vaguely and hesitantly round the stage, undecided and uneasy about all they do, crowds of characters colliding, with no significance in their movements. Then all their remarks will fit into this atmosphere, and the purpose of the play will be conveyed.

Shakespeare packs so much into the language of his plays that although we may miss the excitement of having the atmosphere created before our eyes, yet by simply reading them we can usually discover just what that atmosphere should be. The first part of *Macbeth*, for example, with its strong sense of hidden evil, must take place in semi-darkness, and a well-lit stage would spoil it: we can see this in the constant recurrence of night and darkness in the imagery:

Now o'er the one half-world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams arise.

A Midsummer Night's Dream also takes place by night, but this time night is not terrifying and evil; the suggestions are of the beauty and magic of moonlight, and the producer will

make no attempt to suggest fear or evil. The spirit of *King Lear* is easy to capture, even from reading: the violent storms of passion are paralleled by the storm on the heath, and the producer will make his stage appear simple and wild, to fit the wildness of the play.

At this point it is perhaps necessary to say a word on the language of drama. Almost all the plays mentioned are in verse. Must a play be in verse? Are there any good plays in prose? What are the respective advantages of prose and verse on the stage?

It is not easy to give simple answers to these questions, since the practice of dramatists is not constant. We can say with certainty that most of the world's great plays are in verse; but that there are some very fine plays in prose. In the twentieth century in particular most dramatists have used prose (though there have occasionally been signs of a revival of verse drama). It is probably true—though there are some critics who would dispute this—that verse is more suitable to a good play than prose.

The reason for this is that drama is a highly concentrated form of writing. When we have read a good novel, we often find that none of the actual words remain in our mind, simply the total effect of the book. In a play the actual words are very important. At moments of great dramatic intensity, attention is concentrated on just what a character is saying; and we have already seen that the language which demands—and deserves—the greatest attention is poetry. One of *Macbeth's* most moving lines, spoken after he has seen the ghost of the murdered Banquo, is

It will have blood, they say; blood will have blood.

It echoes many earlier lines in the play, and shows us how

much Macbeth's thoughts must be running on blood. It echoes, for example, the horror of Macbeth looking at his bloodstained hands after he has killed Duncan:

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine
Making the green one red.

These lines are very effective dramatically: because they are great poetry. Macbeth's sense of guilt is so great that he feels he could pollute the whole world. This feeling is rendered by the use of the image of blood: can he wash it off? *All great Neptune's ocean* is a phrase suggesting vastness—he can pollute it all. The idea of staining the ocean red is given twice: first in long, latinized words that echo the sense of vastness: *the multitudinous seas incarnadine*; then, as a contrast, in the simplest words possible: *making the green one red*.

Many times in the play the imagery of blood recurs; and many times it gives us insight into Macbeth's mind. These dramatic effects are achieved by the poetic genius Shakespeare shows in handling language.

Here is another example from a lesser-known but very fine play of Shakespeare's, *Troilus and Cressida*. It is a play about war; and the great war-hero Achilles, in a moment of weakness, tires of the ugliness of fighting, and longs for peace. Hector is his great enemy:

I have a woman's longing,
An appetite that I am sick withal,
To see great Hector in his weeds of peace;
To talk to him, and to behold his visage
Even to my full of view.

These lines, like all dramatic poetry, should really be read in their context, or heard on the stage; but perhaps some of

their effect comes through even in isolation. They contrast strongly with the usual warlike spirit of Achilles; he himself is aware of this contrast and ashamed of it—hence he calls his feeling *a woman's longing*. The next line—*an appetite that I am sick withal*—expresses both shame and the depth of his desire; and the rhythm of all the lines shows how deeply they are charged with emotion. At the moment at which they come in the play they strike us very deeply with their disgust and loathing of war: and their effect is far beyond what prose could achieve.

When we do find prose in drama, it is usually some special sort of prose, very different from the humdrum language of everyday life. The plays of the later seventeenth century in England—what is known as Restoration drama, performed at the court of Charles II—are in prose; but it is a highly polished and artificial prose specially constructed to dazzle the audience by its brilliance. The plays of Synge, the great Irish dramatist of the early twentieth century, are also in prose; but it is a beautiful, rhythmic prose that is often very close to poetry:

I see the trees naked and bare, and the moon shining. Little moon, little moon of Alban, it's lonesome you'll be this night, and tomorrow night, and long nights after, and you passing the woods beyond Glen Laoi, looking every place for Deirdre and Naisi, the two lovers who slept so sweetly with each other. . . .

