By James Arthur Published: Mon Oct 28 2019

Night reading mode

On Poetry Reading Writing Process

Some Thoughts on Ambiguity: Mystery, Truth, and Lies

On the occasion of James Arthur's new book of poems, The Suicide's Son, *he's written a moving meditation on the role of the ambiguous in poetry, now and in the past. The* AGNI *blog is proud to present it in two installments, the first here.*

1. Teaching "My Papa's Waltz"

Not long ago, when I was flying home from the West Coast, the stranger in the seat beside me struck up a conversation (was I travelling for work or pleasure? what did I do for a living? oh, I was a writer? what did I write about?) until finally I admitted that I write poems; no novels, no journalism, only poems. The man I was speaking to seemed mildly embarrassed. "Well, I love to read," he said, "but I just don't understand poetry."

I hear this all time. Maybe every poet does. But I believe that in fact most people do understand poetry, knowingly or not, because poetry's logic is so primal. Long before children are able to follow a complex narrative, long before they develop a sense of anticipation about how a story's plot will progress, they respond to aural pattern and to structure: to songs, lullabies, and nursery rhymes that rely on poetic techniques like rhyme, refrain, and syntactical parallelism. I have an eight-year-old; when I first began reading to him and rediscovering children's books, I was surprised to realize how many of them, like Goodnight, Goodnight, Construction Site are not prose, but poetry. Most children who grow up speaking English know these lines from Mother Goose:

> Hickory, dickory, dock,
> The mouse ran up the clock;
> The clock struck one;
> The mouse ran down,
> Hickory, dickory, dock.

or these lines, from Dr. Seuss:

> I do not like them, Sam-I-Am.
> I do not like green eggs and ham.
>
> Would you like them here or there?
>
> I would not like them here or there.
> I would not like them anywhere.
> I do not like green eggs and ham.
> I do not like them, Sam-I-Am.

We also encounter rhyme, rhythm, and figurative language in adages, advertising, and children's counting games, in the slogans and cheers at political rallies, and in the lyrics of pop songs. In these contexts we not only understand poetry, but rely on it, recognizing intuitively that sound and pattern make their own kind of sense and can in fact guide us across loosely connected chains of associative thought. Dylan fans have no difficulty finding meaning in lyrics like "Keep a clean nose / Watch the plain clothes / You don't need a weatherman / To know which way the wind blows." But when people encounter equally associative language on the page, they're likely to find it *difficult*.

I believe that this idea of poems being difficult has to do with ambiguity and with misconceptions about how metaphor should be understood. Confronted with a seemingly obscure poem, in which the poet's intended meaning appears to be heavily veiled in figurative language, some readers wonder why the poem can't just say what it means. I'd like to probe this question of what poems mean and how they mean it.

I'll start with Theodore Roethke's widely anthologized poem "My Papa's Waltz," first published in 1942. It's very accessible, and I often use it when teaching undergrad creative writing classes. If you haven't read it recently, take a moment to read it aloud now, paying close attention not only to what the words say directly, but also to what they suggest.

When I present this poem to a room of freshman or sophomore university students and ask them how they interpret it, some respond to the poem's emotional warmth. For them, the poem describes a scene in which a hard-working father returns home and dances around the house with his young son—maybe the boy is standing on his father's feet—and because the father is a little drunk, the dancing is clumsy and rough, knocking down pots and pans, while the boy's mother looks on, frowning in disapproval. These readers often characterize the poem as nostalgic, affectionate, and melancholy: a poem about a burly, bear-like father, remembered years later by his grown-up son.

But every time I've taught the poem, others in the class have pointed to words and phrases that seem to carry a suggestion of violence: "the whiskey on your breath" . . . "I hung on like death" . . . "the hand that held my wrist / was battered on one knuckle. / At every step you missed / My right ear scraped a buckle." Whenever I teach the poem, sooner or later one student will ask, "Well, isn't the father beating up the child?"

Often at that point there's an argument: students who interpreted the father sympathetically don't like seeing him cast as a bully. Sometimes they feel tricked. Or they question whether the class isn't attaching too much significance to phrases like "you beat time on my head" and "the hand that held my wrist." Did Roethke really want us to pore over every word for subtext? *Aren't we overanalyzing the poem?*, they ask. But others point out that it's not just a matter of a phrase or two, that at least half of the lines in "My Papa's Waltz" have an ominous subtext: when there is so much implied violence, how can we pretend that "My Papa's Waltz" is just a tender, melancholy poem about a father and a son?

