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## Obscurity and Annotation<sup>1</sup>

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Poetry at present is in a difficult position. All the recent good poetry is obscure, and more recent good poetry is more obscure, and becoming more so; both because there are many more things for poetry to refer to and because of the nature of those things. They centre round surrealism and psychology; that is, they are an attempt to deal rationally with the irrational regions of the mind. This means that you have got to put irrational processes of thought in your poem, and assume the reader will know enough about the matter to understand them, on the principles you have both been taught. One would not think this was a very solemn matter, but the consequences are far reaching.

Whether that is an adequate explanation or not, most people will agree that poetry seems, by some inner necessity, to be becoming more difficult to read. This may seem a portentous and unanswerable notion, like the belief that childbirth is becoming more difficult with every generation; but in fact it seems no more than a matter (no doubt involving some give and take on both sides) which can be settled by private treaty between writer and reader. Poets, on the face of it, have either got to be easier or to write their own notes; readers have either got to take more trouble over reading or cease to regard notes as pretentious and a sign of bad poetry. And yet, though some agreement is no doubt possible, one finds on examination, as in most such cases of rival interests, that there are many aspects of the matter to be borne in mind. It is the object of this essay to bring some of them forward.

I wish, then, to mention four main sorts of occasion on which a poem is obscure, and to consider the arguments for and against notes to clear up such an obscurity.

In the first and simplest case, where no problems might seem to be involved, the poet has used an obscure, perhaps technical, word, or has chosen to leave a main verb which might be mistaken for a participle, or would like the reader to know that he is repeating in the ninth book a line

that came in the first, or was thinking, when he wrote what he did, of a passage in Virgil. Now it seems to me, as indeed to most people, that there are many examples of this simplest type of obscurity where it is both entirely innocuous to write, and positively impertinent not to write, the note which would save further trouble. But difficulties arise when you consider which these cases may be. For one thing, people are annoyed; they regard it as a sign of unnecessary pedantry, as a reproach to them for not being better informed, or as an unwarranted insult to them if they are informed already. Further there is a notion, widely prevalent, and certainly in some degree reasonable, that any note confesses that the poet has failed; that 'the first business of a singer is to sing,' and that you can't be listening to a song if you are perpetually grubbing about in the notes at the end of the book.

Certainly some notes may be pedantic, and some impertinent, but the idea that all are likely to be (that one should look harshly on them at first sight) is unwise at all times, and particularly unwise just now. For it seems important that both parties should try to be tolerant on the matter; there is a genuine crux about notes giving information because the notion of general knowledge has changed. In the eighteenth century culture was unified; every educated person knew about Virgil; you could fairly, without causing offence, introduce a reference to Virgil without explaining it, so as to imply 'well, if you don't know that, you had better go and find out at once.' But nowadays there is no (or only a very bare) field of knowledge that an educated person is sure to know about; by an educated person I mean merely a person who would appreciate the poem if he could understand the references. You may know a lot about the classics, and a lot about psychology and anthropology, and yet not know some quite simple term in physiology. I do not mean simply that anyone may have a gap in his general knowledge; I mean that there is now no normal field of general knowledge, no hierarchy even of pieces of knowledge some of which it is less discreditable not to know than others. When Mr Eliot writes notes to *The Waste Land* so as to imply 'well, if you haven't read such and such a play by Middleton, you had better go and do it at once' — the schoolmaster's tone is an anachronism, it belongs to a time when knowledge could be treated as a unified field. An odd reference does not even show that the writer is learned on a subject; it may merely be a piece of information that had stuck in his head, and become useful as a metaphor. Everybody's reading is miscellaneous and scrappy, like his.

In these circumstances it really ought to be possible to write simple, goodhumoured, illuminating and long notes to one's own poems without annoying the reader. I quite see that no one has yet written notes to his own poems without looking a fool, but as knowledge becomes increasingly various it will eventually have to be done. Nor is this an arrogant act;

people tend to be offended if a word is explained in the notes which they happen to know, but this is simply a mistake on their part. They merely happen to know it; nothing that anyone is likely to explain in notes is now a thing that every cultured man ought to know. And on the other hand not to explain a term which competent readers of the poem may have to go and look up is an arrogant act; it assumes that the line is worth their taking the trouble to go and find a dictionary. Much of the present day distaste for modern poetry arises simply from this change in the relation of the cultured public to general knowledge; no one is to be blamed for it, and it could be got over sensibly enough if the poets were sufficiently sure of themselves to adopt the right tone, and if the public would take a sufficiently historical point of view not to be easily offended. As for the view that notes are liable to be boring; after all, you needn't [read] them if you don't choose to.