Prose like that has some of the qualities of poetry; we do not feel that it is inadequate for the dramatic situation: it is far removed from ordinary prose.

The popularity of prose in modern drama is connected with the fact that many modern plays are realistic in treatment and domestic in subject. The plays of Bernard Shaw are a good illustration of this. Shaw dealt with contemporary

social problems; he believed in facing the ugly and unattractive things in life, and he put them into his plays; he made his people behave on the stage just as they behave in real life. He is rather like those novelists who believe in giving us a slice of life; and it is natural that he should write in prose. Many of his plays, like *Candida* or *Arms and the Man*, deal with family life—a favourite subject in twentieth-century drama, and one so everyday that it seems to many dramatists suited to treating in prose.

Shaw himself is a very fine dramatist. His plays are lively and interesting, they make us think, and they show great mastery of stage technique. Prose suited Shaw's realistic, reasoning temperament, and he would probably have written much worse had he written in verse. But it can be argued that with the hundreds of less distinguished modern dramatists the use of prose has had bad effects: it has limited modern drama to the superficial, comparatively uninteresting aspects of life. After all, if we are to see people behaving on the stage just as they do in everyday life, then we might wonder why we should go to the theatre at all, instead of just watching our neighbours. The use of prose has prevented drama from being either profound or universal.

So it is interesting to notice that there are signs of a revival of poetic drama in our time. Most modern verse plays are difficult, just as most good modern literature is difficult: the modern writer feels that he must mirror in his work the complexity of his age. But for those interested, here are three plays worth reading: *Winterset*, by the American Maxwell Anderson; *The Ascent of F6*, by Auden and Isherwood (though this has a very puzzling last act); and *Murder in the Cathedral*, by T. S. Eliot (discussed above).

This chapter must close with Shakespeare. His name

appears so often in these pages, in fact in any work on English drama, that there is a tendency to think that Shakespeare *is* English drama. Is this so? Are there no other plays worth reading in English? Or are Shakespeare's plays much easier than all others? Or much greater? Or more suitable for foreigners? And is this concentration on Shakespeare a good idea?

These questions are important and each deserves an answer. To the first we may answer No. Shakespeare is, to be sure, the best of English dramatists, but he is by no means the only good one. Among his contemporaries there are Marlowe, Middleton, Webster, Chapman, and above all Ben Jonson; there are Congreve in the later seventeenth century, Sheridan in the eighteenth; Shaw, Synge and Eliot in the twentieth. Each of these is a great dramatist.

Are Shakespeare's plays much easier than others? Again the answer is No. Many of his plays are so familiar to us that we do not realize how complicated the plots often are, how difficult the language. *King Lear* has a fairly straightforward plot, but the language is complex and difficult; *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is much simpler in language, but more complicated in plot. Shakespeare's plays are probably less easy than those of his contemporaries, Beaumont and Fletcher; (their *Knight of the Burning Pestle* is worth reading, especially if you have read and liked parts of *Don Quixote*). But the truth is that all Elizabethan plays are difficult when compared with modern plays: this is only to be expected after 350 years.

What then is the reason for the pre-eminence of Shakespeare? Partly, perhaps, it is the English love of hero-worship: but this is not a major reason. It is that most of the other great English dramatists are Shakespeare's contem-

poraries: not as great as Shakespeare, but just as difficult. And they have in the past been considered too difficult for reading in schools (which most of them are) and for the general reading public (which most of them are not—at least if they have notes). English drama, with very few exceptions, contains no good plays written between 1700 and 1900. Those written in the twentieth century are widely read and performed; those written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are difficult. And the effort of overcoming the difficulties imposed by the passage of time has been directed almost entirely at Shakespeare's plays, since the greatness of these is so unquestioned.

