

Reading for the Obvious in Poetry: A Conversation

Derek Attridge and Henry Staten

Dear Henry,

As you know, I've been trying for a while to articulate an understanding of the literary critic's task which rests on a notion of responsibility, derived in large part from Derrida and Levinas, or, more accurately, Derrida's recasting of Levinas's thought, one aspect of which is an emphasis on the importance of what I've called variously a "literal" or "weak" reading. That is to say, I've become increasingly troubled by the effects of the enormous power inherent in the techniques of literary criticism at our disposal today, including techniques of formal analysis, ideology critique, allusion hunting, genetic tracing, historical contextualization, and biographical research. The result of this rich set of critical resources is that any literary work, whether or not it is a significant achievement in the history of literature, and whether or not it evokes a strong response in the critic, can be accorded a lengthy commentary claiming importance for it. What is worse, the most basic norms of careful reading are sometimes ignored in the rush to say what is ingenious or different. (The model of the critical institution whereby the critic feels obliged to claim that his or her interpretation trumps all previous interpretations is clearly part of the problem here, and beyond this the institutional pressure to accumulate publications or move up the ladder.) We may be teaching our students to write clever interpretations without teaching them how to read...

The notion that it is smarter to read "against the grain" rather than to do what one can to respond accurately and affirmatively to the singularity of the work can compound this disregard of what is truly important. This is not to say that the use of literary works as illustrations of historical conditions or ideological formations (including abhorrent ones) is invalid or reprehensible; just that to do so is not to treat the works in question as literature. Nor am I suggesting that what is important in a literary work is immutable and capable of transcending history: the practice of interpretation takes place, it should go without saying, within a historically-produced cultural context. (The relevant context may, however, be of considerable historical duration and geopolitical extent.)

You too have expressed a desire to promote some kind of minimal reading as a critical virtue, and it occurred to me that this issue of *World Picture* on "the obvious" might give us an opportunity to discuss these issues, perhaps by focusing on a particular example and talking about what we take to be obvious (as well as what a concern with the obvious makes possible and perhaps what it excludes). The choice of an example is going to be pretty arbitrary, but let me suggest—partly because of its shortness, partly because it has been subject to a huge amount of interpretive ingenuity—Blake's little poem "The Sick Rose." Are you up for it?

Derek

Dear Derek,

I think that yours is a very needed project, and that no one is better qualified than you to undertake it because of your marvelous knowledge of the history of English literature and in particular of English meter—knowledge few literary critics can approach (certainly not me). My own work on this kind of reading has convinced me that it must be "dialogical": if something is obvious, then it must be so not just to me but to others as well, if not initially,

world picture 2

then with a bit of pointing out. (Caveat: if someone takes it as axiomatic that everything in a text is always up for interpretive grabs, this person will resist all such pointing out. The interlocutor must be open to the possibility that there can be general—not universal—agreement, across ideological divides, on certain features of the text, and willing to take such agreement, when and if it happens, as pointing to something significant about the text.) So I think a dialogue between us on a specific poem is a very good way to approach the question of the obvious.

It's worth mentioning at the outset that Derrida, who has influenced both you and me so much, never bought into the idea that "everything is interpretation." I think a lot of people still don't realize this, even though Derrida made it clear over and over, right from the beginning. In *Of Grammatology* he stressed that what he called "doubling commentary," commentary that respects all the traditional canons of scholarly rigor, is a prerequisite for saying anything significant at the deconstructive level; and this always remained his position. Of course he thought doubling commentary is not enough; but it is the prerequisite, and as he said, "it is not easy."

One more preliminary before we get down to cases. Since critics who consider themselves "formalists" or "close readers" have for a long time criticized what you call "ideology critique" along lines that superficially sound similar to yours, I want to underline the fact that you are critical of "formal analysis" as you are of "ideology critique". Close reading readily becomes a display of the richness of the reader's imagination and her virtuosity as a reader of poetry; but virtuoso displays of reading by definition go where other readers can't follow on their own. In my conception of "minimal" reading, there's a certain rejection of virtuosity in reading. I don't know if you agree with this. Clearly one must have a lot of skill as a reader to read poetry adequately; but an important part of this skill involves knowing where to stop.

You've suggested that we talk about Blake's *The Sick Rose*.

O Rose, thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

This seems to be a very un-obvious poem. On its face, it's a poem about a flower that is being killed by some kind of vermin; which, if we take this image in its ordinary sense means that the vermin is eating it. But that's not what the poem says; what it says is that the rose is being destroyed by the worm's "dark secret love." So, if we approach the poem at the level of what it "means" we are immediately up to our necks in those qualities that get interpretive enthusiasm going: ambiguity, symbolism, multiple meaning. What, then, is obvious in it—and of what value is the obvious? In your discussion of this poem in *The Singularity of Literature* you mention its "deployment of syntax to achieve an unrelenting forward drive that climaxes on a single powerful word" (66). This observation sums up the power of the poem at an absolutely fundamental, and visibly manifest, level: that of the poem as a structure of grammatically formed, meaningful sound. Your discussion goes on to quickly note the multiple meanings of

world picture 2

the key words, and this points into the depths of interpretation; but then you return to the sound-structure and talk about it as follows:

The simplicity of the strongly articulated phrasal movement contributes to this experience. The arresting initial statement, “O Rose, thou art sick:” – one line, two beats – is followed, after a pregnant pause, by an extension that takes up the seven remaining lines. This extended elaboration of the opening line is made up of three lines of anticipation, followed by the stanza break which further heightens the tension, and then a four-line arrival. And those three lines of anticipation form a crescendo of intensity – “The invisible worm / That flies in the night, / In the howling storm,” – while the stanza of arrival varies the 1:3 balance of the first stanza by taking the reader through two climactic statements of equal length: “Has found out thy bed / Of crimson joy; // And his dark secret love / Does thy life destroy.” (69-70)

There are a few details that someone might read differently (are there only two beats in the first line?), but in its overall outlines your remarks point to what is, or can be made, obvious. This is a perfect demonstration of what I referred to above as a skilful analysis that is not ingenious, not something tied to the refined individual sensibility of the interpreter, but which brings into play basic analytical tools that must be the common stock of poetry critics. This is how the poem is put together at the most basic, nuts-and-bolts level.