Of course the notes ought merely to give information, as to grammar, purpose, and meanings of words, and the mode of action of tropes. (All these are proper.) One must not try to put some more into the poem through the notes, like Mr Eliot on *Shantih* — 'I suspect you are not being as impressed as you ought to be by the depths of meaning to be found in this word.' I have been talking as if this situation was a matter of the Future, and belonging to an unprecedented situation in which the human mind was only now discovering itself. But of course it is true of any poetry in which thought is sufficiently active; Shakespeare wants all the notes he now has, and could have written most of them himself if he would have taken the trouble. It is true one must have a great deal of sympathy for people who don't take the trouble, but there comes a time when the reader has a right to demand that they should. To leave your poetry to be annotated by someone else, with much greater trouble than it would have cost you, is again an impertinence under the disguise of modesty.

And it seems also to be true that people demand a certain undress of a book or an author; they do not like it to keep them strung up to a high level of difficulty or exultation, when they are sure the author is not like that all the time. A whole new book of poetry without prose seems to them rather like a seduction without conversation; it becomes almost indecently portentous, which one feels sure it wouldn't be if it was talked about sensibly. What's more, there is a fairly large public for critical writing; much larger than for good modern poetry. There seems to be no doubt that poetry published with long discursive notes, taking the tone of ordinary critical writing, would be much nearer the concentration they are prepared to swallow. But such notes must be general critical remarks arising from a point, and claiming to be detached from it.

Indeed, I think a poet may reasonably, now as in some previous generations, feel a little impatient of the cult of general knowledge; it gives one

rather a shock, for instance, in a cinema, when all prices of seats (showing animation for the first time) break out into a roar of satisfied and scornful laughter, because the low character uses a word in the phonetic and historically correct way. The glutton for general knowledge is not necessarily the person whose sensibility a poet wishes to affect, or feels sympathy with, and yet even for such a poet it is hard to avoid making obscure references. I believe it is true to say that most research workers in the sciences have not a wide general knowledge; they are too seriously and completely satisfied by the knowledge they need and the knowledge they have themselves given to the world. Now it is no sort of use for the poet to claim that these people are too low and stupid for him to mind about them, or that they do not care about what is happening to contemporary sensibility, or that they would necessarily be bad judges if they had the evidence before them; people who have acquired many branches of knowledge are often people who have not been satisfied by any, and it is precisely the people who genuinely understand some one branch of knowledge who would profit by a single poem, a single effort of the sensibility, which united it to many others.

I feel no doubt, myself, that once you regard poetry as a medium which is entitled to deal with a variety of matters, then the side in favour of notes is much the more sympathetic of the two. But even in this, the simplest, case there are weighty arguments on the other side.

As for hard words, people can use the dictionary for themselves if they want to, and where there is a difference of opinion as to whether it is more impertinent to send a reader to the dictionary or to tell what he already knows, a writer may be forgiven if he chooses the less laborious alternative. As for the latent quotation from another writer or another part of the poem, it is not interesting for a reader to know this as a separate piece of information; he will find it out for himself, at the only moment when it can be useful to him; that is, when he reads one of the poems without having forgotten the other. But these may seem flimsy arguments such as imply their own answer; the important argument (applying chiefly to difficult grammar, or complex movements of thought) concerns the general mode of action of poetry.

A thing seems more interesting when you have worked it out for yourself; you know more about it, and you have the fondness of a proprietor. Furthermore, you have in any case to discover the poet's feeling; how or why he thought as he did; the thing is not a puzzle but a process, it is not your immediate object to get to the other end; and a note may be like those charmingly courteous motorists who offer you a lift when you are only going for a walk (even so, of course, it need not excite hatred or contempt).

But certainly the note may be more annoying than the motorist, because not only is a poetical device more interesting when you have found it for

yourself, it is actually different. You can refuse the lift, but the note may have finally interrupted the process of understanding a thing without it, and if you are told the last part first you have been given the thing in the wrong order (at any rate, not in the order intended by the poem); it may be like taking a Seidlitz powder backwards.

This argument assumes that the process of understanding some lines of poetry is an essential part of their value, and the natural reply is like that about what the landscape gardener called the element of surprise in a vista; 'Pray what do you call it when you walk round the garden for a second time?' Thus stated, the objection illustrates its own answer; there is undoubtedly something akin to surprise when you come again upon the vista, and the most natural suggestion would be that it was a memory of your previous surprise, or an imagination (if you are walking in the other direction when you first come to the spot) of what the surprise would have been if you had experienced it. Having thus referred the element of process to the original experience, we can consider its nature in the case of poetry.