This singling out of Shakespeare, then, has been unfair to his contemporaries; but has it been a good idea from our point of view as readers? Here I think we can answer Yes. Shakespeare's plays deserve the closest attention we can give them. The habit of reading them when we are still children makes us familiar with them early, and many readers feel that this helps them to appreciate the plays as they grow older. Many readers of this chapter are no doubt already familiar with several of the plays mentioned.

There are great advantages in giving careful attention to a single author, for we can learn a great deal about literature by comparing his different works, studying his development, seeing how his treatment of different subjects varied. With the help of a few carefully selected plays and one or two of the books mentioned at the end of this chapter, this can be done very profitably for Shakespeare. Here are one or two hints and guiding remarks on the main points of interest.

There are two main classifications of Shakespeare's plays, each with its special value: according to type; and chronologically, in periods. The division according to type is into

three—comedies, histories and tragedies. A comedy is a play whose general outlook on life is happy; usually it has a happy ending; serious and even sad scenes may occur, but they do not dominate the mood of the play: thus *The Merchant of Venice* contains the almost tragic figure of Shylock, but it remains a comedy because our sympathy is with the Venetians and is never completely won by Shylock. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is happy all through: even the quarrel of Oberon and Titania never gets as violent as—say—the quarrel between King Lear and his daughters; and it is made up before the play ends. Shakespeare's finest comedies are perhaps *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*: both these, especially the latter, touch very serious notes, but they never become tragic.

The histories introduce us to many of the political and constitutional issues of medieval English history, for Shakespeare wrote plays about not less than seven English kings. Most of them deal with rebellion and kingship: the cares and responsibilities of leadership interested Shakespeare deeply, and many of his kings contrast themselves enviously with the poorest of their subjects. Here for example is Henry V:

What infinite heart's ease
Must kings neglect that private men enjoy!
And what have kings that privates have not too,
Save ceremony, save general ceremony?

Shakespeare's three Roman plays—*Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*—might be called historical tragedies: in every essential of subject and treatment they resemble the tragedies, yet like the histories they stick very closely to recorded events.

It is possible to define tragedy as simply the opposite to

comedy—a play whose general outlook on life is unhappy, and certainly this definition would fit all Shakespeare's great tragedies. But there is a more interesting conception of tragedy which derives from the ancient Greek writer Aristotle. This is that tragedy is caused by a single flaw in a not ignoble nature. The downfall of a tragic hero must be caused not by external events, but by some weakness within him. This will produce in the audience a feeling of inevitability, that the tragedy was not the result of a mere unhappy accident but the result of an inner necessity.

Othello is a good example of this. Othello, at the opening of the play, is a character whom all admire: he has fought bravely for the state of Venice, his honesty and openness have won the love of Desdemona. His one weakness is egotism; and the villainous Iago works upon this weakness to make Othello ruin his own peace of mind, murder his wife, and finally kill himself. A noble nature is overthrown by his own weakness.

Another view of the difference between comedy and tragedy which is held by many critics is that it is based on the difference between man as a social being and man as an individual: that comedy is about social relationships, manners and customs, whereas tragedy is about the secret places of the heart, the inner struggles or experiences of the tragic hero. There is much truth in this view, and it is interesting to compare the titles of Shakespeare's comedies with those of his tragedies. *The Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Much Ado about Nothing* are titles which describe the play as a whole; *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello* point at the tragic hero, showing us that attention will be concentrated on him.

The other classification of Shakespeare's work—the

chronological one—is in some ways even more interesting. There is no doubt that Shakespeare's work changed considerably as he developed, and critics have tended to divide it into four periods, though of course the divisions between the periods (especially between the first two) are not at all clear-cut: for Shakespeare himself did not consciously leave one period and enter the next, it was simply that his attitude to life changed gradually. The four periods are generally called Early, Mature, Tragic and Late: typical and well-known plays of each period are *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*. Here, by a brief comparison of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Macbeth*, we shall try to discover some of the differences between the plays of the first and third period.

The Merchant of Venice has an exciting story: we are kept in suspense until the end to know whether Antonio's ships will return in time, or whether Portia will succeed in saving him from Shylock's wrath. In *Macbeth*, written twelve years later, the story is much less important: it would not matter at all if we knew the whole story before beginning the play. For Shakespeare has become interested in the mind of his characters, and is trying to understand and put before us the struggle between ambition and conscience in *Macbeth*, complicated by the influence of his wife. He is seeing deeper into people than he had done in the early play.