Both lines of interpretation are worthwhile. There is violent imagery; it's reinforced by Roethke's use of hard fricative and plosive consonant sounds ("With a palm caked hard by dirt, / Then waltzed me off to bed") and by Roethke's metrical choices, which push rhetorically and dramatically charged words like "boy" and "caked" into metrically unstressed positions, creating rhythmic tension. But there is genuine tenderness in the poem too. Instead of asking that one of these qualities, the violence or the tenderness, negate the other, the experienced reader acknowledges that these two elements coexist inside the poem.

I'd argue that recognizing their coexistence makes available the deepest and most rewarding interpretations of "My Papa's Waltz," because it's possible to love someone who is abusive. Or maybe the relationship between father and son is sometimes tender, sometimes violent. Is the poem truly about physical violence, or is it about an emotional conflict that the poet compares to a brawl?

I find the last line of "My Papa's Waltz" enormously powerful: "Still clinging to your shirt." Reading it, I can imagine the boy being carried up to bed, holding onto his father's shirt either because he wants to be close or because the two of them are still grappling. For me the line also raises the possibility that the boy has been put to bed, and is lying awake, clutching at real or imagined fabric, engaging in a kind of a psychological struggle with his father; the line suggests the idea, too, that even now, in the narrative present, when the speaker of the poem is presumably no longer a boy but a man—when the father is maybe long in his grave—the grown son is wrestling with these memories of childhood still.

Clearly my interpretation of the poem has entered the realm of the speculative. A skeptic might ask, how can you be sure Roethke meant any of those things? . . . and the truth is, I can't be sure. Many questions of interpretation can't be definitively settled, because each reader brings to the poem an individual sensibility, mood, and frame of reference, with the result that each reader forms an idiosyncratic interpretation of what is most important and arrives at a largely personal understanding. In a very real sense, ambiguity and metaphor make it possible for writer and reader to collaborate in the creation of a poem's meaning.

I'm not suggesting that a piece of writing means whatever we want it to mean. Some interpretations of a poem or story are so tenuous that we can say that they're wrong—it would be hard to make the case that "My Papa's Waltz" is about a dog. It's also fair to say that some interpretations of a piece are richer and more interesting than others. But in my experience, the fullest understanding of a work of art, almost any work of art, entails a recognition that its objective meaning, if one can speak of such a thing, exists at a point of intersection between all of its viable meanings.

Which brings us back to ambiguity, and to the question of why writers use figurative language. Why be mysterious? When learning to write essays, most of us are taught that it's important to convey abstract ideas with clarity and precision, so why would one choose to write in a way that subjects the meaning of one's words to such variability?

The answer, it seems to me, is that while many kinds of writing are intended to convey information (whether facts or interpretations of facts) literary writing seeks to convey experience, in the broadest sense. A successful elegy doesn't communicate the mere fact that the narrator is sad; a well-written elegy might actually provoke the reader to a feeling of sadness, or to some other kind of sympathetic engagement with the world of the poem. In other words, poems, like stories, like movies, like songs, operate by making a claim on the reader's imagination—sometimes on the reader's emotions too, but I find that poems can't access emotions without first accessing the imagination. Art makes imaginable what would otherwise be abstract.

That's why creative writing students are always told to show and not tell: if the goal were to communicate information, poets could do it efficiently by saying this character is cruel, that character is sensitive, this character is beautiful. But such generalizations would make very little impression on the reader's imagination, so the writer, even the writer of the most distilled haiku, must sometimes work against the utilitarian efficiencies of language. Instead of stating plainly and explicitly that someone is beautiful, a writer will more often try to find a sequence of words that allows readers to form a mental image of whoever is being described. The reader becomes an interpreter. Instead of passively receiving information, the reader imagines the person, judges the person to be beautiful, and takes the judgment to be their own.

2. Feeling vs. Sentiment

Another piece I like to present in the classroom is Edna St. Vincent Millay's 1939 poem "Rendezvous."

The dramatic situation of "Rendezvous" doesn't seem ambiguous at all: the poem apparently describes an assignation between the narrator and her lover—maybe a younger lover—who, anticipating the narrator's arrival, has scrubbed his fingers and decorated the apartment with roses, not realizing that these careful preparations, far from seeming sexy, will leave the narrator feeling old. The poem's ambiguity is really an emotional complexity arising from mixed feelings; for me that last sentence, "And I wish I did not feel like your mother," is funny, sad, bleak, and so jarring that it almost eclipses everything that's come before.

