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Empsonian Pregnancy and Wordsworth's Spousal Verse

"Demystification" is a word that has become practically synonymous with literary theory during the past twenty years. Today we are not likely to encounter a theory of poetic inspiration or genius, or theories of less exalted subjective categories, such as intuition, imagination or association. The task of interpretation begins, strangely enough, with a resistance to the claims, be they trivial or grand, that any work of literature would make upon us. The literary critic, if he fears the charge of naivete, assumes the role of the critical philosopher. Before granting access to the higher faculty of imagination or to the emotions, the critic will want to know, on the strictly verbal plane of analysis, what a literary text is pretending to assert. In the terminology of Frege, which critics have found useful, the sense of a text must be scrutinized before we may look at its referents. William Empson's famous discussion of a cartoon from *Punch* illustrates the distinction in a memorable because obnoxious way:

First youth: Hello, congenital idiot
Second youth: Hello, you priceless old ass
The Damsel: I'd no idea you two knew each other so well.

The joke lies in the youths' ability to talk to each other in non-referential terms. We find out, from the joke, something about the way the youths feel about each other, but nothing about their feelings towards actual imbeciles or donkeys. The sense of the joke translates an apparent insult into an expression of cleverness. The joke reveals an implicit agreement between the youths that they can afford to speak to each other in this way without being taken literally. The implication of the joke has nothing to do with foolishness, with being an ass; on the contrary, the situation suggests, according to Empson, freedom, naturalness and safety.¹

In the literature of high seriousness, the gap between sense and reference may grow very wide indeed. Specialized, highly technical

methods of analysis, such as semiotics, structuralism, transformational grammar and descriptive poetics have stepped in to exploit this gap. We now know a good deal about, say, narrative conventions and voices or about the internal logic of oppositions and substitutions within a poem; but it seems increasingly difficult to avoid taking this analysis as an end in itself. There is a dangerous seductiveness about all this analytic machinery. Unless we continue to ask serious questions about the existence assertions of a text, we may, as Kant suggested, fall into a state of oblivion. Poetic constructions become absurd. As Kant notes, the poet vainly tries to milk the male goat while the critic stands by, anxious to catch the milk in his sieve.

The work of William Empson offers us the rare opportunity to consider ways in which careful, technical analysis may lead to crucial theoretical breakthroughs. I am tempted to call Empson, after Milton, a "sect of one." Only the work of the late Paul de Man, in my opinion, offers a comparable attempt to shift the epistemological grounds of literary studies by way of extraordinarily precise readings. Of course any reading, even a very imprecise one, is capable of making question begging theoretical leaps. Genuine theoretical insight, as Empson realized, lies in the reader's sense that the text continues to "resist" the "machinery" of interpretation.

The diner out may resist absorbing the figures on a restaurant bill, but such resistance is merely an evasion of an all too clear meaning. Similarly, trivial metaphors, such as the "legs of a table," offer little resistance; they fall into the class of habitual or dead metaphors. Empsonian resistance is defined as a "false identity" that asserts itself at the same time that it cannot be accepted. The critical task is to define, as precisely as possible, the mode of the false "equation," not for the sake of doing away with it, which would be pointless, but for the sake of what it may tell us about verbal fictions, tropes and existence assertions in general. I want to look closely at one type of equation, which Empson, in *The Structure of Complex Words*, called "pregnancy." For the moment, however, it is important that we recognize resistance as an axiological principle in Empson's theorizing; it is a value upon which hinges the passage from specific acts of close reading to literary theory.

Again, only de Man, to my knowledge, has grasped the importance of resistance in Empson. In a review of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and *Some Versions of the Pastoral*, de Man stressed Empson's aversion to any immediate apprehension of meaning.² For Empson, meaning always requires hard labour. Unlike his mentor, I. A. Richards, Empson does not attempt to align a poetic text with some originary experience, which Richards described variously as the balancing of

impulses, the Coleridgean reconciliation of opposites, or the achievement of synesthesia. Such affective criteria prove to be most valuable in aesthetics, but as Richards himself came to realize, after Empson, they bypass troublesome semantic confusions. Criticisms must shift from discussions of sensation to sense.