In first reading a passage of poetry, such as requires attention, there are likely to be a series of stages where, knowing it in part, you judged it as what you understood; these stages in understanding the passage are likely to remain in your mind as part of its tone. On this view, there will be little harm in a note if you read it only after you have thoroughly accepted the poem without it; a re-reading with the notes may then take you into it further. One would at least deduce from this the usual practice of collecting notes at the end of the book, except indeed in the case of scholar's texts, an edition of Shakespeare, say, when the reader is assumed to have read the play already. One might also deduce that the notes should not be published with the first edition; the collected edition, for instance, would be a suitable occasion, and the writer himself would then be better able to regard his work objectively. Some poets and writers of programme music adopt a teasing variant of this plan.

Strauss used to mystify his hearers at first; tell them he proposed not to give them the clue to his literary scheme, then give one clue after another to his personal friends, till at last sufficient information was gathered to reconstruct the story he had worked upon. Gibbon, too, published the notes as the last volume of his history.

This argument, based on the mode of action of the imagination, is certainly not a generally reliable one; the powers of the imagination are great enough to refute an argument based on any limited view of their nature, and a poem is more like a garden than a Seidlitz powder. In whatever order you come to understand a structure, you can in some degree imagine what it would have been like to have come by another route. All one can say is that the work of imagining this cannot be done for you by any system of

notes, and a very elaborate system of notes may actually make it harder. A test case is provided by Mr John Livingston Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu* [London: Constable, 1927], which sets out the historical material from which Coleridge distilled 'Kubla Khan' and the 'Ancient Mariner'. It is a very large book, and the sources are of very great variety; even when you know them all it is hard to hold them in your mind and re-distil them into the poems. Now one can hardly doubt that, if Coleridge had published, at the same time as the poems, a complete account of their sources (from what travel-book he had taken the epithets; what legend was in his mind to suggest the incidents; for what personal reasons they had appealed to him) their merits would have been as easily or as generally recognised as they were. The stress would have been different; we would be asked to admire the erudition, the interest, the grasp of mind, in the poems, rather than their poetical qualities as such. Of course they would be no less good in themselves, but it would have been harder, when they were novelties, to see their peculiar merits. For the business of finding the materials, the operation of distilling them, are not here the most important points; the main thing about them is the resulting order of Coleridge's sensibility. Indeed, the notes here (this is not so true of the Khan as of the Mariner) hardly affect the poem as a separate organism; they do not obviously fall in the province either of the critic or of the biographer; they simply make an extremely interesting and satisfying book on their own. The fusion of materials here is unusually perfect; most poems gain far more definitely from a knowledge of their sources; and if you say this shows their imperfection the reply is that one does not read a poem for being 'perfect', but for conveying something, a sensibility, a mode of experience, which cannot be conveyed in any other way. Certainly the mode of statement is connected more intimately in a poem than anywhere else with the thing stated, but even though they be conceived as one, that is only to say that, given an inadequate statement of something worth stating, the inadequacy must be only apparent since the thing has been stated; the conditions admit that it is known. That all good poems do not need notes cannot be stated as a deduction from some theory; being capable of being tested, it can at best only be an empirical generalisation. The essential point, I think, is that after reading *The Road to Xanadu* you have to make the same effort of selection from the material as was made by the poet, in order to get back to feeling about them as he did in the poem.

People would have realised the complexity of the material but not how effectively it was applied, how little irrelevant detail entered into the final result; even how little necessary the notes were to it. And it would have been harder for them to see that a new thing had been made out of the materials; that there was something in the poem which was not by any care to

be discovered in its sources. That the materials are complex is not interesting unless they are well used, in the result, and to insist on the materials is to put less stress on the result. Many people would have been frightened off, many would have been irritated, and the unity of effect would have been destroyed.

But if the notes as to sources are unnecessary to the 'Ancient Mariner', that is not to say they were irrelevant to *The Waste Land*. The Romantic Revival was interested in far away, richly coloured, strange things as such, not as exciting a historical sense and reminding you of a way of feeling or judging. The references in *The Waste Land* remind you of whole elements of your own mind, which everyone now uses in coming to decisions; when Coleridge packs into the same verse a detail from Polar voyages and a detail from *Purchas's Pilgrims* in the tropics, we are meant to think of both of them as far and strange; to think of them, indeed, as we would have done if we had met them in the original, though our sense of their romance would have been weaker, because not so much heightened by their setting. It is in such cases as this that it is not necessary to know the actual source, though it may be reassuring to know that there is one. When a citation or memory of some other writer carries with it a historical sense, some criticism of him and an interest in its original setting, then it is necessary to know the source if one is not to miss much of the original effect.