And now, having taken the trouble to look first at how the poem is organized as a syntactic, temporal, rhythmic structure (I call this the “cadence” of the poem), you conclude in a way that resolves the interpretive problem I posed at the outset.

The final two lines, phrasally no more than an extension of the previous statement, work semantically to explode the thus far barely contained nursery-rhyme narrative into the most adult, and most terrible, of scenarios. (70)

Instead of treating the relation between worm and love as a question of ambiguity or multiple meaning, you treat the transition to love as a function of the poem’s *action* or *gesture*, what it *does* rather than what it means. There is a temporal, syntactic movement that builds up to the eruption of the erotic scenario, and to perceive this movement (which is right out there to be seen) is to perceive the formal design of the poem.

Now, I don’t find obvious the notion that the preceding lines can be characterized as a “barely contained nursery-rhyme narrative.” On my reading, “Thou art sick,” “invisible worm,” and “howling storm” introduce a dark foreboding into the poem from the outset. The contrast between the conclusion and the rest of the poem is not so much between innocence and experience as it is between animal-vegetable process and sado-masochistic eroticism. But the “dynamics” of the worm-love relation remain the same in either case, and are based, as you show, as much syntactically, in the cadence of the poem, as they are semantically. Your main point, concerning the overall movement of the poem, I would say is indisputable.

Of course nothing is indisputable or obvious unless the parties involved share some presuppositions about the nature of the enterprise. What emerges from the preceding discussion is, I think, that finding anything obvious in a poem depends on our willingness to look at the poem at the level of how it works, how it’s put together (which I call its *techne*), rather than at the level of meaning. Poems are made of words, and words have meanings; but there’s meaning that’s pretty much on the surface of the words and then there’s deeper meanings. When you speak of the erotic scenario that erupts at the end of the poem you are

world picture 2

taking it at face value, not digging into it; and we need to restrict ourselves to this sort of “minimal meaning” to trace the manifest features of the poem.

Henry

DA: Dark foreboding, yes: what I meant by “barely contained nursery-rhyme narrative” was that the intimations of something terrifying strains the nursery-rhyme qualities of the first six lines—their insistent rhythm, simple vocabulary, straightforward syntax, and the charged imagery speaking directly to childhood experience (the rose, sickness, the worm, the night, the storm). This tension is obvious, I would say, to anyone with the necessary linguistic and cultural knowledge—knowledge which is widely shared and in no way privileged.

HS: “The intimations of something terrifying strains the nursery-rhyme qualities of the first six lines. . . .” When you put it this way, I do find it, as we’re agreeing to say, “obvious”—something that is undeniably present in the poem.

DA: When you speak of “the level of how it works, how it’s put together, rather than at the level of meaning,” you touch on an aspect of your own work that I’ve found extremely valuable: your emphasis on the shared *techne* or know-how available to an artist at any given time and place. Presumably, “The Sick Rose” has an immediacy today, over two centuries after its creation, because the *techne* that enabled Blake to write his poetry is, in large part, still accessible to us. The rhetorical forms of the lyric (such as the apostrophe – “O Rose...”), the basic rhythmic templates of the English verse tradition (the whole poem works as a single sixteen-beat unit, the simplest and most popular rhythmic form available to Blake and to us), the symbolic cultural heritage of the west (the rose as beauty, perfection, virginity, love, Christian sacrifice, and so on): these seem to be to be some of the resources Blake was able to draw on, and that still, by and large, engage us in the same way. So perhaps it’s not quite right to say “rather than at the level of meaning”? Doesn’t meaning – of the kind you describe, “surface” meaning – form an important part of *techne*?

HS: Quite right. My wording was misleading there; meaning is an essential dimension of the materials and techniques a poet works with and of the poem we read. I shouldn’t draw such a sharp line between what the poem means and how it works, because what it means is an important aspect of how it works. But it’s essential, I think, to keep the functional aspect foremost and to understand the meaning aspect in and through the functional.

DA: Now you may say that to read the rose as a symbol of beauty, perfection, etc. is to leave the surface, and the garden plant, and therefore the realm of the obvious, to enter the depths about which there cannot be general agreement.

HS: Yes.

DA: But don’t these connotations constitute an aspect of the generally agreed meaning of the word *rose*? Or perhaps we need to distinguish between the obvious and the more recherché aspects of the word’s symbolic force. Of the associations I mentioned, beauty, perfection and love are surely not much less general than the literal botanical meaning.

HS: There are many associations that a word like “rose” can potentially arouse; but which of these associations are in fact activated within a specific poem, in a way that we actually need to bring out in order to get the bold, sharp outlines of the poem’s action? *Perfection* doesn’t seem to me to play a significant role in the major dynamic of “The Sick Rose”—a dynamic you’ve

described so well—and therefore I would say this meaning is not saliently activated here (certainly not at the level of what is or can become obvious). The rose is sick, and sickness doesn't attack perfection as such, it attacks health. *Beauty* is no doubt there in some way, since flowers in general have this connotation; but even beauty plays no direct role in the drama of the poem; "bed of crimson joy" suggests a kind of exuberant organic vitality in the rose more than it does its beauty. The drama foregrounds the joyous vitality of the rose, on the one hand, and its vulnerability to the worm, on the other hand; and in this connection the associative resonance would be, rather, with the softness of rose petals, so easily crushed, don't you think? I don't claim that this association is obvious; it's a bit in the background. But it's more directly linked to the manifest action of the poem than are beauty or perfection.

An important difference between this softness and beauty or perfection is that the latter are culturally validated meanings of roses, prominent in the tradition of representation, but softness is much less so; it belongs more directly to our sense experience of roses. When I'm teaching a poem I like to start, not with the literary resonances, but with the physical, sensual characteristics of the phenomena named or implied by the words, and then to feel around in the associational fields of these characteristics. This keeps us focused on the primary physicality on which the functioning of the words is based. There are strong pedagogical reasons for going this route, since our students often don't know the cultural resonances of words and images; but they do have senses. Also, I believe that poets are crucially committed to this primary physicality, and that poems often manifest this interest.