American New Critics, in their stress on the inclusiveness of meaning in paradox or poetic intension welcomed Empson's studies in ambiguity. But the ambiguities of *Seven Types* are only a prelude to the false identities of *The Structure of Complex Words*. In an ambiguity, two distinct meanings may be read into either a single word or phrase, and the context does not decide between them. False identities, or equations, however, seek to establish a necessary link between two different senses of a word or phrase; they are, for Empson, the key to doctrines, beliefs and emotions in poetic language. Equations are rarely aesthetic, have little to do with poetic style and nothing to do with ambiguities. Empson is quite clear about his attempt to break new theoretical ground in *The Structure of Complex Words*:

[D]ouble meanings used occasionally by a rich stylist tend not to be equations at all, or only of a peculiar sort. I have written two books largely concerned with literary double meanings, and I looked through them for examples useful in testing an equation theory, but I hardly found any. In an ordinary literary use both the meanings are imposed by the immediate context, which has been twisted round to do it, and the suggestion is not "as everyone admits, so that language itself bears us out" but "as I by my magic can make appear."³

Immediate context, the prime consideration of new criticism, is susceptible to endless manipulation; it may be vague or rich in texture, but it does not resist interpretation.

Equations, by contrast, draw us into the "tricky" game of false doctrines and statements. The "magical" nature of contextual interpretation — a term that occurs frequently in Empson's disparaging remarks — suggests the ease with which contexts complicate meanings and hence their lack of critical value. The crucial difference between magical ambiguities and resistant equations may be demonstrated by briefly comparing Ransom, Wimsatt and Empson on the Richardian relation of tenor to vehicle—the tenor being the original context, the given discourse, and the vehicle the imported or foreign content.⁴ The text in question, Denham's address to the River Thames in Cooper's Hill, has been put through numerous analyses, but it has the advantage of preparing the way for a consideration of Wordsworth's exchange between mind and nature.

O could I flow like thee, and make thy stream
My great exemplar as it is my theme!

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process out of the same material." Wimsatt continues: "The river landscape is both the occasion of reminiscence and the source of the metaphors by which reminiscence is described. A poem of this structure is a signal instance of that kind of fallacy (or strategy) by which death in poetry occurs so often in winter or at night, and sweethearts meet in the spring countryside." When tenor and vehicle collapse into each other, it signals the birth of a romantic poem, but specifically, in Ruskinian terms, the birth of fallacious poetry. The collapse of tenor and vehicle makes possible a "dramatization" of the spirit through what Wimsatt calls the "faint, shifting, least tangible" parts of nature. There is a continual warping of vehicle by tenor, whether in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," Blake's "To Spring" or Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey." These poets, with the exception of Blake, claim to derive their inspiration from nature, but a close reading of the structure of their imagery shows that it is far from natural. The sense of the poetry is often extremely subtle; it works by implication, rather than by overt rhetorical devices such as we are liable to find in metaphysical poetry. Yet its referents are highly deceptive. Within a romantic transaction between tenor and vehicle, bits of description intrude into the wrong contexts. In the intimations ode, for example, when Wordsworth, though inland far, sees in his soul the immortal sea which brought him hither, we have a parallel set up between the calmness of the soul looking into infinity and a person inland on a clear day looking back at the sea. The tenor concerns souls and age, the vehicle travellers by sea. But why, in this text, are children sporting on the shore? They are not part of the vehicle as such. Rather, they are part of the tenor, the theme of old age, which has been attracted over to the description of the vehicle. If we mistake the children for an essential feature of the vehicle, they confuse the tenor, for we will have to reconcile them somehow with the vision of immortality associated with the sea, a symbol of solemnity. The fusing of tenor and vehicle, far from enriching poetic ambiguity, leads to accidental strains of meaning. To call these accidents "contexts" is gloss over the possible hollowness of the confusion. Wimsatt, following Ruskin, introduces the possibility of a fallacy rather than a paradox. Empson takes the fusion of vehicle and tenor a step further by measuring it against his criterion of resistance.