Other new elements are found in *Macbeth*: a deeper study of moral problems, and a knowledge of the subconscious mind. The moral issues in *The Merchant of Venice* are simple: Shylock is the villain, Bassanio the hero; Shylock hates Bassanio, the audience hates Shylock. It is true that when Shylock pleads *Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs*, etc. we begin to feel sorry for him: but this may be

more than Shakespeare intended, for the Elizabethans probably felt a prejudice against Jews which we do not feel today. We are undoubtedly meant to be pleased at Shylock's downfall. But in *Macbeth* the moral issue is not so simple. Viewed from the outside Macbeth is an even worse character than Shylock—a murderer and a tyrant. But Shakespeare is no longer content to dismiss someone as bad; he now shows us the workings of his mind, helps us to understand why he went wrong. Hence the great tragedies, and hence a 'villain-hero' like Macbeth.

In the sleepwalking scene of *Macbeth* Shakespeare shows an understanding of the subconscious mind as great as that of any modern psychologist. Lady Macbeth has tried to conceal and ignore her feelings of fear and guilt; she has behaved as if she had no conscience and no weaknesses during the murder of Duncan; but in the end she has broken down. Now she is walking in her sleep; and words and images come tumbling from her that have lain in her subconscious mind for months. After the murder she had scorned Macbeth's horror at his bloodstained hands, and had said

My hands are of your colour, but I shame
To wear a heart so white.

But the blood on the hands must have made a deep impression on her, though she did not realize it at the time; and now she looks at her hands and imagines that they are covered with blood which will not wash off:

Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.

This is very convincing. The subconscious mind does carry memories like that, without our realizing it. Then later,

under the influence of a long suppressed feeling of guilt, they may come pouring out.

And finally, we may illustrate the difference between the two plays, and thus between the two periods of Shakespeare's verse, by contrasting the quality of the blank verse. The Prince of Morocco praises Portia in these lines:

Let's see once more this saying graved in gold.
Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire:
Why that's the Lady, all the world desires her:
From the four corners of the earth they come,
To kiss this shrine, this mortal-breathing saint.

And Lady Macbeth reproaches her husband in these:

Was the hope drunk
Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since?
And wakes it now to look so green and pale
On what it did so freely?

.These two passages contrast in rhythm: that of the first is even and regular, and corresponds with the metre, so that each line is a separate rhythmic unit, and the pauses come at the ends of the lines. The second has a violent, apparently irregular movement, for the rhythm does not slavishly follow the blank verse pattern, but corresponds to the shades of meaning and emotion in what Lady Macbeth is saying; pauses come in the middle of the lines, important words like *drunk*, *green* and *pale* are stressed, while the last half-line is meant to be spoken in a rush.

The passages contrast in imagery too. That of the first passage is in no way startling: the comparison of Portia to a saint, and her home to a shrine, is a pleasing and conventional one. But the images in the second passage are so amazing that we might not notice them at first: *hope* is being

compared to a drunken man, who promised bold things when drunk, but the next morning has lost his boldness, looks unhealthy—*green and pale*—and nervous. And in the middle of this already startling image comes another: the comparison of hope to a garment, in which Macbeth *dressed himself*. Shakespeare's great tragedies are thick with startling and violent imagery like this.

Finally, the two passages contrast in emotional intensity. The Prince of Morocco is uttering a polite compliment; Lady Macbeth is pouring out her deepest feelings. And since Shakespeare's verse has now lost its earlier stiffness, it can respond to the most delicate shades of this emotion; a good actor or a sensitive reader will see where scorn is intended, or hatred, or pity; how strong the feeling of scorn is; and just how it is combined with other emotions.

Shakespeare's development was, on the whole, towards a deeper seriousness; towards a deeper insight into character and moral problems; towards more complicated but also more brilliant language; and perhaps we may also say towards tragedy, though at the end of his life he returned to comedy (*A Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*) while retaining the distinctive language of the tragedies. Some critics have found a mood of peace and reconciliation about these comedies of Shakespeare's final period that makes them appropriately his last work.