Love, by the way, is a different case altogether from perfection or beauty, or softness, since it is named within the poem. We don't need to make the association; the link is given.

DA: The Christian associations, the evocation of *The Romaunt of the Rose*, the pointing towards images of the Christ-child holding a rose: these perhaps belong to the domain of the non-obvious. For Blake, however, Christian associations were probably much more powerful and widely-perceived than they are today. Isn't our task as readers – responsible readers – to rediscover those lost or faded webs of association?

Or take the worm. As I noted in *The Singularity of Literature*, for Blake's initial (few) readers, the word *worm* could well have evoked much more than the garden creature: the monstrous "loathly worm" of medieval ballads, the worms that prey on the damned in Hell, the worm that seduced Eve, and more. Obvious to Blake but not to us? (There are, of course, instances where we need not to recover older meanings but obliterate, as we read, current meanings; one word that frequently produces this necessity is *gay*.)

Of course, here's where disagreements start. Historical disagreements, for one thing: what associations a particular word would have had at a particular time is a notoriously difficult thing to retrieve. But there is also the question of what potential symbolic meaning is in fact relevant, which raises a further test of obviousness. Let us imagine a reader arguing that "dark secret love" raises the question of racial difference. This would be moving beyond the obvious because, among other reasons, nothing else in the poem coheres with this interpretation. (A detailed analysis of Blake's references to race – in "The Little Black Boy," for instance—could possibly provide some justification for this reading, but it would still not form part of the poem's minimal meaning, and would remain an intriguing suggestion.) So coherence of some sort would seem to be an aspect of the kind of reading you and I are endorsing.

HS: Absolutely. Everything rests on looking at how the structure of meaning in the poem as a whole hangs together. We don't have to make a metaphysical fetish of "unity" in order to recognize that the poetic craft or *techne* as traditionally practiced aimed at giving a beginning,

middle, and end to poems, in a way that produced a well-joined and completed artifact. I think one good reason to define a discipline of reading for the obvious or manifest form of poems, and to differentiate this discipline from that of “deep” or “strong” reading, is so that we can re-open the space for talking about how poems are unified, or how they fail to be unified, at the level of the craft of poem-making. The “fissures” in poems that cunning contemporary readers discern occur not at the level of visible craft-mistakes but at the level of the deep historical resonances of words. A previous generation of critics knew how to talk about how poems succeed or fail at being well made (see Ransom, “Shakespeare at Sonnets,” in *The World’s Body*).

As you note, retrieving what a word might have meant to the author, but not to us, by means of historical research, is very hard, and leads to disagreement—definitely the realm of the non-obvious. The specific examples you give here, though, of the historical meanings of “worm,” actually strike me as cancelling each other out, in the sense that they all amount to exemplifications of the balefulness of worms, a balefulness that is already fully evident in the poem itself. To the degree that they might seem to add anything that isn’t already brought out by Blake, it’s something that doesn’t clearly cohere with the poem. For example, the worms in hell gnaw the damned; but how is the rose parallel to the damned? Is she a wicked sinner who is being justly punished? And Eve is not invaded and destroyed by the worm’s love; she is tempted verbally in a way that activates her own desire; she then willingly eats it; God punishes her with mortality; and she lives out her life to die a natural death. The parallel with the drama of the rose gets weaker the more detail we add. What often happens in class is that students will raise this sort of thing, which then takes a lot of time to dispose of, because once you have a hypothesis in your head you can always invent clever ways in which to make the parallel fit (regardless of how far out it may be); and meantime we’re not reading the poem for the effects it’s actually, manifestly, creating. So I prefer either not to mention such things at all, or merely to summarize them as part of the resonance of the image, stressing that they’re not very important individually (and this is exactly how you bring them in *Singularity*).

DA: You may have doubts about the symbolic suggestiveness of rose and worm in themselves, but what about the sexual symbolism in their conjunction? Sexual symbolism in its crudest form—the phallic worm, the vaginal rose, the bed: is this not obvious to all readers, and thus part of what it means to take the poem at face value? It relies on the most basic visual associations to do its work (again, a touch of the child’s imaginative world?). Yet the implications of this interpretive leap are shocking: destructive pest entering beautiful flower to kill it *equals* human love-making... So my term “literal reading” is a bit misleading: it can include a response to symbolic meanings as well as literal. What I wanted to suggest is that the words mean what they mean, and they never stop meaning what they mean. (Meaning being, of course, a matter of general agreement. There is no such thing as a private language—Wittgenstein’s slogan bears repeating.) Even metaphors, as Donald Davidson insisted, mean what they say and not something else. This is a poem in which a worm enters, and destroys, a rose; and it’s only because worms and roses, and howling storms and crimson joys mean more than entomological, botanical and meteorological phenomena when we meet them in this arrangement that it’s a poem in which a great deal more happens.

HS: I’m very friendly to calling the kind of reading we’re after a “literal” reading, even though it can be misleading (but *all* our terms can be misleading, starting with “obvious”). I think that the notion of “symbolism” is more misleading than “literal” is. Except when it’s used in the strictest sense, to mean something whose meaning stays more or less constant in each of its occurrences, the notion of the symbol has always seemed to me to introduce obscurity into the discussion of poems. To students “symbolism” inevitably suggests “hidden meaning,” something accessible only by guessing, or by scholarly research, not by paying closer attention to the poem at hand, and I prefer not to use it; in most cases, talk of “associations” does all the

necessary work. You yourself say here that the fundamental conjunction of images “relies on the most basic visual associations to do its work.” Precisely. And I think it’s better not to call this “symbolism,” especially in cases like this one, where the technically non-literal meaning is so reliably linked to the literal meaning. I think it’s highly significant, though, that Blake has not depended on the worm-rose conjunction by itself to communicate the erotic meaning; he has thrown the words “bed” and “love” in there to make it *obvious*. To read a poem “literally” to me means not to depreciate the figurative meanings, but to take it at its word and to avoid reading through it or behind it as much as possible.