Denham's text on the Thames, for Empson, is not a particularly interesting example of fusion.⁶ Empson prefers to consider this text as an example of "allegory," as a sub class of metaphor, in which equal prominence is given to tenor and vehicle. Empson neatly sidesteps the muddles that arise when critics try to decide which side of the metaphor deserves prominence. Instead, he argues that the "function of an allegory is make you feel that two levels of being correspond to one

Though deep, yet clear; though gentle, yet not dull;
Strong without rage; without o'er flowing, full.

For Richards, the flow of the poet's mind is the tenor, the river the vehicle; but the two sides of the metaphor ambiguously mingle. "Deep and clear" applies literally to the river, figuratively to the mind; but "gentle" seems to reverse the direction, and applies from mind to river. So too, "strong without rage." Tenor and vehicle are consistently switching order. The point of the comparison seems to be less a likeness between mind and river—which would be the classical approach—than the establishment of a context for saying, by implication, some things about the mind. Denham is not really interested in describing a river, according to Richards. But Ransom, by extending the context of the lines one step further, switches tenor and vehicle on Richards and claims, "no," it is the mind which is the vehicle for the description of the river. Cooper's Hill is a topographical poem, first about a hill then about a stream. The metaphor in question is particularly rich, for many aspects of tenor and vehicle overlap, even while, Ransom says, they remain "substantively themselves." There is nothing ambiguous for Ransom in the text's crossing of properties, for "the world is dense with [metaphorical] cross-relations and its interpenetrations of context." Empson tells us that the immediate resort to ever higher levels of generalization about a problem is "dull" and I suspect that the rich suggestiveness of Ransom's conclusion only masks the superficiality of this theory. Ransom, like Richards, strives to locate a singular point of likeness which gives any metaphor its cognitive ground; but, that accomplished, we soon wander into the magical realm of textures of meaning. It would not do to compare the mind to a cup of tea, as Richards suggests, but we hardly feel that such insights will help to explain the vacuity of so much of the world's metaphorical texture.

Wimsatt, discussing a similar confusion of tenor and vehicle in Coleridge's "To the River, Otter," notes how prone such confusions are to fallacies — a critical judgment, it seems to me, that begins to take us into the realm of resistance.⁵ Coleridge's river is much more distinct than Denham's. Coleridge describes tints, sand with various dyes and gray willows. But, Wimsatt shrewdly notes, vividness of detail is merely a matter for a "school of poetics." The crucial aspect of the river is its "rich ground of meaning," which, unlike mere vividness of description, is open to challenge and susceptible to confirmation. As in Denham's poem, Coleridge's overt similitude between river and mind, the point of Aristotelian metaphor, gives way to the Richardian dialectic of tenor and vehicle, in which both "are wrought in a parallel

Associationism to Idealism, particularly in *The Prelude*, but the claims of his poetry are always false.⁷ Wordsworth never really erects the third concept that his poetry pretends to. This is either a grievous or an erroneous charge. And it is a matter of considerable theoretical importance to decide which. I have been arguing in favour of Empson's rigour and his refusal to be taken in by any sort of literary mystification. But we would expect Wordsworth, in his own right a severe critic of the nonsensical, to be the last object of Empson's scorn. Critic and poet in this case share equally a reverence for the notion of serious verse. Moreover, Empson's criticism of Wordsworth's stylistic "magic" goes against the grain of more than a century of appreciation for what has come to be known, after Carlyle, as romantic natural supernaturalism, or what Wordsworth calls the "exquisite fit" between natural detail and the revelation of spiritual force, the individual blasted hawthorn and the moving mists of the divine in nature. Meyer Abrams is willing to concede that Wordsworth's phrasing is often vague and that his syntax is lax; but he assumes that Wordsworth knew what he was saying. Abrams is the champion of Wordsworth's prospectus to *The Excursion*, in which Wordsworth announced his "spousal verse." Wordsworth would marry the highest sublimities of the human mind to the simple produce of the common day, and for Abrams, this "great consummation" is the point of departure for an understanding of the great works of romanticism.⁸