Here, then, a reasonable argument against notes would be that all citation of this sort is wrong, perhaps because always ill-digested; that it asks the reader to think about the sources and listen to what is implied about them; that it is criticism and not poetry. But the distinction here is only as to the degree of consciousness of the variety of elements referred to; no one objects to a *general* effect such as excites the historical sense; and now that the historical sense is coming to occupy so large a part of the ordinary cultivated mind it seems a natural material to use very frequently in poetry. And though, very often, the note could be avoided by longer and more explanatory writing in the poem; though it is true that poetry should not be criticism, should include its material dissolved into itself; yet it is precisely this which is aimed at by the compactness which is likely to require notes. It is better to be brief in the actual poem, rather than explain your reference, even though that involves a note, because then when the reader had read the note and understood the collocation he will, *in future*, read it directly as poetry and not have to read it as criticism; not have to read the note every time because it is part of the text. One great important function of poetry is precisely this; to make the reader connect naturally, with understanding, things which he had not connected before; this is done pre-eminently by a collocation which needs at first to be explained by a note (more usually, needs at first to be worked out and known as a discovery) and afterwards

taken for granted and remembered as a feeling, as a handy unit which can be applied in judging. If poetry must use a greater variety of materials, it is almost always better that it should use them in a concentrated way so as to insist that they had been digested into poetry (even if this means that the poetry must have a limited body of readers) than that it should explain itself in the text so as not to be poetry at all. These are arguments used often against notes, but they are stronger arguments against what is a natural consequence of refusing notes, the poem which carries its own annotation.

The argument that *The Road to Xanadu* would have obscured the poems it explains, if published too early, is one that applies to notes in general, not only to notes by the author himself. Most of the earlier arguments apply only to notes by the author himself.

This example from Coleridge may seem an extreme case, like the sources of experience, now perhaps forgotten, from which an illuminating detail was drawn, rather than like the materials which actually make units of the material which the reader must interpret; you might think that the understanding of Coleridge's sources in this case was not an understanding of the same sort of element as must be understood to enjoy poetry. But the act of communication in the arts is so queer that one cannot know it is unlike this; in particular, it involves a great deal of social sense, of knowledge as to what kind of life the author or persons described were leading, which is not overt when the poetry you admire is all of one school but becomes among the most important matters when you admire a wide variety of schools. And even when you admire only one, such elements are concerned, however little important it may be to know about them. A passage of Gurney's about melody may be illuminating here.

#### A melody

seems like a fusion of strong emotions transfigured into a wholly new experience, whereof if we seek to bring out the separate threads we are hopelessly baulked; for triumph and tenderness, desire and satisfaction, yielding and insistence, may seem to be all there at once, yet without any dubiousness or confusion in the result; or rather elements seem there which we struggle dimly to adumbrate by such words, *thus making the experience seem vague only by our own effort to analyse it*, while really the beauty has the unity and individuality pertaining to clear and definite form. [Edmund Gurney, *The Power of Sound*, London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1880, p. 120; Empson's italics]

The second main case occurs when the author does not himself clearly understand how the effect has been produced. Thus a word may be used typically, as if it were a symbol, and actually take effect as if it were; but the author may not know how it does this, what it is a symbol of, and the reader may (this does not follow, necessarily, but is more often true than one would suppose) need not know about it either, before it can take effect

on him in the same way. You might say that there is no difficulty here because the effect by definition cannot be explained, so there is no question as to whether it should be. But there may still be doubt as to whether the poet ought to say clearly that this is not a metaphor, or that he does not understand it; further whether this should be considered creditable; whether it is the business of a poet to have understood his own writings, and whether it would always be possible to have done so.

Now I do not myself believe that any poetical effect is of its own nature permanently inexplicable; this is an act of faith, and in practice only means that I think it worth while to try and explain things. But there is no doubt that there have been excellent poets who could not have explained their own methods, and this not for any lack of intelligence, cultivation, or critical powers; I should take Milton as an example. One might even say, indeed, that the most intimate, valuable, and interesting devices of a period, its peculiar contribution to literature, is likely to be just the one that it is least able to explain; chiefly because, being a novelty, it cannot then be phrased in terms other than its own; partly because it is taken for granted, and not thought a thing that needs explaining, nor indeed could have been done differently. Thus the fact that a poet cannot himself explain an effect is certainly no argument for rejecting it; nor is the fact that a critic of a later age cannot explain an effect any reason for rejecting it; for while it can then be viewed more objectively, it is known less intimately; these two on the face of it about counterbalance each other. Very curious evidence on this last point may be found in Bentley's under-rated notes on Milton, and the answers to him in the ensuing controversy. The fury with which Pope attacked pedants has this real justification, that there was no other way of answering them; the only way of defending Milton's text against Bentley's emendations was to laugh at Bentley; critics who tried to give reasons for what was, then as now, obviously the more beautiful reading gave away point after point, for sheer lack of the necessary critical machinery. I think that nowadays we can explain why Milton was right, but the explanations usually seem long and fanciful; they would only convince men who believed already that the line was beautiful, and only wanted to know why.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, poets nowadays understand fairly thoroughly what they are doing, and our critical machinery, I believe, is good enough to deal with most immediate technical problems such as would be required to show the force of a particular word or line. There is no doubt that explanation may be hard, but I think myself that, when a poem is safely written, a poet ought to try to understand his own mental operations, and if he can't understand them there is no harm (though there is little virtue) in his saying so. Of course, in another sense, there is no question that he *must* understand them when he is writing them; that is, he must apprehend them fully,

and must know how they will affect a reader who does not come to them with his own assumptions; he must then feel how they work; but that is not to say that he must be able to write a critical defence of them. The power of writing a critical defence one would expect to come later, for one thing because he has too much in his mind at the time of writing to be able to focus all its parts.