I would put your final point, with which I very much agree, a little differently than you do. If we say that worms and so forth “mean more than entomological, botanical, and meteorological phenomena” we run the danger of evoking the science-poetry split by which the New Critics were so impressed. The New Critics thought of science as conceiving such phenomena “positivistically” as brute, unmeaning facts. But real science left behind this kind of positivism a long time ago, and we literary critics should, too. The poet is interested in the same things as the scientist, only from a different angle; if worms and so forth can be seen to mean so much it’s because the phenomena themselves can be seen to—not because everything has been transposed into something “human” or “humanistic.” For both poet and scientist, it’s a matter of seeing the complex relations among different phenomena. To me, defending the dignity of the phenomena themselves, as phenomena, goes along with privileging, on the one hand, the literal, the sensual, and the physical to which the poem refers or about which it arouses associations, and, on the other hand, the obvious in its language.

This brings me back to the point about the erotic associations around worm/rose. I’ve noticed that to my students it doesn’t seem *enough* that this poem should be about a worm entering and destroying a rose, even given the striking translation of this drama into erotic language; they feel that the manifest drama has to be merely a symbol for something more significant, that the worm’s love has to be just a metaphor for something about human love (whereas, in the formal order of the poem, the worm is literal, and “love” and “bed” are, apparently, metaphorical). For them, it’s a poem about seduction, or rape, or venereal disease, or some confused mishmash of all of these. To my mind, they don’t respect botanical phenomena sufficiently.

DA: I’m a little wary of the privileging of the “literal, the sensual, and the physical,” or at least of the sensual and physical, since the literal may be the intangible as well. I take your point about the dangers of the old science-poetry division, and I agree entirely that the objects with which the scientist is concerned are the same as those with which the poet is concerned. Empiricism is no bad thing in the reading of poetry. But words may convey meanings—literal meanings—that the scientist would have a hard time analyzing. The “worminess” of *worm* is not quite captured by the entomologist, and it would surely be another example of misplaced ingenuity to undertake a lengthy investigation of the exact species of worm Blake might have encountered in London, or which type of worm attacks roses (and which type of rose is susceptible to attack by worms). Doesn’t the empirical approach in fact break down pretty quickly as we try to imagine that flying worm that takes wing in stormy nights? This seems to be something like a generic worm, rather than an identifiable creature; a living entity prone to arouse disgust and fear. (Worm phobias are not uncommon, and the reluctance to touch worms is, I imagine, quite deep-seated among a large number of people, at least in Western cultures.) So yes, give the empirical phenomena their due, but recognize that literal meaning doesn’t equate with phenomenality of that sort.

I’d be willing to do without the term “symbol” on the grounds of its ambiguity (the French Symbolists were operating with a very different meaning from C. S. Pierce, for instance); “associations” doesn’t come with that complicated baggage. But here of course our notion of

the “obvious” runs into difficulties, as your comments suggest: can we distinguish between obvious associations—those which are “generally agreed”, to use your phrase—and those which are secondary, perhaps only potentially there to be activated in certain contexts, or only retrievable through historical research? The OED definition of *rose*, for instance, includes “allusive, emblematic, or figurative uses,” the first of which is “the flower as distinguished by its surpassing beauty, fragrance or rich, red colour.” Can we not assume that any instance of the word “rose” will convey something of these associations to most speakers of English unless the context prevents it? I believe there’s a case to be made for beauty as an association that clings very closely to the concept “rose,” one that a writer has to work hard to shake off. And I would say that the force of “sick” derives partly from its contrast with those associations; the effect would be much weaker had Blake written “O gorse thou art sick” (for all sorts of reasons, of course, but among them the absence of a sense of perfect beauty).

Dorothy Parker, to move to a rather different poetic register, exploits the associations of *rose* in her knowing way:

One Perfect Rose

A single flow'r he sent me, since we met.
All tenderly his messenger he chose;
Deep-hearted, pure, with scented dew still wet -
One perfect rose.

I knew the language of the floweret;
“My fragile leaves,” it said, “his heart enclose.”
Love long has taken for his amulet
One perfect rose.

Why is it no one ever sent me yet
One perfect limousine, do you suppose?
Ah no, it’s always just my luck to get
One perfect rose.

You will say, no doubt, that Parker makes all the associations (including fragility, the association you highlighted earlier in our conversation) perfectly explicit, so there’s no need to find them contained in the concept “rose”; but the triteness of the first two stanzas emerges precisely because there is no need to spell out those associations. And note that one of them is “pure”—would one use this term of a gladiolus or an orchid?

Let me quickly say that I agree entirely with your analysis of the dangers posed by the readerly desire for “hidden meaning”: for many inexperienced readers of poetry this is a *sine qua non* of a good poem, and it leads one quickly astray. Tom Paulin’s recent book *The Secret Life of Poems* advertises this error in its very title, and his readings of particular examples frequently demonstrate unwittingly the absurdities into which it can lead. I also agree with the difficulty of countering (even in oneself) a far-fetched meaning that has presented itself—as you say, “once you have a hypothesis in your head you can always invent clever ways in which to make the parallel fit (regardless of how far out it may be).” So what we need are techniques of disabusing ourselves—and perhaps others—of these unnecessary elaborations. We need to stop congratulating each other on producing ever more ingenious interpretations, as if originality and out-of-the-wayness were guarantees of rightness. One sometimes feels very alone; I was at a conference recently during which a visiting celebrity contributed to many of the Q and A sessions by pointing out some unlikely verbal trickery in one of the poems the speaker had

world picture 2

discussed, and while I inwardly resisted, I sensed a murmur of impressed assent in the audience.