Wordsworth's prospectus announces a marriage; it reads, as Abrams notes, like a prothalamion.⁹ As an allegory, a sustained comparison, Empson could have no objection to the prospectus; for Wordsworth would be celebrating a reality higher than his mind or the landscape of Grasmere upon which he gazes in preparation for his chant. An allegory, we recall, mingles tenor and vehicle deliberately so as to subordinate them to a third idea. But Wordsworth, as Abrams notes, is like the Biblical happy bridegroom: he wishes to consummate his marriage. In rhetorical terms, he wishes to fuse mind and nature, to move from allegory to the sort of mutual metaphor found in Antony and Cleopatra.

Does Wordsworth achieve a third idea, which would elevate the received doctrines of sensation and association to a truly imaginative level? Or does he remain trapped in what Hegel would call the "barrenness" of allegory, no matter how much he declares, in Miltonic fashion, that he is brooding upon the abyss. These questions situate us at the centre of a conflict between romantic doctrine and Empsonian theory. Either Empson's account of the resistances of sense fails to account for Wordsworthian verse, or the entire marriage metaphor evaporates into stylistic trickery and false claims.

another in detail, and indeed that there is some underlying reality, something in the nature of things, which makes this happen. Each level may illuminate the other." The effect of a sustained mutual comparison is "magical," perhaps even vaguely pantheistic. It makes sense, according to Empson, only with reference to a third, unstated level of implication. Unlike Richards, or Wimsatt, Empson reserves the term "fusion" for those cases of mutual metaphor in which the third idea is clearly in sight. In a proper fusion, the emergence of the third idea is the result of a collapse within the comparison. Shakespeare's Cleopatra provides an example. Brooding upon her desolation as Caesar's captive she declares:

and it is great

To do that thing that ends all other deeds,
Which shackles accidents, and bolts up change,
Which sleeps, and never palates more the dug,
The beggar's nurse, and Caesar's.

The word "dug" is the point of fusion and resistance. At first, it seems that the "thing," Death, separates us from nature, which, like a nurse, sustains us all, beggar or Caesar. This is to read "dug" in opposition to nurse. But the nurse may be read, further, in opposition to death, so that Death, rather than nature, becomes the universal bosom that comforts us all, beggar or Caesar. Which is the source of our comfort? Nature or Death? The image of the baby at the nurse's breast collapses the two ideas into one: the baby sleeps more soundly than the adult, and so it is more death-like, but the baby is also the source of new life. The baby at the breast, unlike the mind compared to a flowing river, collapses or fuses the terms of the comparison into a new idea that sleep is a death and a birth.

It may not be irrelevant to quip at this point, after Wordsworth, is not our birth but a sleep and a forgetting? Wordsworth, more than Shakespeare or Denham, would seem to be the perfect candidate for a study of metaphorical fusion. Wordsworthian nature, particularly in *The Prelude*, is alternately a nursemaid and a sanctum of death and murder. Yet Wordsworth disappoints. For Empson, Wordsworth is not ambiguous, since his diction is simple; only his syntax is muddled. But neither is he a sophisticated user of equations. Wordsworth's mutual metaphors refuse to yield a third term of meaning, although they seem to approach fusion all the time. Wordsworth, for Empson, belongs within the derogatory sphere of the vague. His comparisons of mind and nature, the sublime and the phenomenal, fail to coalesce in a coherent doctrine or statement. Empson writes that there may be some philosophical truth in what Wordsworth says about the relation of

To answer these questions, it is necessary to look a little more closely at Empson's discriminations of more or less resistant metaphors. These discriminations are rooted in his definition of "pregnancy."¹⁰ All metaphors that involve more than a simple transfer of the properties of one object to another — say, the legs of a table — involve a cognitive act of typification. Empson names the semantics of this act "pregnancy." A word or phrase takes on more than suggestive or connotive values when it becomes pregnant; it creates a typical meaning. Pregnant words have a normative or idealizing function. Metaphors depend upon such typifications. Empson links pregnancy, metaphor and resistance in this way: Metaphors cause a feeling of resistance to some false identity.