But one must insist on the phrase 'when the poem is safely written', because there is often an intervening stage, while he is still willing to alter it, not yet detached or informed enough to understand it critically, but already out of the period when he could apprehend it directly as a solution of the problems that he was dealing with. It is essential to let a thing settle before you start messing it about; the paint must dry before you varnish; apart from that, one must at any time hesitate to emend, from the point of view of the analytical critic, what has at the time seemed satisfying from the point of view of the author. It is easy to do to one's own writings what Bentley tried to do to Milton's, and if the alternative, to satisfy the critic, must be to explain why the original is better, this might well lead to the suppression of most poetry. For even though explanation were possible to you, it might often seem impertinent, and would certainly often seem useless, to give your own writing as complicated an explanation as most good writing deserves. Furthermore, an author himself cannot well do this for himself, because the problems of communication must leave him in doubt. A critic, when public opinion has settled down as to the merits of a poem, can set to work to explain the full complexity of its mode of action, but it is no use for an author to do that, because he does not yet know whether his private fancies get across, how far the poem *has* a mode of action at all. There is usually a process of crystallisation, so to speak, in a poet's attitude to a poem when it is written; for some time he is liable to alter it whenever he reads it, perhaps to alter it back again; then, perhaps simply after it has appeared in print, or (thinking of Shakespeare) after it has been acted or shown to particular people, there comes a time when, partly by a sense that he wants to know how other people are seeing it, partly because the state of mind which produced it has really become alien to him, it becomes an external object, he looks at it as a member of the public, there is no further question of altering the thing; and he can treat it as a datum to reason about, and defend if he chooses. The best plan in most cases, then, on this ground as on the previous one, is that the author should not write notes till the poem has at least appeared in print, probably not till some time has past, till he has written something else, and is bringing out a collected edition.

The notion that it would be absurd for a poet, even if it were possible, to justify a phrase with as complex an argument as many phrases require,



must act as an additional argument against the demand for explanation before a critic can take a new poet seriously.

The third case where notes might seem called for occurs when the author, while he knows something which is true about the poem as a matter of biography, does not know whether it is part of the poem as an independent organism, whether it is a useful thing for the reader to know. For a poem rises from some sort of experience, which it transmutes into more general, more complete, more satisfying, more valuable, and perhaps simply different experience. So, the original experience may have very little to do with the final product; and yet the poet may like to remember that it occurred, because to write a poem is an act of self-knowledge which he likes to feel as its basis of fact. Hence an author generally knows things about the imagery or proper names used in the poem which are to him part of its contact with his own life, which gives it its sap; but these may be irrelevant to, or may actually be misleading about, the particular experience conveyed in the poem. They are interesting, if at all, to the biographer, not to the critic. A phenomenon I have often noticed,' as Mr Eliot says in one of the strangest of his notes.

Now of course a great deal of biographical information is very useful in understanding a poem, and mere quantity of biographical information is not likely to do much harm. A poem is a very independent organism, and once people have got used to it they are not likely to be disturbed by information about its origins. In a sense, too, it is a compliment to your readers to imply that they are not easily disturbed, for instance, by prosaic associations; that they can afford to be given information of this kind, which they probably ought not to take too seriously. On the other hand, to give such information assumes that people want to know about your biography; it ought to be said casually, as a sort of gossip, when the subject comes up, and not put in the notes very grandiosely. Wordsworth was fond of telling his readers just where he was sitting when he wrote a poem, and whom he had gone for a walk with; it is rather a winning trait, which I suppose no one is irritated by, and no one finds very useful as a source of interpretation.

Still, a difficulty might arise from not knowing whether a piece of information was of this sort, which does not deserve a very orderly note by the author, or whether it is of the first sort and should be explained. The trouble about writing notes to your own poems, especially at an early stage, is that you do not know how much people want to know; what is trivial to them, not to you; what to you, not to them; what is vulgar, abject, or boastful, what brave and searching, what merely a bore, to give a reader at the end of the volume.