Your last parenthetical point is very interesting, and it raises the question—which isn't easily answered – of which terms in the poem are literal. *Rose* we can assume is literal (but does Blake's upper case R invite us to give the word something of the quality of a proper noun?—"this particular rose, which I name Rose"). *Sick* is not as commonly used of plants as of animals, but it's pretty close to being literal. *Invisible* can't be entirely literal, but we can understand it as "unseen"—though not entirely, as "invisible" carries a whiff of the magical, or the perhaps the eldritch. (Is this not an association that would be generally understood?) Then *flies*: if the worm literally flies it's not a literally a worm; if it's literally a worm, it can't literally fly. Do we have to invoke the historical meaning here?—"any animal that creeps or crawls, a reptile, an insect," as the OED tells us, citing Shelley in 1820 for its most recent example. *Night* and *howling storm* are presumably literal; but then *found out* suggests a willed activity hard to ascribe to a worm, however noxious, and as you point out *bed* is metaphorical. So, in fact, is most of the second stanza, until the last line: this is part of the poem's movement towards the adult and the erotic. Our obvious, minimal, "literal" reading has no option but to proceed figuratively in order to bring the meaning back to the empirical scene of flower-killing pest: "love," for instance, has to be understood as a metaphor for the pest's physically intimate connection with the flower, as well as its need for what the flower can offer it. But it doesn't stop meaning love as we understand it in the human domain. I believe it's this mental stretching and wrenching that makes reading the poem—no matter how many times we do it—such a powerful experience.

HS: You're taking "entomological" to mean the phenomena in question specifically as known by the scientist, but I meant it more loosely, to mean precisely what you describe perfectly as the "'worminess' of *worm*," the human experience of worms as generically codified in our culture, including, notably, revulsion from their touch (as opposed to the "higher" levels of symbolic meaning that might be read through the worm). This typical, and even stereotypical, experience, which is typed into language, is the only kind of *empeiria* in question when I speak of the sensual and physical aspect of poetry.

Yet surely the sensual and physical have a peculiarly constitutive role in poetry that they do not have in other uses of language. It was from none other than Blake that as an 18 year old I first learned to privilege "the five portals" of the senses as the entrance of all experience, including that of the infinite, and this attitude has always remained fundamental for me in the reading of poetry, even during my voyage through deconstruction and poststructuralism. Today we no longer need understand the role of the senses in the strictly "sensualist" way that it was understood in the 18th century; we know how tightly experience is wound together with language. But the role of language itself has come to be oversimplified by many critics since de Man, and I think today the mediated immediacies of physical presence bear bringing center stage again—not to reject what we learned from de Man and others, but to correct the one-sidedness of that sort of view.

Lyric poems characteristically project literal scenes of utterance, in the detailed context of which (context mostly implied, and having to be carefully excavated) the words uttered acquire their force. When I speak of the sensual and physical aspect of a poem I mean in large part that the critical imagination has to limn the detailed outlines of this context, based rigorously on what is explicit in the poem, in a way that fills out the reference, sense, and force of the words uttered as concrete, situated speech act or "language game". Thus we ask, for instance, "Who is speaking in this poem, and to whom? What is the situation in which these words are uttered? Are these words, in this context, the sort that someone would be likely to utter spontaneously,

and if not, in what way do they vary from spontaneous utterance?”—and so forth. The context we reconstruct is, in part, an “empirical” scene in the limited sense (as consisting of physical objects with objective primary and secondary characteristics); but it’s recognizable as a typical scene-form, and its physical details come permeated with typical meanings that this kind of scene has accumulated across culture-history, not just in literature but in common, culturally-typed experience and in the common language (what Wallace Stevens calls “the vulgate”). Thus, to fill in the scene’s empirical detail is a way of beginning to pry open the storehouse of meaning with which it comes permeated, and to do so in a way that remains responsible to what is literally “in” the poem.

DA: Now I want to throw a spanner into the works. One of the weaknesses, as I see it, of traditional formalist criticism (even, or especially, when allied to a stern moralism, as in F. R. Leavis), and still evident in such successors of the New Critics as Helen Vendler, is the unquestioned assumption that a critical commentary aims at a universal truth about a literary work, claiming to be the last word and rendering all previous and future commentaries inadequate. No doubt the practitioners of this style of criticism would deny that they accord such a status to their own work, but it is evident as an ideal in their writing: the unstated goal is to rid their commentary of all that derives from their own peculiar situation, history, and psychic constitution so that the universal and timeless shines forth. (Kant, or a misunderstanding of Kant, is somewhere behind this project.) The counter-argument, to which I subscribe, is that our most powerful, honest engagements with works of art spring from that very peculiarity, and that to eliminate it, if it could be done, would be to render criticism blandly programmatic. This is tricky ground, I know; on the one hand, I am arguing that ingenious interpretation is often forced and false to the work; on the other, I am insisting that a valid and valuable response is individual. The distinction that has to be made – and it’s a very difficult distinction—is between interpretation that is achieved by the ingenious exploitation of hermeneutic protocols that have gained credence in the literary establishment, and interpretation that is an attempt to articulate a strong (and I would say necessarily singular) response that can be put to the test of general agreement.

Let’s take *allusion* as an example of an accredited hermeneutic protocol. (This is another area where we move away from sensuous empirical reality.) It’s possible – in fact, it’s quite easy – to scrutinize a poem for phrases that echo earlier literary works, and scholars can garner high praise from their peers for doing so. But an allusion that means nothing to a particular reader (because the source text is not familiar to her) is, for that reader, not an allusion in any meaningful sense. My understanding of how a poem works allusively is dependent on the singularity of my own reading (and the operation of my memory); I can explain it to others, and encourage them to follow up some of the necessary reading, but I can’t guarantee that anyone else will respond in the same way. (This is to leave out of account the equally important fact that an allusion is only relevant if it works in the poem: a mere echo has no value in itself—though to repeat your earlier comment, it’s always possible to invent a clever connection.) And if we expand from allusion to the whole store of memories that an individual brings to the reading of a literary work, we see a similar process at work.

If I’m right, what becomes of the centrality of the “generally agreed” interpretation that we both regard as essential? I see the arrival at such agreement as a process: one puts forward what one understands as unquestionable, but one is willing to have it questioned. Our singular responses are tested against the responses of others; reading literature is not a solitary activity, but an ongoing conversation. If you and I can agree on a minimal reading, this is a stepping stone to a secure understanding of the poem; but if everyone else we encounter dismisses it, we are likely to lose faith in it. (Obviously, we observe some kind of hierarchy in weighing the judgments of others: we recognize experienced or acute readers as well as poor readers, and

apportion credit accordingly.) What I'm calling a singular response is not an idiosyncratic response; the subject who responds is, after all, constituted within a cultural field, and singularity is a particular nexus within that field. All its elements are shared elements, though the specific conjunction that produces a subject is unique (and, of course, always changing). Wittgenstein's "family resemblances" provides one way of conceptualizing such a field.