An interesting and (if carefully done) quite profitable exercise is to arrange the Shakespeare plays we have read in what seems to be their chronological order; and then to check our guess against the list given in almost any of the books recommended below.

We have not had space in this chapter to deal with individual plays at any length; but this is something that the

reader can do for himself, with the aid of one of the many good editions of separate plays. Instead I have tried to touch on points of comparison between the plays, and some of the general dramatic problems they raise. Here in conclusion is a specimen of more detailed criticism: a single scene, with a commentary.

With such a rich variety to choose from, almost every reader will no doubt wish to suggest another scene that seems to him more suitable. I have chosen this one from *Antony and Cleopatra* because it is short but powerful, and contains a wealth of Shakespeare's mature dramatic poetry. Of course the verse is not as simple as in Shakespeare's earlier work, and some lines may require re-reading several times before they are clear. But in poetry of such depth this is worth the trouble.

As ever, readers should think about the scene for themselves, puzzle out any difficulties, even work out some of the details of its presentation on the stage, before reading the commentary. But in case they do not know the play at all, here is an account of what has gone before.

The play tells of the Roman leader Antony who threw away the world for love. He and Octavius Caesar share the rule of the Roman world: first as partners, then as rivals. Antony wastes his opportunities by staying in Egypt, where he has fallen in love with the queen, Cleopatra; he is persuaded to make a diplomatic marriage to Caesar's sister Octavia, then gives her up to return to Cleopatra. By the opening of this scene, Antony and Caesar are openly hostile; it is the night before the battle; Antony and Cleopatra are feasting their friends and followers for what, Antony realizes, may be the last time.

Antony and Cleopatra: ACT IV SC. 2

Enter ANTONY, CLEOPATRA, ENOBARBUS, CHARMIAN, IRAS, ALEXAS
with others.

[Enobarbus is Antony's general; Charmian and Iras are Cleopatra's attendants.]

ANT. He will not fight with me, Domitius?

ENO. No.

ANT. Why should he not?

ENO. He thinks, being twenty times of better fortune,
He is twenty men to one.

ANT. Tomorrow, soldier,
By sea and land I'll fight: or I will live,
Or bathe my dying honour in the blood
Shall make it live again. Woo't thou fight well?

ENO. I'll strike, and cry 'Take all.'

ANT. Well said; come on.
Call forth my household servants; let's tonight
Be bounteous at our meal.

Enter three or four Servitors

Give me thy hand,
Thou hast been rightly honest;—so hast thou;—
Thou,—and thou,—and thou:—you have served me well,
And kings have been your fellows.

CLEO. (*aside to Eno.*) What means this?

ENO. (*aside to Cleo.*) 'Tis one of those odd tricks which sorrow shoots
Out of the mind.

ANT. And thou art honest too.
I wish I could be made so many men,
And all of you clapped up together in
An Antony, that I might do you service
So good as you have done.

SERV. The Gods forbid!

ANT. Well, my good fellows, wait on me tonight:
Scant not my cups; and make as much of me
As when mine empire was your fellow too,
And suffered my command.

CLEO. (*aside to Eno.*) What does he mean?

ENO. (*aside to Cleo.*) To make his followers weep.

ANT. Tend me tonight.

May be it is the period of your duty:
Haply you shall not see me more; or if,
A mangled shadow: perchance tomorrow
You'll serve another master. I look on you
As one that takes his leave. Mine honest friends,
I turn you not away; but, like a master
Married to your good service, stay till death:
Tend me tonight two hours, I ask no more,
And the gods yield you for't!

ENO. What mean you, sir,
To give them this discomfort? Look, they weep,
And I, an ass, am onion-eyed: for shame,
Transform us not to women.

ANT. Ho, ho, ho!
Now the witch take me if I meant it thus!
Grace grow where these drops fall! My hearty friends,
You take me in too dolorous a sense;
For I spake to you for your comfort; did desire you
To burn this night with torches: know, my hearts,
I hope well of tomorrow; and will lead you
Where rather I'll expect victorious life
Than death and honour. Let's to supper, come,
And drown consideration.