The crux of the matter is that writing a poem is an act of much more inti-

mate self-knowledge than writing notes to a poem, and the second may interfere with the first. In particular, poets often describe, so as to diagnose, situations which are then strange to them, but into which they afterwards tumble and even then fail to deal with; not remembering then what they had described, not remembering afterwards from what experience they had first described it. In cases like this, if he had written full notes at first, they would later seem to him surprising and probably wrong. How is a poet to say why, from what experience, he writes as he does, when the experience has not yet happened to him, when it exists only as an attitude to life which will attract such experiences to him? Nor is this a freak case; all elaborate choice involves knowing what you will feel like under very different and quite new circumstances; and a poet as an artist is often anticipating experiences which may never, or only in the most distant future, occur. (That is a fancy of Herbert Spencer's, about musicians.)

The justification of 'poses' follows on from this; it is that you are trying things out to see if they fit. You may easily enough grow out to fill the area afterwards, if you have begun by making an adequate city wall. So much of life — any sustained activity — involves an act of faith, even an act of impertinence, of this kind. Milton, one may suspect, was for most of his life what he was then called, a shallow-pated young puppy; it was only late in life that he justified the claims he had lived by. Not to make such claims is never to justify them. There are often periods in an artist's life, or indeed in anybody else's, when he is merely holding on, hoping that he will tumble into the situations which he already knows how to deal with. One might deduce from this that, however much the biographer may be called in, the notion of 'sincerity', that the impulses concerned must be genuine, can never be applied simply.

The question here (waiving these more fantastic points) is very like that about the notes to the 'Ancient Mariner'; the poem has been extracted from the material, and it is not obviously an advantage to put the material into its neighbourhood, or it may be soaked up again. You may give away the flower of beauty easily enough, but when plucked it may wither; you can give it with the roots and tell the reader to plant it in his own garden, and it may live; but it is a question whether you need give him the weight and inconvenience of the surrounding soil.

The fourth and last case occurs when it could be inconvenient, for biographical reasons, to put the note in at all; at any rate for a large interval of time. The obvious case of this is a sort of extension of the third case, when the note gives information about the poet's private life; a note by Shakespeare, for instance, as to whom the sonnets were written about, even if we could imagine him writing notes, would not have been written. Statements perhaps more useful for criticism, though hardly less personal (statements

such as Wordsworth claimed to be making in *The Prelude*), would be as to the motives and experience behind, or psychological principles at work in, *Manfred* and Pope's satires; in each case the idea is absurd, and they are not, after all, similar writers; Wordsworth's own self-revelation, if it comes to that, drew its splendour from the energy of the hypocrisy that soon afterwards overwhelmed him; if people nowadays write poetry which they can afford to analyse, in this fundamental sense, in public, it is because they do not put things they immediately care about, and are in the thick of, into their poems. It would be absurd to expect poets to take up the scientific line of rational curiosity on such points; the convention here, as in the rest of life, must be that you cannot expect people to explain the experiences one most guesses at in them, because, even if they could be sure they were among friends, still by the act of explaining all kinds of stresses would be set up, and the process might turn out, in any degree, unexpectedly painful. Indeed that, in many cases, was precisely why the subject of the poem was interesting, why it was worth while to them to labour at the form in which the sensibility resulting from the experience was conveyed. Such poetry was in part only satisfying because it enabled them to speak through a veil of decency; in part only useful because it enabled them to speak through a veil of ignorance.

An explanation of these biographical cases would certainly have done much towards explaining the poems, and would reasonably have been refused. But one can find less direct cases, where it is a question of explaining the actual imagery of the poem, or the motives and experience behind Pope's satires, of which the same is true. I do not suppose Keats could have explained his very straightforward use of Freudian symbolism, though he must in some sense have known all about it; but certainly if he could have done it would have been very unwise of him to do it.

But I do not know that that is true nowadays; one could claim any amount of sexual symbolism in a poem without exciting much interest, and certainly without exciting much indignation. That may indeed be fairly generally true of the technical devices, as apart from the subjects, of literature; when they are understood and accepted they may safely be used in explanations. It seems to be true that there has been, and ought to be a further, change in public opinion to make this last class smaller than it was. I do not think anyone now has that horror and terror felt by Tennyson and Browning, for prying critics who at once settled upon their corpses.

In any case, even when the note would lie between the third case and the fourth, the notion of dignity is an important one; 'It does not matter what the original event, or the formative impulse, may have been; because I claim to have built them up into something of more permanent value.' It is important, because if a poet knows he is to be challenged on such matters, as a

test of his merit as a poet, then this consciousness is bound to interfere with his poetry; if not, you may say, he is not so sensitive as to be a good poet.