The reason why resistance is called for is that you have to pick out the right elements from the vehicle, the parts of it which are treated as "typical and essential" for the case in hand; if you merely accept the false identity you may fall into nonsense. And when the vehicle is typified it becomes pregnant by definition. Whereas in the case of transfer, though a logician might produce possible alternative grounds for the shift, the hearer feels that there is no difficulty and nothing to be typified The rose of metaphor is an ideal rose, which involves a variety of vague suggestions and probably does not involve thorns, but the leaf of transfer is merely leafish.¹¹

Pregnancy and resistance are thus inextricably tied to each other, though, in a curiously romantic fashion, gains in one involve losses in the other. A metaphor is resistant until the pregnant point of comparison is found; at that point, we have a cognitive moment of typification. Of course, this does not make the metaphor any "truer" as a proposition; yet it is, for Empson, the ground of what he calls a "(true) metaphor" — with the word "true" in brackets.

The immediate question is: why does Wordsworth's poetry lack the pregnancy that would make possible the third idea within a good mutual metaphor? Cleopatra's sleeping infant typifies the bosoms of death and birth and so makes possible an equation between the two. The metaphor of birth as death is so pregnant that deciding between tenor and vehicle is irrelevant; the difference between the two, as Empson states, becomes unimportant. Pregnancy makes possible Empson's crucial statement that in mutual metaphor "tenor and vehicle are treated as examples of some wider concept which transcends them." In the case of Cleopatra, this happens to be her wish, in the face of defeat, to be dissolved in the universal spirit. To extrapolate this argument: Wordsworth cannot marry mind to nature because he cannot sufficiently idealize his metaphors. He only pretends to transcend the dualism of subject and object. Of course this is familiar

criticism of Wordsworth, first made, I believe, by Coleridge in the twenty-second chapter of the *Biographia Literaria*. For Coleridge, and for Wimsatt, Wordsworth is always upsetting the direction of his thoughts with accidental descriptions. Coleridge called this a lapse from "noble fiction" into "falsehood".

There seems to me something inadequate in all these formulations, which are, after all, not practical but theoretical criticisms of Wordsworthian poetry. If I may turn the tables around for moment, I would say that Wordsworth was resisting something in the typification process itself. For typification, or pregnancy, is not at all a rare occurrence in literature. In fact a poet would have to work very hard to avoid pregnancy. Empson's chapter on pregnancy demonstrates all sorts of ways in which words become pregnant, ranging from the purely grammatical level of punctuation to satire and propaganda. The important thing about pregnancy is that it typifies so as to make a claim, often with moral force or valuation behind it. But often in a pregnancy the claim may not be supported by some meaning in view. We may typify by generalising, or pausing, or excluding certain connotations of a word, and all this time we may not know what we mean to say. Empson bears down with all the weight of his impressive critical machine (mood, immediate context, predication) on pregnancies in Swift, Wells and propaganda without ever testing the claims of any author. Indeed, in the case of Wells and Hamlet, the pregnancy of the word "man" is admitted to be vague. We have, then, a strange contradiction. Pregnancies are usually vague, yet they are essential to the critical principle of resistance. Somehow, pregnancies take on assertive power in the context of metaphors, where vagueness of meaning is not tolerated. Perhaps this mystery is explained when we consider pregnancy as only the first cognitive step. Empson tells us that the business of a pregnancy is to assert an equation between a class of objects and its ideal representative. The "whole method of the trick is to shift from an idea to an ideal." Resistance, it would then seem, begins when the ideals are brought back down, through vehicles, to commonsensical understanding. Wells, after all, asserts that man may reach to the stars; but Wordsworth wants to bring the heavens down into the light of common day. An ideal concept must find its idealized vehicle of representation. Richard the First may not be typified by any lion, but only by a particularly courageous lion. Lion and king at first resist each other, but then fuse and so establish the specific idea of courage.