Yet there are vivid moments of strangeness throughout the poem. Look at line 12 (the third-to-last, for "Rendezvous" is a kind of long, loose sonnet): "Your laughter pelts my skin with small delicious blows." It's more nuanced than we might immediately realize: *pelt* and *blows* invite us to think of the lover's laughter as a kind of shelling or bombardment that rains against the narrator's skin . . . so, as in "My Papa's Waltz," we have figurative language that suggests conflict, except that here the assault is *delicious*, as if the lover's teasing laughter is a source of joy, even a kind of erotic intimacy between the two people.

What I want to point out especially is that the sentence "Your laughter pelts my skin with small delicious blows" is vivid and affecting not despite its ambiguity, but because the line is slightly mysterious.

I've talked mostly about poetry, but I think ambiguity is just as important to fiction, to creative nonfiction . . . to most art, actually. Some prose, as in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, or *Coming Through Slaughter* by Michael Ondaatje, is highly metaphorical (and therefore ambiguous in a mode that we sometimes describe as being "poetic"), but ambiguity can also enter even the most sober realist fiction simply through characterizations that respect the genuine complexity of human motives and behavior. Think too about how joy and sadness can coexist inside a piece of music, or how a movie can be both funny and horrifying. Life itself is made up of multifaceted sense- and thought-impressions, experiences that can't be translated into a single emotional register, much less one message or meaning. If a work of art is to give us a persuasive vision of reality, that vision has to include some of the raw, uninterpreted strangeness of existence.

Emotional ambiguity is also one of the most reliable defenses against sentimentality. Novice writers sometimes confuse sentimentality with strong emotion, but the two are different things. Emotion is part of being human. Sentimentality is emotional affect that has been simplified to control an audience's reaction. I find *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf to be extraordinarily powerful and affecting—reading it, for me, is an emotional experience—but Woolf's writing is not the least bit sentimental; on the contrary, Woolf's portrait of characters who try to build meaningful lives and, despite succeeding to some extent, are nonetheless swallowed by time is exceedingly unsentimental. Good literary writing shows us something like life (a vision that may include emotionally charged material, like the father-son relationship in "My Papa's Waltz") and trusts us to react, perhaps even in a way the writer has not foreseen. Sentimental writing, on the other hand, lingers over every teardrop, over the innocence of children and the gentle wisdom of grandparents; it cues up the violins and asks us to cry. The more discerning we become as readers, the more we recognize the smallness of the offering, and withhold the very emotional response that the author is trying to force upon us.

One of my favorite living American poets is Natalie Shapero, whose second book, *Hard Child*, was published last year. Much of *Hard Child* explores parenthood, a theme that can easily lend itself to sentimentality, but Shapero's poems are faithful to the true strangeness of their subject matter. Look, for example, at "Ten What."

One of the qualities that carries us through this poem from the beginning is a kind of screwball humor: Shapero opens with the rhetorical question, "the camera adds ten what?" and if we're familiar with the adage "the camera adds ten pounds," we know the answer the narrator seemingly can't recall. We can enjoy the surreal possibilities—the camera adds ten spider plants, the camera adds ten lovers—while the poem keeps us entertained with a virtuoso working and reworking of assonance ("A worker bee will die before / a camel. A fox will die before a pilot whale. / A pocket watch will die before the clock inside / the crocodile . . ."), but from the first line the poem is also characterizing the narrator as an anxious, distracted person who doesn't want to be photographed, who fixates on lifespans and mortality, who doesn't want any more of anything, especially not clocks, which remind her that time is always passing, and that life is finite.

All of this could seem to be a whimsical study of neurosis . . . until the end of the poem, when the narrator lets us know in a flat, almost offhand tone that she's a new mother. The baby isn't named, isn't identified as a son or a daughter, isn't *my* baby or *our* baby; it's just "the baby," and the narrator acknowledges no resemblance between the baby and herself. On a second reading of that last sentence, "Everyone says / the baby looks like me, but I can't see it." we might even wonder whether the "it" refers not to the resemblance between mother and child, but to the child itself, as if the narrator is so determined to keep her newborn at a distance that she can't even see the baby, and refers to the baby as "it," using a pronoun that normally would signify not a person but a thing. The juxtaposition of the two final couplets, and also that hard rhyme, *free it / see it*, creates an implied analogy between the baby and the doomed moth that the narrator doesn't feel responsible for, and doesn't plan to save.