But it is possible to turn sharply round at this point, and view a poet very differently; for a poet, particularly of this sort, who is riding the storm rather than recollecting in tranquillity, must have a great deal of the scientist in him; he must have just that toughness, that indifference to the source of the original feeling, that power to stand outside his feelings and generalise, at some distance, from the materials that his feelings present him with, which is necessary for a self-analysis of the kind in question. He must be able to kick down the ladder by which he has climbed the haystack; even to let it dwindle to a needle which it may be hard for him to pick up (so that the fourth may dwindle to the third type of obscurity); and yet again he must have an eye that can find it, and through the eye of that needle he must troop all his camels. Such a poet — to drop all this — must have peculiar powers of explaining his writings, even though to use them must expose him to peculiar dangers, and I suspect that Pope, if such an activity had seemed to him (for some unimaginable reason) worth his while, could have published a very complete analysis of the processes of mind at work, the sources of satisfaction, in his satires.

I appear to have been arguing against some person who thinks that poets ought to explain themselves as completely as possible. I do not know of any body of opinion which thinks that; I discuss it because it is what I would like to think myself. This is generally true; if you attack a view in any detail that proves you to have some sympathy with it; there is already a conflict in you which mirrors the conflict in which you take part; that is why you understand it sufficiently to take part in it. Only because you can foresee and enter into the opposing arguments can you answer them; only because it is interesting to you do you engage in argument about it.

For personally I am attracted by the notion of a hearty indifference to one's own and other people's feelings, when a fragment of the truth is in question; I enjoy the chatty reading of poetry in the chatty explanatory frame of mind which could annotate its own works. But it is useless to pretend that the best poetry is written in this frame of mind, that a completely satisfying life can centre round truth like this. The notion that one ought to be interested in truth, indeed, is connected by Mr Wyndham Lewis, somewhere, with the child who is always asking questions; the only question he wants to ask is 'how do babies come,' and he asks the others because he is not allowed to ask that one. I was saying just now that the glutton for general knowledge is not necessarily the best reader of the poet; but nor can one assume that the glutton for explanations is the best interpreter of a poet.

Evidently it is no use blaspheming at random against the spirit of curi-

osity, which was one of the causes necessary to raise man from the beasts, whether it was a sexual perversion or no (and it casts a strange light on Neanderthal home life if the human spirit of enquiry was first developed in this way). Furthermore, the particular form of curiosity relevant to this essay, the desire to understand one's surroundings, poems and states of mind, rather than to accept them, is a curiously important part of present-day sensibility. Just as the prevailing notion of the Romantics was 'life in itself is prosaic, so let us think about the occasions where, or when, it may be interesting, and have as interesting feelings as possible,' so now there is a prevailing excitement connected with the sciences, and drawing much of its energy from a sense of the disorder of the world. 'Any minute now we may be blown up or bankrupt,' begins the creed of the age, 'we don't, therefore, stand to lose much by digging up the bulbs to see if they are sprouting. While yet the bombs hold off, and may they hold off for a sufficient number of weeks, let us not live or build but dig into the foundations, let us expose what has been since creation in darkness now for the first time to the light of day.' The merits of this age, to speak less flamboyantly, are among the critics rather than poets, or rather among the poets who are critics than the poets who are distilling their material from life itself. The arguments against notes, against the inquisitive attitude, are, we need to be reminded of the [ ] but it is they which are our chief glory, if we have one; and it is unwise to avoid doing, even for the best reasons, what may turn out to have been the only thing we could do.

Another cause making for the self-explanatory or critical poet, rather than the poet as such, is the gradual extension into ordinary consciousness of the time-scale of the sciences; this seems bound to affect the artist, especially now that the historical sense is becoming so important, and it may be one of the few reasons why the scientist can reasonably be regarded as a danger to the artist. It goes in exactly the opposite direction to the process of thought I have just considered; but that is only because a disturbance in either of two directions (especially when there is a compensation mechanism such as causes oscillation) acts chiefly as a disturbance, and in much the same way.

The last idea was that things are now very unstable, and therefore it is better to try to understand our foundations than to build upon them, because the understanding will survive even if the foundations go wrong. The other idea is that, though we personally or our government may be unstable, human life as a whole is likely to last longer than people had thought. It is no use feeling bored by this irruption of astronomy into literary criticism; the estimated endurance of civilisation has often affected literature before. It seems to be an important part of the seventeenth-century attitude to life that they believed the world was coming to an end

quite soon; their sonorousness, their concentration whether on death and the macabre or on the fleeting moment, are continually to be understood in terms of the astronomical belief of the time. If the critic admits that their beliefs affected them, he must admit that our beliefs may affect us.

Most people have been told, and few people have been able to forget entirely, that the astronomers give the earth, as a habitable planet, a probable life of at least a thousand million years; it is not widely believed that the human race will allow or encourage itself to evolve at all rapidly, and we are left to digest the fact that our descendants, very like ourselves, will go steadily on performing their natural functions on this planet for appalling periods of time. Literary critics have been fond of talking about what 'posterity will say' of a particular poet. Posterity is likely to last as long as all vitality has yet lasted since the first jellies. It is not Dante only when he searched hell with the eye of an enquirer, it is terrestrial life, which is no more than halfway upon its road. Now people at present are still able to avoid bearing this in mind, but it is rapidly filtering into the general consciousness, and once it has done so it seems to me bound to affect the arts very greatly, it may be very much for the worse.