When Wordsworth, in the prospectus to *The Excursion*, tries to shift from the "shadowy ground" (a perfectly literal assertion, common in picturesque description) to "breathe in worlds" beyond the

"heaven of heavens," he seems to idealize, prematurely, both realms into unsubstantiality; following this, the two realms may mingle, but perhaps in only a vague, allegorical sort of way. We seem to enter the purely pregnant sphere, the idealizing mind of man, too quickly. Yet the claim of the passage is the refitting of mind and nature in such a way that they will surpass the "most fair ideal Forms/ Which craft of delicate Spirits hath composed/ From earth's materials." It seems to me that Wordsworth, as Abrams says, knows very well what he is doing, unlike most users of pregnant language. He is using pregnancy, extremely abstract vocabulary, to prevent all metaphorical possibilities, save the usefully vague and pregnant notion of a great consummation between the individual mind and the external world. It would be vain to search this prospectus for what Empson calls a mutual metaphor. There are none; only pregnant suggestions of what lies ahead, as yet undefined. Wordsworth's search will not be for adequate idealizations; that is not his claim. Empsonian theory reaches its limits here, I would venture, for it will allow vagueness only in exchange for a promise of an ideal fulfillment. Empson's "third idea" sounds as if it yields precise referents, but in fact it yields only wonderfully complex senses of words. Elder Olson, one of the Chicago neo-Aristotelians, once noted that Empson promises commonsensical conclusions, but that a massive gap remains between his treatment of verbal complexities and the demands of mimetic representation.¹² I would emend Olson by suggesting that Empson sets up obstacles that cannot be evaded in good literary theory. Discussions of reference must proceed by way of an analysis of sense. The connection between the two is always difficult to establish; but it is a tribute to the theoretical rigour of Empson that his insights into pregnancy and resistance should prepare the way for a commonsensical reading of Wordsworth's apparently mysterious prospectus.¹³

NOTES

1. *The Structure of Complex Words*, 3rd ed. (Totowa, N.J.; Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), p. 21.
2. See "The Dead End of Formalist Criticism," in *Blindness and Insight*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 229-45. This essay includes a survey of Richards' work and briefly discusses the American New Critics. The review originally appeared in *Critique*, in the early phase of de Man's career; de Man uses an existential vocabulary of "deep divisions" within "Being itself" to describe Empsonian ambiguity. De Man eventually abandoned questions of Being, but remained interested, throughout his career, in Empson.
3. Empson, pp. 73-74.
4. The terms "tenor" and "vehicle" originate in Richards' *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936; rpt. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), p. 96. Richards' discussion of Denham may be found

- on pages 121-23. John Crowe Ransom's reply is found in *The New Criticism* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1941), pp. 71-73.
5. See "The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery," in *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1954), pp. 103-16, but particularly 108-116.
 6. See Empson, pp. 345-46. The discussion of Cleopatra follows shortly thereafter, on pp. 348-49.
 7. See Empson's discussion of *The Prelude*, pp. 289-305.
 8. See *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1971), pp. 21-32.
 9. Abrams, p. 27.
 10. See the chapter entitled "Pregnancy," in Empson, pp. 321-30.
 11. Empson, pp. 334-35.
 12. See his "William Empson, Contemporary Criticism and Poetic Diction," in *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern*, ed. R. S. Crane (1952; rpt. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 45-82. Olson's own position, by contrast, errs on the side of mimesis, as when he claims, on p. 54, that a poem "has no meaning at all. It is a certain kind of product..." like a bed or a chair.
 13. This paper was written with the support of a Killam Post-Doctoral Fellowship at Dalhousie University.