(*Exeunt*)

As Antony and Enobarbus enter they are discussing Antony's challenge to fight Caesar in single combat, which has been refused. In this incident we can see something of the contrast between the two men: Antony the romantic and the

gambler, thinking to save his desperate situation with this arrogant gesture; and Caesar cool and sensible, refusing to throw away his chance of victory for a colourful adventure. Antony is defiant:

—Tomorrow, soldier,
By sea and land I'll fight.

He shows his soldier-like spirit; so does Enobarbus. Now for the banquet: and when the servants appear, we see another Antony, the leader who can win men's hearts. These few lines in which Antony shakes hands with the servants give the actor a great opportunity: the simple words '*and thou—and thou—and thou*' bring tears, as we are told, to the watchers, and should have something of the same effect on the audience. We are being shown the servants' loyalty, and Antony's charm. Notice that he does not call them by name: he is not a personal friend but a leader unbending, and addresses them not as equals but as servants whom he is honouring by shaking hands: perhaps he does not even know their names. And so the scene is not held up with a list of names, and we are shown the exact relationship between master and men.

It becomes clear that Antony is behaving as if he is to die the next day. He utters the far-fetched wish that he could 'be made so many men' and serve them as if they were Antony. We may feel this is extravagant talk, and it continues, but suddenly we find that in the midst of the extravagance he has said something disturbing:

and make as much of me
As when mine empire was your fellow too,
And suffered my command.

He has already told his servants *kings have been your fellows*:

now he is comparing them to his empire. But if we think over this far-fetched comparison we can see in it his sense of foreboding that prompts him to make it. The empire *was* their fellow; now it no longer 'suffers his command'. There is the tragedy that has already begun, the fall of Antony; and he is hinting, of course, that soon the servants will go the same way, and not be under his command either. We cannot fail to see by now that he expects to die the next day.

In his next speech he leaves all extravagant comparisons, all hints, and speaks simply and directly. Even the rhythm seems to have got smoother, calmer, more decisive. He says straightforwardly:

May be it is the period of your duty.

He has prepared us for this, by his friendliness, then by his hints. Now the clear statement strikes us all the more powerfully:

I look on you

As one that takes his leave.

All this while Enobarbus and Cleopatra have been commenting to each other on Antony's behaviour. The *asides* which they utter show the producer how the scene should be presented: Antony and the servants in one group, Enobarbus and Cleopatra standing apart, watching, wondering and worrying. Both love Antony, and his dark hints upset them. Enobarbus shows from his first short reply that he is moved: *to make his followers weep* serves not only as Shakespeare's hint to the actors on how they should react, but also as the reluctant confession of Enobarbus that he too is affected. We see this most clearly in his next speech, in which he is revealed as the hard-bitten soldier, weeping against his will. He confesses his grief, but is ashamed of it; and instead of

yielding he is angry with Antony for making him forget his manhood so. All this is summed up in the term *onion-eyed*: Enobarbus knows that his tears are caused by sorrow; but the only cause which a soldier should admit is a purely physical one, like onions. He is not really pretending that his tears are caused by onions, but feels it necessary for his self-respect as a soldier to use the word, so that at least he is not confessing openly that he has so far forgotten his manhood as to weep. No one is deceived, but a touch of Enobarbus' dignity is preserved.

And now comes the change of mood that transforms this scene. Suddenly Antony cheers up; and in his last speech he brushes aside the sorrow that he has himself created and tries to bully everyone into gaiety. So far the movement of the scene has been getting slower and slower; now the sharp change must be emphasized by faster speaking and lighter gestures. So the speech starts vigorously; and a good actor should be able to shatter the mood of sadness simply by the words *Ho, ho, ho!*

This last speech bursts with confidence, and with a pretence that he has not really been serious in his foreboding. Clearly the actor must be louder, happier, more confident. There is now a touch of extravagant gaiety in his words (to *burn* this night with torches). The speech, Shakespeare has realized, must not be too short, or there will not be time for Antony's friends and followers to respond to his change of mood and cheer up. But by the time he comes to *let's to supper* they can all have begun to laugh and chatter again; and the skill of the producer can show itself in the way he directs group after group to quicken into laughter, to start moving and talking more gaily, as the speech progresses: so that we can actually *see* Antony influencing his friends.

