

WILLIAM EMPSON: GENIUS OF AMBIGUITY

CHARLES I. GLICKSBERG*

WILLIAM EMPSON employs a method that is highly technical and specialized, but it must be admitted that it yields some astonishingly fruitful results. At least, it provides in the field of literary criticism an effective cure for glib generalizations. Instead of offering us brilliant theorizing and unfocused emotional reactions, the stock-in-trade of the impressionist, this enterprising scholar-critic patiently undertakes the task of disentangling the ambiguities of meaning in the skein of poetic context. He uses the word "ambiguity" in a special sense as any "consequence of language, however slight, which adds some nuance to the direct statement of prose". He is thus interested in catching overtones of expression, hidden nuances and implications not revealed by a superficial reading of the text, subtleties and indirections precipitated by means of protracted analysis and the developed technique of free association. Inherent in poetry is the process of diffused association, and the richer, the more varied and original the diffusion, the greater the genius of the poet. And greater, too, by implication, it would seem, is the genius of the critic who can bring this diffused glory to light.

Words may possess, as I. A. Richards has taught us on numerous occasions, a number of distinct meanings—meanings that cluster together in a system of interanimation. The indwelling ambiguity springs from an indecision as to the meaning intended. Frequently the meaning branches off in different directions, and it is a nice question for the reader to determine which road to take. (If he is sufficiently versatile and enlightened and well-versed in the Empsonian method, he will wander off, imaginatively in all directions at one and the same time.) There is a probability, in short, "that one or the other or both of two things has been meant." There is the disconcerting fact that a statement possesses not one but several meanings. *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1931) is devoted to the complex and difficult task of digging up, as if they were so many cunningly buried mines that may go off in your face at any moment, the tangled roots of ambiguity in the soil of poetry. Empson frankly confesses that he is the type of critic who likes nothing better than to dissect and tear apart. When he encounters a bit of unexplained beauty

he becomes irritated and grimly tackles the job of plucking out the heart of the mystery. He will scratch and scratch until the source of irritation is removed, until he discovers the hidden treasure-trove of meaning. If a line of verse affords aesthetic pleasure, there must be a good reason for this delight, and he is determined to find the reason. This scratching analytical habit of mind stands in good stead; he enjoys himself enormously in the critic's laboratory, making stained slides and cross-sections of the living tissue of poetry. He grubs contentedly in the toughest soil and invariably comes up with a wriggling, wonderfully articulate worm.

A rationalist by nature, he does not believe in the idea that sounds are valuable in themselves, that there is such a thing as "pure" poetry. If sounds are freighted with semantic value, it is because they are the seeded bearers of charged meaning. And meaning is his meat and drink. If this seems to make him a disciple of the scientific psychological school in the study of poetry he is not at all put out. If this be tresaon, he will make the most of it. He is vastly amused by the squabbling of earnest critics over the controversy between Beauty and Truth and by their insistent demand that one become an adherent of Beauty or of Truth. Such logomachies, he contends, are symptomatic of the contemporary cult of confusion, the epidemic retreat from reason. While the scientific method cannot without serious difficulties be applied to literature and art, the canons of Reason certainly can, and he is a staunch defender of that ancient and honorable point of view. If he were forced to take sides in this matter, he would find the position of a psychologist professionally engaged in dissecting verses decidedly more enjoyable and profitable than that of aesthetic critic interested solely in problems of Taste. Rationalism thus stands vindicated.

In his hands the technique of analyzing the effect of a poem becomes amazingly complex, but this does not, of course, mean that one is permitted to take refuge in irrationalism, in some vague, satisfying doctrine of intuition. Though no rational explanation is ever wholly adequate in the interpretation of poetry, valid reasons of one kind or another can usually be found and are worth giving. The aim, at all times, is to understand the nature of one's aesthetic reactions instead of being entirely at their mercy. It is sheer nonsense to assume that to extricate the underlying meaning of a poem is to destroy its meaning; that naive sensibility is to be preferred to the vigorous and effec-

tive use of intelligence. If people suspect those who spend their life in analyzing things, however ineffably beautiful, those who peep and botanize over their mother's grave, as suffering from some form of emotional sterility, that is primarily because analysis is so often badly done. But can criticism capture and convey the elusive essence of poetic atmosphere? Empson is convinced it can. Frequently our response to poetry is a sensation, a physiological heightening of sensation, but this response is contingent upon fundamental brain-work in the analysis of poetry. This is too often forgotten, with the result that the aesthetics of poetry is steeped in a witches' cauldron of mystical confusion. The assumption is commonly made by the brotherhood of critics that poetry is too sacred a realm to be profaned by the spirit of rational inquiry. Empson emphatically dissents from this judgement. Without the effort of critical intelligence on the part of the poet, what he produces is as a rule botched and abortive. A method may be abused, but that hardly constitutes an indictment of its essential validity when correctly used.