So we can imagine arriving at a minimal reading that most experienced readers would assent to, even if it contains elements that some of them had not noticed before they are pointed out. This would be the basis for, but would not be the sum total of, singular readings, which would bring to the poem different accumulations of memories, habits of thought, preferences, psychological tendencies and so on. Only in such a singular response can the reader do justice to what I've called the otherness of the work, which is one dimension of its singularity – its singularity, that is, for a particular reader. (The third term in my interconnected trinity is *inventiveness*; this raises further questions which I don't want to pursue here. It connects in important ways with your notion of *techne*.) Blake's phrase "in the howling storm" may for you be a cliché, a slight blemish in the onward movement of the poem; whereas for me it may be, for reasons I find very hard to articulate, a forceful, climactic continuation of the previous line. Would such a disagreement need to be resolved, or could it be accepted as the result of the language's working at a very deep level on, and in, both of us in different ways because we are different people?

HS: "The Sick Rose" projects a scene of someone in a garden looking at a diseased rose and noting, in the form of a direct address to the rose itself, and with considerable agitation, that some detestable varmint is killing it. The poem's power need not be searched for in the allegorical depths because it can be found in the way this very familiar and commonplace scene is conveyed into language of an uncommonly artfully formed sort. You have stated the essentials of this artfulness in your remarks on how the biological scenario is translated into one of human eroticism. I think the reader's, and especially the critic's, feeling that it's not enough for the poem to be "about" a bug and a flower (and, as I am now stressing, the speaker's linguistic response to their fateful encounter) arises from the fear that one has nothing, or nothing much, to say, or to think, about such a poem. Yet, strangely, the more one restricts oneself to what is there to be read, so to speak, on the surface of the poem (what we have agreed to call the obvious or literal), and the more one learns to track the cunning patternings of this surface, the larger the field of explication becomes, and the more surprising to oneself how hard it is to touch its bottom—despite the fact that one is severely restricting oneself from taking imaginative flights with the poem. Because this field of explication is so large and varied, the rigor of weak or minimal reading, its restriction to the obvious, raises no obstacle to the emergence of what you call *singularity*. I'm inclined to think, in fact, that weak reading is so generative that if pursued tenaciously it will almost inevitably lead to singularities of interpretation.

However, while readers can and will emerge with very different readings when they get far enough, before we get to that point there are several levels of analysis—levels beyond the essentially descriptive level of reading at which we identify things like stanza structure and rhyme scheme—that can by their nature be highly consensual. Your remarks about the "Rose" that I cited at the beginning are an example of an essentially descriptive account that to my mind should serve as the stable substructure of any more elaborately developed weak reading. (This stability has, of course, nothing to do with eternal or universal meanings.)

Another aspect of description with a high probability of consensual acceptance is the patterning in many poems of what the structuralists liked to call "binary oppositions." There is a primary linguistic energy in such oppositions that requires a minimum of understanding of

meaning to grasp, and which is very often obvious or close to obvious (beginning with such traditional topoi as light/darkness and the like); in many cases all we have to do is point to the pairs of words that have such a relation to one another and remind ourselves of what it is about them that makes their meanings clash—a clash that can often be felt right at the surface of the words' meanings, independently of most subtleties of interpretation. By sharpening our sense of this clash, we make palpable the “force” or the “dynamics” of the juxtaposition of these words in this context. Blake's poem fairly explodes out of the juxtaposition of these two words: worm, flower.

Following this approach, we could understand the whole poem as an elaboration of this nucleus, an unwinding of the skein of associations that these words have historically acquired in the Western tradition, which, as you've noted, are already coded, when they come to Blake, with erotic as well as entomological meanings. When we take this approach, we can see that, in making the worm as horrible and threatening as he can make him in so little space, Blake has followed the path of the linguistic and phenomenological stereotype, rather than that of “empiricism” (hence the deviations from literal fact to which you call attention). Yet there's no conflict between this “linguistic” approach to the poem and the “empiricism” (as you call it) that I'm advocating; on the contrary, the linguistic approach needs to be anchored to the literal, sensual scene that somehow, somewhere, underlies the linguistic play, because without the literal scene the poem loses its *form*.

But have you and I even succeeded in identifying the literal scene of “The Sick Rose”? You've noticed that, because “Rose” is capitalized in the first line, it could be read as the rose's name; and in that case it would seem fair to suggest that the poem is literally apostrophizing a *woman* named Rose. Neither you nor I have considered this alternate route through the poem, which would flip our reading on its head. Now “worm” would become metaphorical and “bed” and “love” would become literal. Can't the poem be read either way, and isn't it, then, “ambiguous” in the sense so prized by many readers?

I think weak or minimal reading fundamentally involves a rule of simplicity, an Ockham's razor, to combat the critic's tendency to spin ever more elaborate interpretive epicycles: the simplest, most direct interpretation that nevertheless accounts for just as much or more of the poem's “obvious” is to be preferred. This rule interlocks with the principle of coherence we've discussed above. Once an interpretation is proposed, we must go systematically through the poem to see what its consequences are for every detail of the poem. If Rose is understood as a woman, for example, “bed of crimson joy” becomes luridly sexual, to say nothing of the “invisible worm” that has found its way to this bed. But if her bed was already one of “crimson joy” before the worm found it, then Rose was already no angel (indeed, thoughts of prostitution start to arise, and one might recall the young prostitute of Blake's “London.”) Is the poem, then, a stern, sad lecture to a prostitute about venereal disease? This is the kind of reading my undergraduate students find eminently satisfying. But why, if she's a prostitute, does her bed have to be “found out,” and why in the “howling storm,” and why does the worm fly, and why is its “love” said to be “secret”? The interpretive difficulties you've mentioned all become more acute in this alternate hypothesis. Its fit is loose at best; the rule of simplicity easily decides against it.