The last words of a scene are always among the most prominent: if a dramatist wishes to leave a phrase lingering in our minds after a scene has ended, the best thing for him to do is to put it at the very end, so that it seems to be left behind on the silence that follows the scene. Shakespeare has done this here. Antony concludes

Let's to supper, come,
And drown consideration.

This is the climax of a speech that has urged everyone to be gay, and Antony no doubt speaks it as a climax, perhaps even shouts it as the music strikes up. But as he goes out we realize that the last word he said was *consideration*. He was urging his followers to enjoy themselves without sad thoughts; but *consideration* is what every sensible man is likely to use the night before a battle, and we realize that Antony is telling them to stop thinking, to forget their situation and not look at the truth. So as the noise and laughter die down and we are ready to move on to the next scene, we realize that the original mood of Antony was perhaps a truer one, that their present mirth is really the result of avoiding thought, an escape from the reality we have earlier been shown.

After these detailed remarks we can perhaps make one or two general comments on the scene. In the first place, it shows Antony's extraordinary power of leadership. It is he who controls the mood of the whole gathering; he can make them weep and then make them laugh again. And this gives an opportunity to the producer: he should show by his presentation of the scene this magical influence of Antony. When Antony turns to speak to a servant, the reaction should be clear and sudden. When he moves, there should be a ripple as several people turn to follow him. At the

climax, as the scene ends, he might even leap on a chair or table to dominate it more effectively. This would not have been possible on the Elizabethan stage, where there was no front curtain, and the actors had to go out at the end of the scene; for the effect would be spoilt by Antony having to climb down again. But on the modern stage the curtain can fall as Antony stands above the crowd, leaving us with the impression of his commanding influence.

Secondly, we can see Antony's irresponsibility. He has this great power over his followers, and he uses it to suit his changes of mood. When he feels gloomy, he makes others gloomy; when he decides to cheer up, he brushes the gloom of others aside. We can see from this scene not only why Antony was great, but also why he fell; the cool and efficient Caesar has not this magical power over his followers, but nor has he this desire to twist their feelings to echo his own mood: he gives us a feeling of steady purpose which is the exact opposite of the fitful brilliance of Antony. We have already noticed that Antony's irresponsibility is hinted at in the very last word: it reminds us that he is escaping from the truth. So here is another hint to the producer: the next scene must not follow too quickly. There must be a pause (a few seconds will be enough) as the noise dies away and that betraying last sentence is left lingering in our minds.

The scene is Antony's scene: he says far more than anyone else, and its success on the stage will depend largely on the actor who plays his part. But the parts of Cleopatra and Enobarbus must not be neglected. Because they are such important characters the audience will be watching them, even though they say so little. Cleopatra must show her passion for Antony in the urgency of her brief questions; Enobarbus must reveal himself as the rough soldier ashamed

of his love for Antony, and perhaps in his discomfort he can already give a hint of his later betrayal of his master. For this scene, like any good scene, needs a knowledge of the whole play; and I hope one result of this discussion will be to persuade several readers to read *Antony and Cleopatra* itself: not among Shakespeare's easiest plays, but in the opinion of some critics his greatest.

Suggestions for Reading

I. Shakespeare

It is always best to read Shakespeare's plays in individual volumes, choosing a series in which the type is pleasant and the introduction and notes useful. Two excellent cheap series are (1) the Penguin Shakespeare, which sets out the play more or less as Shakespeare wrote it: many other series try to modernize, and so interfere with our picture of what the play is really like; and (2) the Laurel Shakespeare, published in America by Dell, which has fine type and good introductions, but no notes.

For fuller notes, it is best to use the New Clarendon Shakespeare (intended for use in schools) or one of the two splendid (but expensive) modern scholarly series, the New Cambridge or the New Arden.

Which are the best plays to read first? The following list is only a guide, and those with some knowledge of Shakespeare will soon go beyond it. Those marked * are perhaps the best of all to begin with.

