Poetic Presence and Illusion

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Preface

The words *metaphor* and *illusion* occur many times in the pages that follow. Since they are perhaps my principal dramatis personae, it may be useful to prescribe the limits I intend to place on the life I give them. I want especially to speak here of *metaphor*, since that term parades around these days in a common guise quite different from—though not necessarily any more authentic than—the one in which I place it. For me metaphor is seen not merely as the naive or primitive half of a dichotomy it shares with metonymy—as the impulse toward linguistic identity in opposition to linguistic difference—though it has been the habit to view it this way at least since Jakobson. Although surely it is a figure intended to produce the illusion of verbal identity, I want to use it as a figure that works its momentary trick with a full awareness of the differential nature of language which precedes and coexists with it. It works toward verbal magic only by allowing its self-dissolution in the same act. In this duplicitous act metaphor includes metonymy, comes after it, and thereby transforms itself into irony. It has, in effect, become a metonymic metaphor, if I may use a phrase I have introduced elsewhere.\(^1\) It is, then, this sense of *metaphor*, together with its basis in illusion, which constitutes my claim to the poem’s use of identity to create our sense of its presence. My special notion of *illusion*, obviously indebted to Gombrich’s, will emerge in the lines that follow.

I was tempted to call this volume "Identity and Difference," except that the title I have chosen had certain advantages for me, including the fact that it was not a title already used by Heidegger. For many of these essays, like much of my recent work, deal with my notion of poetry as metaphor, and with metaphor as the paradoxical figure that forces an illusionary identity of terms and concepts which yet—outside the momentary aesthetic illusion—remain differentiated. So the theme of identity and difference, or—more accurately—of identity as identity as difference, may well seem to bring most of these essays together. Still, my coupling of poetic presence and poetic illusion is another way of describing the same relationship between poetry as metaphor and the reader's sense of both reality and the poem's reality. For the poem is present before its reader—like the drama before its audience—only within an illusionary context. That is, its signs are there to stimulate his capacity to create its presence as an illusion, though one he shares with other members of his culture whose illusionary mechanism has been similarly trained. So the reader's double sense of the poem as a presence and as an illusion—as an illusionary presence and as an ever-present illusion—is my central conviction that guides these essays.

But the illusion should not be taken lightly as a false substitute for "reality." It is itself a real and positive force: it is what we see and, as such, it is constitutive of our reality, even if our critical faculty deconstitutes that reality into being no more than illusion. But it is an illusion we can live with—and, most spiritedly, do—though now with self-knowledge, the knowledge of its illusionary nature and of our mystification. This book examines both the workings of poems in order to trace such constitutings and deconstitutings, and those literary critics in our history who have been concerned with this doubleness. For it is based on the assumption—though it is one for which it also argues—that poems are the places where this dual action most strikingly occurs, and where it remains—thanks to their potential presence—for the rest of us to operate upon.

I acknowledge that such notions as these seem derived from the post-Kantian tradition. And I am aware that, in these post-Hegelian and post-Nietzschean days, this is hardly a fashionable source. There may be no need for me to apologize since I also betray a commitment to an extra-metaphorical, existentialist reality which undoes the illusion, and such a commitment may hardly be admitted into post-Kantian precincts (and is probably even more unfashionable). Nevertheless, I concede the post-Kantian flavor of my general position, though my existentialist modifications allow it to sanction a theory of poetry as self-deconstruction (I would prefer to say—in the spirit of
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Rosalie Colie—that it is a theory which sees poetry as a metaphor that "unmetaphors" itself. I have been urging this notion for many years now—well before the recent deconstructionist vogue. However I may be convicted of deriving from Kant or (even worse!) Coleridge, then, the union in metaphor of self-affirmation and self-denial may well bring me into apparent alliances with recent continental criticism in the wake of Hegel and Nietzsche. In my essay (below) on Matthew Arnold, for example, I seem curiously to have created for him a deconstructive role in the history of modern thought not altogether dissimilar to what others have created for Nietzsche. If my Arnold seems pallid by comparison, he may be the price which the Anglo-American theoretical tradition pays for its civilized denials and its consequent sanity. But the similarity in function between Arnold and Nietzsche is there, as the reader will find me suggesting in places where—despite differences between us—I make common cause with a theorist like Paul de Man in treating the willful "blindness" confessed in literature's act of "insight." All this, perhaps, is evidence of the essential oneness of the current theoretical moment, whatever the variety among the sources and resources of those contributing to it.

I ought probably to use this occasion to remind the reader of what I say explicitly more than once in the essays that follow: that I for the most part use terms like poems or poetry or literature interchangeably, meaning all of them to represent fiction-making, whether in verse or prose. It is, in short, what critics used to call—with less discomfort than we now feel—"imaginative literature" (with the implicit slur on non-poetry as unimaginative), though what they had in mind, as I do, is the Aristotelian notion of poesis. Such matters take on a special importance these days, when it takes a lonely daring to make a separatist defense of poetry, as—with certain crucial qualifications—I persist in doing below. But to dwell further here on differences between my use of literature and others' would anticipate arguments made in these essays.