True, the method of dissociation may not explain everything or be valid at all times, but the critic, if he is to reach any conclusion at all, must assume that it is valid and try his best to make it valid. Empson therefore assumes that "atmosphere", the most intangible and elusive of the poetic properties, is "the consciousness of what is implied by grammar." And he finds this assumption highly profitable in that it transforms the magical and the mysterious into the sensible. If "atmosphere" resists the instrument of analysis it is not therefore something to be commended. For a good poem will not suffer under analysis; careful reading will not reveal a number of self-conflicting and hence absurd assumptions in the poem.

In taking up the second type of ambiguity, for example, Empson discusses ambiguities in which two or more meanings combine to produce a single meaning, and he resorts to elaborate ingenuity to illustrate and reinforce his thesis. He will take a Shakespearian sonnet, and by manipulation, reveal unsuspected facets of meaning. Nor does the analysis of poetry act as a dissolvent of aesthetic pleasure. Yet he himself admits that the intricate analyses he provides are the result, not of appreciative reading alone but of scholastic concentration and intensive labor. Indeed, his method of "free" association crystallizes into a new psuedo-poem that remotely resembles but is still unlike the original. To such a charge he retorts that poetry is essentially subjective that it can take effect only "if the impulses

(and to some extent the experiences) are already there to be called forth; that the process of getting to understand a poet is precisely that of constructing his poem in one's own mind." This is a perfectly sound methodological procedure if the critic can be sure that the poem he constructs in his head is in major respects the same kind of poem the poet wrote, and how can this be determined if not, as in science, by the consensus of opinion of the best trained minds? Not that we can get, or that it is desirable to get, uniformity of agreement, but the problem after all, as Richards recognized in *Practical Criticism*, is to eliminate irrelevancies, the gratuitous importation of alien, subjective associations, the reading *into* a poem of ideas and images, symbols and significances, disguised puns and cryptic allusions, which are simply not there but the product of the reader's agile imagination.

Anyone who deems that Empson's rationalistic method of analysis seizes upon the central meaning but murders the emotional and imaginative values of a poem need but read his subtle and spirited commentaries which reveal a hearty love, a sensitive and sagacious appreciation, of poetry. On occasion, it is true, his disintegration of a poem is too clever and too thoroughgoing to be convincing. Sometimes, indeed, he goes too far, as he transforms a Shakespearian sonnet into a literary conundrum and with the endlessly patient resourcefulness of a Sherlock Holmes tracks down the clues—he can find a dozen where the untrained eye sees none—and pieces them together to form a "theory," a pattern. As a rule however, his interpretation not only grasps the essential spirit of a poem but wonderfully clarifies and enriches its inner meaning. It is easy enough to compose impassioned nonsense in gilded prose that is palmed off as impressionistic criticism; it is enormously difficult to penetrate the heart of a poem and extract its "meaning," without damaging or sacrificing its sensuous, atmospheric, untranslatable beauty. Empson's interpretations of the concentrated, "metaphysical" verses of Donne are admirably done.

Empson analyzes the various types of ambiguity with extraordinary psychological finesse and penetration. He employs a method suggested by I. A. Richards and by Robert Graves (in his *Poetic Reason*), which should prove of deep interest to literary critics. Interesting, too, is his suggestion that some ambiguities—those in which the word reveals two contrasted and conflicting meanings—can be understood by means of the Freudian dream-analysis. Poetry, like the dream, may thus

reveal centres of emotional conflict and the process Freud calls "condensation" at work, but Empson allows only a limited validity to the theory of aesthetics that regards poetry as the resolution of a conflict.