Coriolanus

Hamlet

Henry IV (especially part I)

Henry V

**Julius Caesar*

Macbeth

* <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	* <i>Richard III</i>
<i>A Midsummer-Night's Dream</i>	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>
<i>Othello</i>	* <i>The Tempest</i>

Here are a few of the many thousands of books on Shakespeare that can be recommended:

G. B. HARRISON: *Introducing Shakespeare*.
 A. T. QUILLER-COUCH: *Shakespeare's Workmanship*.
 D. A. TRAVERSI: *An Approach to Shakespeare*.
 G. I. DUTHIE: *Shakespeare*.
 G. WILSON KNIGHT: *Principles of Shakespearean Production*.
 MARK VAN DOREN: *Shakespeare*.
 J. DOVER WILSON: *The Fortunes of Falstaff*.
 A. J. A. WALDOCK: *Hamlet*.
The Age of Shakespeare (Pelican Guide to English Literature, vol. 2).
Shakespeare Criticism, in two volumes (World's Classics).

II. A Few Old Plays

Everyman. Written about 1500, this play of unknown authorship about man's encounter with death is still exciting (as I myself found when producing it in a contemporary setting in Africa).

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE: *Dr. Faustus*; *Edward II*.
 BEN JONSON: *Volpone*.
 THOMAS MIDDLETON: *The Changeling*.
 JOHN WEBSTER: *The White Devil*; *The Duchess of Malfi*.
 R. B. SHERIDAN: *The Rivals*; *The School for Scandal*.
 OLIVER GOLDSMITH. *She Stoops to Conquer*.

Though the language and the dramatic conventions need some getting used to, all these plays are well worth reading

and (if possible) putting on the stage today; perhaps the one of most immediate appeal is *Dr. Faustus*, the story of the man who sold his soul to the devil.

European drama is an international movement; and more, perhaps, than in the case of poetry or fiction, it seems artificial to limit this list to English authors. A few modern foreign dramatists are therefore included in the next section, and one foreign dramatist in this: Molière, whose classic comedies on simple situations have kept their universal appeal. Several of his plays have been freely and vigorously translated by Miles Malleson, and there is a splendid version of *Le Misanthrope* by the American poet Richard Wilbur.

III. Modern Dramatists

More than anyone else, the father of modern drama is Henrik Ibsen the Norwegian. Almost all his plays are still of interest today, especially the following:

<i>A Doll's House</i>	<i>Rosmersholm</i>
<i>Ghosts</i>	<i>Hedda Gabler</i>
<i>The Wild Duck</i>	<i>The Lady from The Sea</i>
<i>An Enemy of the People</i>	<i>John Gabriel Borkman</i>

Ibsen's most important disciple is Bernard Shaw, whose witty social comedies treated of similar themes. Among Shaw's best plays are:

<i>Androcles and the Lion</i>	<i>Major Barbara</i>
<i>Arms and the Man</i>	<i>Pygmalion</i>
<i>Caesar and Cleopatra</i>	<i>St. Joan</i>
<i>The Devil's Disciple</i>	

And here is a miscellaneous list of modern plays that readers of this book should find enjoyable and valuable:

JEAN ANOUILH: *Antigone; Traveller without Luggage.*
 BERTHOLD BRECHT: *Mother Courage; The Good Woman of Setzuan; The Caucasian Chalk Circle.*
 T. S. ELIOT: *Murder in the Cathedral; The Cocktail Party.*
 JOHN GALSWORTHY: *Loyalties; Strife.*
 ARTHUR MILLER: *All My Sons; The Crucible; Death of a Salesman; View from the Bridge.*
 SEAN O'CASEY: *Juno and the Paycock; The Plough and the Stars.*
 EUGENE O'NEILL: *The Emperor Jones; Desire under the Elms.*
 JOHN OSBORNE: *Look Back in Anger.*
 JEAN-PAUL SARTRE: *Les Mains Sales* (variously translated as *Crime Passionnel* and *Dirty Hands*); *The Flies; Altona.*
 J. M. SYNGE: *The Shadow of the Glen; Riders to the Sea; The Well of the Saints; The Playboy of the Western World.*
 AUGUST STRINDBERG: *Miss Julie.*
 OSCAR WILDE: *The Importance of Being Earnest.*
 CHARLES WILLIAMS: *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury.*
 TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: *The Glass Menagerie.*