I want now to focus on the elements about which in some measure we disagree, because these are likely to be peculiarly revealing with regard to the nature and limits of “reading for the obvious.” I'm willing to grant that *beauty* is a primary association of *rose*; but I'm still holding out against the notion that *perfection* is primary. (I think, by the way, that you're underrating the role of flowers in general, as opposed to roses in particular, in poetry. The rose is no doubt the very paradigm of the qualities of the flower; but flowers in general carry the association of

beauty, and the lily, for instance, is arguably more immediately evocative of purity than is the rose—which in poetry is almost always *red*, a fact that arguably comes into play at a secondary level in “The Sick Rose” because this rose’s bed has been defiled. *Gorse* can’t replace *rose*, but neither can it replace *daffodil* or *lilac*.) I think the Parker poem skews our discussion in the direction of the initiate’s sense of what things already mean in poetry, apart from what they mean *in this poem*. Parker’s is a very different kind of poem from Blake’s, and would need to be approached in a different way. I resist the notion that you float that “any instance of the word *rose*,” regardless of the specific context, will necessarily arouse the association of perfection, or for that matter of beauty, or redness, or vulnerability, or practically anything else. It all depends on how the word is deployed in the context; and in the case of “The Sick Rose,” the first thing we learn about the rose, and learn twice by the time we have read the title and first line, is that it is sick, so that the concept of perfection is neutralized before it can gain any traction. While *perfection* is undoubtedly “there” in some important thread of the associative skein, I find it important to deny it entry into the minimal level of reading. (One can always argue that “sick rose” conveys the notion “ruined perfection,” but to take this notion as presiding over the entire poem would lead to a very different kind of reading from the one we’re agreeing on.)

I very much agree that reading, even the most disciplined minimal reading, is a product of a singular location in historical-cultural time-space; but it’s precisely the nature of our cultural moment—in which we can less and less take for granted in our students the sorts of associations on which Dorothy Parker is playing—that makes me favor a very restrictive boundary around the notion of a primary association. The typical American undergrad cannot be counted on to think purity or perfection in connection with roses (though I’ve found they can pretty regularly be counted on to point out that roses have thorns); the delicious quality of Parker’s witty poem, with its slyly archaizing literariness, is strictly one for initiates, I think. But it’s not necessarily a bad thing that my students don’t have these automatic responses, because it has forced me to motivate my claims about poems more immediately from the poems as they sit, as a result of which I’ve found that most good poems (including *The Waste Land*, as Eliot himself belatedly realized) don’t need a great deal of the associational icing that we literary critics bring to them. Their power can be reconstituted from the ground up, out of the common language and common experience, together with a quite minimal and general cultural literacy. (In the case of “The Sick Rose,” indeed, whether or not the association of perfection is in theory to be considered primary, I can almost guarantee that an undergraduate who read this poem as “ruined perfection” would systematically misread it.)

The case of “howling storm” is a more interesting divergence between us, one that brings out sharply the way that singularity comes into even the weakest reading—but at what I would consider a pretty “high” level. I don’t look at our divergence as something that has to be resolved, but as something that opens doors to further dimensions of reading, working systematically on the basis of the obvious that we do agree on. We agree that “howling storm” belongs to the same rhetorical register as “flies” and, to some degree, “invisible,” as predicates that don’t fit your empirical garden-variety worm; and we agree that, nevertheless, the garden variety worm has to underpin this rhetorical flight. “Invisible,” however, as you’ve noted, could mean simply that we can’t see the worm that is eating the rose (he’s presumably eating her from inside, and in the dark of night), and flying, while it isn’t a characteristic of worms, is a characteristic of many noxious bugs, so that “worm” starts to sound like a synonym for “bug,” “vermin.” (And among the bugs, of course, there is the case of the wormish caterpillar who emerges suddenly as a moth or butterfly). It also seems unlikely that a real bug would fly at night (are there nocturnal bugs?); but, again, this can be read as a figure of its invisibility to the speaker, its “secretness.” But it’s hard to imagine a real bug of any kind that flies in a *howling storm*. It makes most sense to me if I take it as part of the children’s tale atmosphere you

mention—as the sort of hyperbole we engage in when we emphasize just how bad and scary the big bad wolf really is. And rhythmically, of course, it's marvelous; it's hard to imagine the poem without the crescendo of the three lines

The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm

with their heavy two beat measure, resolving into the first line of the culminating stanza. However, from the standpoint of meaning, “howling storm” feels to me both excessive and unnecessary. I wonder whether Blake has momentarily sacrificed the severity of his scenario in order to attain a rhythmic effect (an effect that I admit is all by itself pretty close to worth the sacrifice). Blake's poetic instincts can safely be assumed to be better than mine; but I don't think it's a good idea to assume that great poets are necessarily infallible in all their judgments (and we know that they are sometimes very unsatisfied with their work when it is as good as they have been able to make it, and that they have to make sacrifices on one level to gain effects at other levels). Whether or not it's excessive, however, “howling storm” is clearly unnecessary at the level of meaning, in the sense that nothing is made of this supernatural dimension in the entire culminating stanza. The bedroom drama of “dark, secret love” (a phrase that, incidentally, strikes me as, along with “invisible worm,” the strongest in the entire poem, the very center of its power) doesn't go well with a howling storm, and even worse is the fact that a howling storm would be furiously tearing petals off the rose even as the worm loved it to death (at which point the whole thing starts to sound ridiculous to me). Now, someone might reasonably object at this point that none of these problems arise if one doesn't try to literalize the poem as I'm doing; but if there's no literal scene to underpin the poem it dissolves into a shapeless goop of symbolism on which the interpreter is free to impose a form of her own devising.

It just now occurs to me to wonder if we should take the worm's nocturnal flight in the storm to be, as I've always unreflectingly assumed, the flight by means of which he discovered the rose's “bed of crimson joy,” or whether it's mentioned simply by way of characterizing him as “the worm who is such a hellraiser that it's nothing to him if there's a howling storm” (and it's worth noting at this point that I've all along been unreflectingly referring to the worm as male and the flower as female, which seems an obvious assumption, but of which today perhaps we should be a little cautious). If the latter, then the dark secret lovemaking need not be imagined as taking place in a storm; in favor of this reading is the frequentative “flies.” And now that “howling storm” is removed from the immediate scene it feels less disruptive, and I become able to hear it at just the same level of hyperbolic volume as “crimson joy,” which thus starts to feel like a suitable binary partner with it. (“Howling-storm-worm, meet crimson-joy-rose.”) But now the poem begins to feel too much like erotic melodrama!