Shapero introduces still more emotional distance, somewhat counterintuitively, with the phrase "my lover." If the man in question is the narrator's partner and the father of her child, calling him "my lover" sexualizes him and at the same time appears to make him exchangeable, and therefore disposable: "I don't want / another lover" could mean "I don't want any lover apart from the one I have," but it could also mean "I don't need anyone at all."

Is "Ten What" about post-partum depression? Maybe. But any such diagnosis literalizes the poem and denies its full range of implication. Just as truthfully, we could say the poem is about something specific to the narrator and this child. We can't know. But the presence of the baby brings a new understanding to earlier lines like "I don't want any more of what I have" and "I know by heart the list / of lifetimes." The poem's whimsy and playfulness don't disappear, not for me, but the emotional distance that Shapero maintains, partly through humor, finally crystallizes into a question: how can we allow ourselves to love something completely, knowing that it will die?

So far I've mostly concentrated on the question of how ambiguity shapes our interpretation of poetry. In the second half of the essay, I'll describe some of the ways that ambiguity can enter into the writing process itself.

3. The Writer as an Interpreter

In a private letter from 1817, the English poet John Keats famously described an attribute that he called "negative capability" and claimed that it was an essential quality in any great writer. Negative capability, he wrote, is the capacity to be "in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason"— in other words, the capacity to contemplate a question without striving to reach a conclusive answer, and to write in such a way that the subject's essential mystery remains intact.

This implies that the best writers do not wholly usurp the interpretive role that properly belongs to the reader. I don't mean, of course, that writers should or do remain ignorant of their work's subtext. After all, the writer chooses the words, and is likely to anticipate some of the meanings that readers will find there. In revising, the writer can support and enrich those meanings. But if we accept that the writer's job is to create an occasion for the reader's own speculations, then the writer cannot be committed to one interpretation at the expense of all others; the writer has to allow multiple implications.

In my writing and teaching, I've found that successful poems rarely begin with the desire to communicate a particular thesis. To the extent that the poet *does* have a thesis, the process of writing is usually a matter of relinquishing that initial argument and allowing a poem to develop in unanticipated directions. I don't mean that writers can't have profound philosophical or even ideological commitments—there are countless examples of great writers whose political or religious convictions were central to their work—but I am saying that during the act of creation, even the most passionately committed writers must be willing to ask questions they can't definitively answer.

It's not incidental that *image* and *imagination* share a common root, for it is to the imagination—and not to our rational instincts—that sensory language makes its appeal. An image is usually best observed and articulated with precision (any accidental vagueness of syntax or word choice tends to cause an *un*productive ambiguity that impedes the reader's engagement) but the meaning or purpose of an image can be quite open to interpretation, because, in contrast to an allegory or a conceit, an image communicates an impression, not a concept.

Writing within any kind of formal constraint can also allow a poet to defer the question of meaning. As the poet searches for the next rhyme, the next iambic foot or assonant echo, subtext accretes as a matter of course, even if the poet is not consciously steering the poem toward a theme or message. Sometimes, if there's an apparent disconnect between what the rhythm is saying and what the words are saying, rhythm itself can complicate meaning—as is true, for example, in Gwendolyn Brooks' "We Real Cool," which presents almost as a nursery rhyme, but comes to a sharp end.

For me, one of the pleasures of writing poetry is that even if the poet doesn't begin with the intention of communicating anything in particular, meaning emerges. And because the poet functions as a curator, deciding what to keep and what to remove, eventually the poem begins to reflect the poet's concerns, and speaks in what is recognizably the poet's voice.

When I was an MFA student at the University of Washington, one of my professors, the wonderful Richard Kenney, worked hard to persuade students that they would write better by working against their intentions. To communicate that point, he once divided a graduate seminar into two groups and asked students in the first group to each spend fifteen minutes writing a double abecedarian (a poem whose opening line begins with A and ends with Z, whose second line begins with B and ends with Y . . . and so on, down to the 26th, which begins with Z and ends with A). To students in the second group, Kenney said, "Write something really smart."

The students who'd been given the job of writing double abecedarians thought they'd received the worse end of the deal, but after fifteen minutes most of the students who'd been asked to write something smart had nothing interesting to present to the class, while the double abecedarians, though mostly unfinished and of course ridiculous in places, all contained surprising moments of vitality and at least a few lines that were rich in implication.