The earliest of these essays was published in 1968 (shortly after the publication of The Play and Place of Criticism, a collection of earlier essays also published by The Johns Hopkins University Press). Though they are scattered, in their dates of composition, from 1968 until only yesterday, about half of them appeared in the last couple of years, perhaps in anticipation of this gathering of them for collective publication. They were, of course, written for a variety of occasions; and where the nature of an occasion seems to affect the tone or the content of any essay, I have described the circumstances in an initial footnote to the essay. Otherwise the details of original publication appear in the "Acknowledgments" following this Preface. Two of the essays,
appearing below as chapters 5 and 9, make their first appearance in this book. And the materials for chapter 15 have been substantially reshaped.

A word about the ordering of the essays. The essays in "critical history"—part one of the volume—appear in the chronological order of their subjects; the essays in "critical theory"—part two of the volume—appear in the reverse order of their composition, most recent essays first, then moving back toward the earliest essay of those included. The reason for this difference in the two parts is obvious: history would seem to demand that the temporal sequence of those being discussed be respected, while—in theoretical areas—I chose the freedom to put my current positions first, then allowing the reader to see in older writings how these positions came to take the form they do.

I see both parts of the book united by my recurrent concern with presence and illusion, with difference as identity. In accordance with this desired unity, I have written what amounts to a title essay in two sections, with one heading each of the two parts of the book. The first focuses on a historical problem, the second on a theoretical, though the two emerge from a common perspective. Each is to give shape to the essays which follow in its part of the book and yet, in their relations to one another, to fuse the two parts in their joint theoretical objective. It would be less than candid of me to deny the sometimes miscellaneous nature of these essays and, thus, the sometimes factitious nature of their cohabitation within these pages. But I am aware enough of the limits upon my own versatility to acknowledge the continual recurrence of my few principal themes within and around these essays, whether explicitly and by pronouncement or subtly, by half-conscious implication.

Most of the recent essays reflect significantly my experience as director of the School of Criticism and Theory, which I helped to found at the University of California, Irvine. It was not possible for me to become involved with so distinguished an array of senior and junior scholar-theorists as I have these last four years without my gathering a lasting influence from their overflowing brilliance. So, to my colleagues among the Senior Fellows and others who taught at the school's sessions, and to those remarkable younger scholars, both

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2 The only exception would be chapters 4 and 5, both of which refer to a single period, although the former is primarily concerned with a late work by Dr. Johnson while the latter deals with many earlier works (by him and others in the period) as well. But in this case it seemed to me important for the reader to have read chapter 4 before coming to the broader (and for me later) considerations of chapter 5.
postdoctoral and graduate students, I am deeply grateful for all that I learned and all that I came to worry about in the class I taught one summer and the colloquia which I directed, with my fellow teachers, during the others. The many challenging colloquium papers which I had to read and with which I had either to do battle or to make my peace before audiences keenly restive and pressing led me to new levels of awareness which undoubtedly have found their way into my more recent work.

There are many others to be thanked, I fear too many to be listed singly—organizers of lectures or symposia for which some of these pieces were originally written and editors of journals or of books in which some of them first appeared. Because of their number, I shall have to content myself with the listings in my “Acknowledgments” and the information in my initial footnotes to some of the essays. But I must single out once more the extraordinary acts of helpfulness and forbearance by Betty Terrell, my administrative assistant, through the years that gradually brought most of these essays to their final form. And, finally, I turn—as I always have—to a grateful tribute to my wife, Joan, whose thoughts have so often stimulated and helped develop what I too easily come to think of as my thoughts. Nothing is a greater source of delight to me, as I contemplate this book becoming a reality, than the appearance on the frontispiece of the visual symbol designed by her; for this marks in print the collaboration to which, in preface after preface, I have sought inadequately to testify. I close by suggesting that the emblem,3 with its epigraph, contains the metaphor implicit within an aesthetic which balances poetic presence with poetic illusion. It relates the fabrication of every fiction to the model game of the Prisoner’s Dilemma: the principle of doubling inherent in the game, as explored in my fifteenth essay below, creates the mirrors and their multiplied images which only the arts can project.

3 The emblem is a free adaptation of a West African Ashanti goldweight, which is an extraordinary example of these miniature works of sculpture. Delicately formed, though only of brass, they serve solely to measure chunks of unformed gold. Yet they are shaped in human and animal images that are to carry various symbolic messages for living and dying. The rounded spiral wings supposedly symbolize regeneration while the bird’s looking backward is related to the omniscience that comes with looking both ways. The coupling of the birds is in the original, although the multiplication and reversing of the double images are the graphic inventions of the designer of the emblem. Perhaps these observations will aid the reader in applying the emblem and its epigraphic riddle to the substance of this volume. (See Margaret Webster Plass, African Miniatures: Goldweights of the Ashanti [New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967].)