An anxiety about the future; a wish to know what, at some undefined date, it will be like; a sense that the future will think us very absurd, and therefore that we must do at once what the future will be doing; these I suppose are the first fruits of the doctrine. But it is difficult to suppose, for instance, that there will be an accumulation of love lyrics, burrowing deeper and deeper, century by century, below the British Museum, unto the last durations. I do not believe that, ten thousand years hence, it will be thought at all absurd to learn Elizabethan English in order to read Shakespeare, but a hundred thousand years hence it seems hard to believe that people will not be otherwise employed. Surely, once you have accepted the time-scale of our current faith, the idea of eternal fame becomes ridiculous, and surely a great deal goes with it; the artist becomes either a man with a hobby or, for however long a day, a journalist; and he can hardly feel, if he is not read now, that he will ever be read later.

On the other hand the idea of scientific truth is given a strong leg-up; any definite piece of knowledge, though of course it must be expected to be included as a small deduction from much larger generalisations, though it may be only included by negatives in the larger generalisation, though it may apparently cease to exist by destroying its own field of application (if enough was known about tapeworms, for instance, the study of tapeworms would cease to be a matter of importance because there would not be any) still has a permanent importance as making part of the body of knowledge. Dr Mackail's view that poetry is 'a continuous substance or energy whose progress is immortal' would seem much more sensible if it were said about



the sciences. If you are doing a scientific research the prospects of futurity do not make you ridiculous; it seems to me that this fact is bound to affect the arts in the direction of the sciences, that it will make poets treat poetry as a form of self-knowledge, and so as a branch of knowledge in general.

Phrasing it in this way one escapes the obvious fallacy in the idea of mixing up the sciences and the arts. Such a mixture suggests that the poet must stop doing what he wants to; or write about matters which he is interested in, but which are irrelevant to his sensibility. Of course that would be as little use to the psychologist as to the aesthete. All that can be said is that poets are likely to possess an increasing degree of self-consciousness, in the sense that they will understand both their impulses and the methods involved and further, what may be more important, they will expect their readers, also, to possess an increasing degree of psychological knowledge, of interest in, and power to understand, the impulses and the methods involved. I do not think that a generation accustomed to psychoanalysis could either produce, or be sufficiently impressed by to encourage, a poet like Byron. To the objection that a poet ought not to be expected to psychoanalyse himself in the notes, because if he knows that this will happen it will destroy his poetry, I should reply that in that case his poetry is going to be destroyed anyway.

Certainly this may seem a dismal prospect; a poet writing for psychoanalysts does not cut so dignified a figure as a poet writing for the delight of a reverent posterity. The sense that poetry will be understood in this sense, whether the poet explains it or not, seems to let us in for being awfully good and rather puppyish; the more pathetic virtues are called for. On the other hand, Freud's remark that artists gain success, and the gratification of their desires, by exploiting a fantasy gratification of those desires, is sufficiently true to be an irritation to the artist; and it seems likely that when this process is generally understood by the public works of this kind are likely to become less effective, or to be accepted only when they are frankly admitted, as for instance in the writings of Baron Corvo.

Arguments against analysis tend to broaden to an unreasonable degree of generalisation, and become arguments against understanding anything. 'It is not safe to get to understand anything, because at any moment you may find that true beliefs are making it impossible to act rightly.' And certainly this is quite true; you can never know that a new piece of knowledge may not suddenly make you very unhappy. It is an act of faith which experience, on the whole, makes plausible; that when you are interested you can say 'it will do no harm to examine this; this is a point where I may use reason.' Certainly all new acts are dangerous, but it is not necessarily less dangerous to avoid them. I may be run over if I go into the street, but the roof may fall on me if I stay indoors. Where nothing is known beforehand there is noth-

ing for it but to be hopeful, and where there is no means of deciding between two courses of action it is more cheerful to choose the more active one.

But another sort of objection to notes centres round the word 'esoteric'; 'it is no use explaining to those who do not feel rightly about the matter; indeed it might do harm; and it is no use explaining to those who already feel rightly, because they do not need the explanation.' This is only a statement that there are some matters about which it is no use to write notes, which is no novelty. [Incomplete]

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Untitled in manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> See Empson's essay 'Milton and Bentley' in *Some Versions of Pastoral*; and J. W. Mackail, *Bentley's Milton*, Proceedings of the British Academy, vol. XI, London: Oxford University Press, 1924.