4. Truth and Lies

I think it's useful to recognize, too, that a poem can be profoundly ambiguous even if that ambiguity lies concealed under straightforward narrative, because any element of style, any narrative strategy, that can be used to prosecute a point also can be used to deflect a point, or to complicate it. Elizabeth Bishop and W. H. Auden both had a genius for writing poems that at first might seem transparent, but whose meaning can shift greatly depending on one's angle of approach.

Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" reworks a famous scene in Book 18 of *The Iliad*: the sea nymph Thetis has asked Hephaestos, the divine smith, to make armor and a shield for her son, the powerful warrior Achilles.

In Homer's version, Thetis knows that her son will soon die on the battlefield outside Troy, so the point of the commission isn't to keep Achilles safe; she asks that Hephaestos make a splendid, immortal shield that will bring her son honor and glory before he dies. In *The Iliad*, Hephaestos decorates the shield with an image of all creation—the Earth, the ocean, the sky, the constellations—all ranging in concentric circles around two human cities, with weddings, the harvest, and dancing set alongside images of violence and conflict, as if to suggest that war is an inevitable, natural part of the great cycle of existence.

Published in 1952, seven years after the end of World War II, Auden's poem gives two contrasting visions: it describes the images that Thetis, at first referred to only as "she," expects to see on the shield—scenes of harmony, honor, and sacrifice that echo the images described by Homer—but Auden's poem also shows the scenes that a reimagined Hephaestos has actually carved onto the shield: brutal images of modern warfare and totalitarianism.

It's easy to interpret the poem as a realist rejection of the heroic conception of war, and I'm sure that's how I understood the poem when I first read it. Libation, sacrifice, and "ships upon untamed seas" seem quaint compared with the more recognizable war imagery of sentries, barbed wire, and marching boots. There are no heroes on Auden's shield, only millions of soldiers marching into battle on the orders of a faceless authority, and, in an apparent allusion to the crucifixion, three figures being tortured while a crowd of people look on and do nothing. Knowing when this poem was written, I find it impossible not to think of the Holocaust, and of the silent complicity of so many, when I read:

> A crowd of ordinary decent folk
> Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke
> As three pale figures were led forth and bound
> To three posts driven upright in the ground.

The lines seem equally relevant today as the passivity of tens of millions of Americans makes possible a string of concentration camps along our own southern border.

If we take Auden's poem as a critique of Homer, then Thetis is naïve, and Hephaestos, like the narrator of Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est," speaks for the poet himself in saying there is no glory in war, and no honor—only cruelty, suffering, and death.

Look again at the second-to-last stanza, where the description of the shield culminates in the image of a "ragged urchin" throwing a stone at a bird. Look at what we're told about that child: "That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third, / Were axioms to him, who'd never heard / Of any world where promises were kept / Or one could weep because another wept." The image seems to say, here is the final cost of war: the child who grows up on the battlefield knows only cruelty, and is cruel to others.

Yet the more I look at the poem, the more I wonder if that child isn't a proxy for Hephaestos himself. In Greco-Roman mythology, Hephaestos is the one Olympian god who is ugly: he's described as being deformed; he is rejected by his own mother and is married to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, who regularly cheats on him. In that penultimate stanza, aren't we also being told something about the "thin-lipped armorer" Hephaestos when we read the lines "That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third, / Were axioms to him, who'd never heard / Of any world where promises were kept / Or one could weep because another wept"?

I think Hephaestos is being psychologized just as much as Thetis. Not only does he live in a world without fidelity or empathy; he's never heard of a world where those things exist. From his perspective, the image on the shield just shows the natural order of things.

The poem progresses like an argument and has the didactic tone of a parable—but there's a great uncertainty at its core. There's even ambiguity in the meter, since the shield is described in rhyme royal (stanzas of iambic pentameter rhyming ABABBCC), but Thetis's vision is described in a very different meter, pure accentual verse rhyming ABCBDEFE, with approximately three beats per line and a varying number of syllables per line. Really what we're hearing is a dialogue between two voices, each with its own vision of reality and its own distinct rhythm. (Interestingly, the contemporary images of war are paired with what one might think of as the high, formal meter, while Thetis's vision of "marble, well-governed cities" and "ritual pieties" takes the much looser and more casual accentual trimeter.)

"The Shield of Achilles" invites us to be seduced by its rhythmic and rhetorical authority, but in the end what does the poem assert? Mainly that the terrible, violent Achilles, who excels in slaughter and warfare, will himself die young. It's not hard to imagine that the ragged urchin might grow up to be like him. The poem presents as an argument, but I think it's a question—about what compassion and humanity mean in a world where there are wars and concentration camps.

