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Notebook

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Benign obscurity

by [Donald Justice](#)

On obscurity in poetry

A literary critic must be prepared to say, "This is good, though I don't know why; not yet anyhow"; indeed his more formative opinions are nearly always like that.

—William Empson

The basic notion is probably less novel than I want it to be, and I may be behind the times to think that it has anything new about it. But I suppose everyone must agree that, in the normal course of going through poems, we put up with a good deal of obscurity, and with oddly little complaining; and I think this merits some attention, if not concern. I hope I will not be seen as joining the very popular revolt against reason and good sense if I suggest that there is in fact something to be said for obscurity in some of its simpler forms. It can at the very least be a sign of the presence of something hidden, of something perhaps too difficult to express easily, or even, for some tastes, a sort of code fo ...

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