As I noted before, the poem has to be read as a fundamentally botanical and entomological because it becomes a vulgar melodrama if read as a metaphor for a human scene. It doesn't impugn the flower's innocence to be crimson, but a crimson woman is not entirely without blame (to say the least) when a roustabout worm winds up in her bed. The power of the poem rests in the way it is able to arouse so much of our response to the fatality of human eroticism while keeping this response tethered to the non-human (and now I start to feel that it's going too far even to assign gendered pronouns to the worm and the rose). Yet it remains the case, as you've convinced me, that there is a third semantic force-field operating in the non-empirical qualities of the worm. The whole thing is set vibrating with an overtone of the fabulous by these qualities; and “howling storm” is what insures the sounding of this additional note (which “invisible” and “flies” by themselves don't quite reach).

It's a delicate balancing act; you're apparently able to hear this note just right, whereas up to now I haven't been.

DA: Delicate indeed, and one dimension of the balance is that between doing justice to the literary work—affirming to the full what I've called its singularity, alterity and inventiveness—and being willing to register moments of failure (in the work) and disappointment (in the reading). In view of the former imperative (which I see as ethical or quasi-ethical, as it involves doing justice to the work of another person or group), the latter imperative must always be provisional: one must always be ready to reinterpret a work more favorably. Hence the value of other people's responses. You've given an instance of this process.

But there is also much to be said for encountering a skeptical response to a line one has always taken as flawless. One aspect of the kind of interpretive dilemma we're discussing is the difficulty of obtaining sufficient distance from a deeply familiar work. I don't know when I first read this poem—I seem always to have known it, and known it by heart—and although it seems new each time I read it, I find it hard to defamiliarize it enough to raise the possibility that Blake has nodded. (There are certainly other poems, including one or two of my favorite poems of Blake's, where I wince at a particular phrase that seems not to live up to the standard of the rest of the work.) So encountering an objection of the kind you raised is always, I think, a valuable process.

On this particular point—the “howling storm”—I have to say, as I read your account of your unease with the “howling storm” line it began to dawn on me that you had been reading it differently from me. Because, I suppose, of the inherent implausibility of the scenario of the second stanza taking place in a storm I had assumed just what you articulate so well—that the third and fourth lines of the first stanza are part of a description of the worm, of its natural habitat, so to speak, and that the scene that follows, in its apparent stillness (the worm is not flying, the storm is not howling) is, if anything, a contrast. But at the same time, reading your account has made me a little wary of that line; I now have to reassure myself each time I read it that your first reaction was wrong! I must register, too, my agreement with your self-doubts on the score of gender: it seems to me quite a leap out of the garden to personify worm and flower, and I must admit to being quite disturbed when I read your reference to the worm as “he”—it seemed much too cosily familiar!

We still disagree, I suspect, about the link between “roseness” and perfection (purity, I will concede, is not as closely linked an attribute); for me the title itself, given its full weight, is shockingly discordant. But we've probably gone on long enough about this little poem—in saying which, I realize that one thing we haven't made much of is its *smallness*, which is also an obvious feature that would have been worth talking about. Tiny worm, tiny poem: but what extraordinary power! There are many other features of the poem we haven't touched on, though they might be thought to be obvious in the sense in which we've been using the term. There is, for instance, the salience of line seven: I agree entirely with you that this comes across as “the center of the poem's power.” How does it achieve this salience? It is, for one thing, the only line with three major content words (Rose-sick; invisible-worm; flies-night; howling-storm; found-bed; crimson-joy; dark-secret-love; life-destroy). Rhythmically this produces in the second stanza the familiar AABA pattern, where a particular configuration is repeated, then varied from, and then returned to with a feeling of closure. The rhythm of the line itself is also exceptional, with three strong stresses instead of two slowing the pace: “secret”, although it doesn't carry a beat, is too important semantically to be de-emphasized (as a chanted reading would do), and this produces a marked tension between metrical expectation and rhythmic realization. Semantically, too, the line stands out: not only does it have two

world picture 2

adjectives qualifying a single noun, but they set up a little eddy in meaning. We would normally expect *secret* in the collocation *dark secret* to be a noun, so it's a surprise to find that it's an adjective; we then understand *secret love* easily enough, but what is a *dark love*? Then there is the echo in sound between two words in the final lines: *love* and *life*. Normally, these would belong together, and the sonic echo would reinforce the semantic contiguity; what the poem does, startlingly, is to turn them into one of those oppositions you mentioned—love becomes the enemy of life. More than that, actually: one of the other things we haven't talked about is the force of the word *destroy*, which suggests much more, and much worse, than the mere ending of a life.

We haven't exhausted what is obvious about this poem, or what could be said about the role of the obvious in literature and the other arts (we haven't, for instance, even raised the question of Blake's illustration for this poem). The obvious turns out to be not at all obvious!

HS: I think the reason one has to reassure oneself each time one reads that line is that to read it as it's apparently intended one has to mentally supply an implied *even*: "that flies in the night/[even] in the howling storm", and this mental maneuver has to overcome the strong syntactic parallelism of "in the night/in the storm." One could maintain this parallelism by understanding *even* before "in the night," but this is complicated too, since it's a sort of "back formation" required by the problems that "in the howling storm" raises. Either way, it's far from a straightforward ellipsis, and strikes me as a fault in Blake's *techné*.

As for Blake's illustration: this raises acute questions about what is "in" the poem and what isn't. They were published together and it's certainly legitimate to talk about their relation; but that, to me, is a distinct endeavor from reading the poem itself.

We certainly haven't exhausted what is "obvious" in the poem. It's the old "purloined letter" puzzle; what's right out in the open can take the longest to perceive. A poem is made up of an indefinite, but definitely very large, number of purloined letters.

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