Having come of age poetically during the rise of Hitler, Franco, and Stalin, Auden knew well that language presents many possibilities for deception—both of others and oneself—and he could be a harsh judge of his own published poems if he later found them to be marred by false simplicities; sometimes he revised and even repudiated his own work long after it had appeared in print. His 1937 poem "Spain," written in support of the anti-fascist republicans in the Spanish Civil War, ends:

> The stars are dead. The animals will not look.
> We are left alone with our day, and the time is short, and
> History to the defeated
> May say Alas but cannot help nor pardon.

"Spain" was widely praised, but Auden later called the poem's last two lines "shameful" because they "equate goodness with success." He wrote, "It would have been bad enough if I had ever held this wicked doctrine, but that I should have stated it simply because it sounded to me rhetorically effective is quite inexcusable." Auden allowed "Spain" and four other early political poems to appear in a 1964 anthology only on the condition that they were accompanied by a note saying, "Mr. W. H. Auden considers these five poems to be trash which he is ashamed to have written."

We regularly characterize honesty as active truth-telling (as in the phrase "speaking truth to power"), but for me it's been useful to recognize that some of the depth and humanity, some of the negative capability, in Auden's poetry probably derives from his sense of being not only under an obligation to tell the truth, but also under a heavy injunction to avoid telling lies, which is not quite the same thing.

5. Breathing Gold

I'll wrap up by briefly discussing one of my favorite poems, "Train to Dublin," written in 1934 by a friend and occasional collaborator of Auden's, the Northern Irish poet Louis MacNeice.

There is much in "Train to Dublin" that I find mysterious, even after many readings, but there are moments of striking clarity too. Although I've characterized figurative language mostly as an agent of ambiguity, it has a countervailing ability to illuminate and clarify experience also.

Look at that first stanza, which describes thoughts coming briefly into focus and then dissipating, to be replaced by others, each mental impression so ephemeral that the speaker cannot hold onto it as he wishes. "I can no more gather my mind up in my fist / Than the shadow of the smoke of this train upon the grass." First we have the arresting image of someone trying to clutch his mind inside his fist, and then there is an analogy that compares the speaker's evanescent thoughts not just to shadows or smoke but to "the shadow of the smoke of [the] train upon the grass," a shadow that is of course constantly changing shape as the train hurtles forward and the smoke blows backwards. The train itself seems to function as a metaphor for the progress of time; nothing is static, so nothing can be grasped.

For me the poem is endlessly suggestive. Train and telephone poles can be seen as modern encroachments on a world of cart-horses, bogs, and Norman stone. This is another kind of progress through time, and the poem hints that the efficiency of our machines has made us less free: "during a tiny portion of our lives we are not in trains, / The idol living for a moment, not muscle-bound / But walking freely through the slanting rain." But any impulse toward nostalgia is checked again and again by the poet reminding us that time cannot be stopped.

Midway through stanza six, at the exact midpoint of "Train to Dublin," the narrative takes a dramatic turn: "All over the world," we are told, "people are toasting the King." But, the speaker says directly to us, "I will not give you any idol or idea, creed or king, / I give you the incidental things which pass / Outward through space exactly as each was." From that point, the poem refashions itself as a long list, an offering of apparently inconsequential momentary impressions that have come and gone. Is "Train to Dublin" about poetry? Writing a poem can feel like trying to gather your mind up in your fist, trying to seize some impression that is always flitting out of reach. But we could just as easily decide that "Train to Dublin" is about life, mortality, about looking out at landscapes that quickly slide away and are gone.

In the final stanza, after a catalog of impressions that includes “fuchsia hedges and whitewashed walls . . . the brass / Belt of serene sun upon the lough,” the narrator brings himself up short: “I would like to give you more but I cannot hold / This stuff within my hands and the train goes on” . . . and MacNeice closes the poem with an allusion to the alchemical goals of prolonging life and synthesizing base metals into gold: “I know that there are further syntheses to which, / As you have perhaps, people at last attain / And find that they are rich and breathing gold.”

These lines are evocative and, for me, quite moving, but they remain open to interpretation. Does the poem suggest that a true master might somehow alter the laws of nature, succeeding where the speaker has failed? Or is the implication different: that a true master recognizes the richness of life without needing to clutch it in his grasp? That’s a kind of alchemy too, understanding that the air we breathe doesn’t need to be transmuted, if it is already gold.