In the concluding chapter of *Seven Types of Ambiguities*, he takes leave of absence from his work of classifying and dissecting ambiguities and settles down to the more congenial task of justifying his practice and stating the critical ideas and beliefs on which it is based. Rightly he feels that the method of analysis he has employed is useful to critics. With regard to the vexed question of belief in poetry, he states that very often it is necessary to believe the opinions of a poet "in a behaviouristic sense; you have to be well enough habituated to them to be able to imagine their consequences; thus you have to be a person who is liable to act as if they were true." But he qualifies this by saying that in our present cultural crisis, people do entertain all the beliefs, no matter how contradictory, that crop up in poetry. As for his "trick" of pulling ambiguities out of a verbal hat, he contends that the method stands justified and that it has distinct value. Analysis calls for an anterior process of sensitive appreciation, after which the reaction can be studied with some degree of detachment. Hence he is really not treating poetry as if it were a part of applied psychology. Poetry, he concedes, cannot be read dispassionately, dissected as if it were a dead object, for then it becomes dead. To *know* presupposes an initial act of sympathy; to recreate the poem in one's mind, one must first be able to enjoy it. In short, an analytical critic must also be an appreciative critic; he must *experience* the aesthetic response before he can hope to explain it. Subsequent analysis merely strengthens and confirms the correctness of the critic's aesthetic response. What this age needs, Empson declares, is "the general assurance which comes of a belief that all sorts of poetry may be conceived as explicable."

Insistence on rational insight and clarity of meaning, but without destroying the magic beauty that poetry communicates—all this, if rightly used and understood, has its important advantages. One is on fairly solid ground. One is free from the vice of impressionism. One can document and defend one's interpretation instead of merely relying on the subjectivity and inescapable relativity of taste. Yet it is the curse of rationalism that it generates the toxic seeds of its own excess. There is a drunkenness of rationalism, just as there is emotional intoxication. Logical dissociation of poetry, when carried to extremes,

becomes a professional game that seems to drive out the play of intuition, all flashes of feeling-response. Empson, for example, is frequently guilty of a pedantic ingenuity that is tortuous and irritating. He labours a line of verse, pulls it apart distils all its nuances of meaning, analyzes it from every possible verbal angle, and thus attributes to the poet a profundity, a devious subtlety, that the latter probably never intended and was most likely incapable of achieving. John Crowe Ransom, in *The New Criticism*, and Cleanth Brooks in *The Well Wrought Urn*, have applied the same fiendishly laboured method to the body of poetry. One is forced to sympathize with Van Wyck Brooks, when, in *Opinions of Oliver Allston*, he takes vigorous exception to the cult of "form" in modern criticism, which by-passes many of the greatest writers because they lack "the elegance" which these formalists so extravagantly admire. For this emphasis on the purely literary aspects of literature, the formal structure and internal coherence of poetry, neglects the perennial longings of man, his needs and his values, his metaphysical quest and his spiritual pilgrimage.

At the same time, we find Empson's critical judgements illuminating, even when we refuse to accept them, because we can follow the steps—the train of association and reasoning—by which he arrives at his conclusions. Some of his explanations of various types of ambiguity as exemplified in poetry and many of his critical comments are fairly trustworthy. His elucidation of a line like "Brightness falls from the air" is apt and striking, a fine example of that free yet controlled association of images and ideas that a true response elicits.

Impressionism in criticism was dealt a mortal blow when I. A. Richards arrived on the literary scene and attempted to establish criticism on a scientific psychological basis. The most gifted of his disciples, Empson has developed on his own account a form of criticism that is disconcerting in its radical innovations. *Seven Types of Ambiguity* sought to show how inextricably complex was the study of ambiguity in poetry. It was the function of the critic to expose the multiple meanings, the copious ambivalences, lurking in the seemingly most simple, unobtrusive lines. Empson thus added a new dimension to the study of poetry. What increased his reputation and strengthened his method was that, not content with doctrinal preachment or abstract theory, he buttressed his criticism with numerous examples of extremely ingenious and often illuminating interpretation.

Though his method seems extraordinarily simple, only the nimble, prolific mind of a William Empson can handle it "successfully". He takes a passage of poetry and by a process of expansion—one can begin almost at any point of the compass and come around full circle—imposes upon it a richly counterpointed pattern of meaning. The interdependence and continuity of language makes it possible to start anywhere, with any kind of mental event or poetic object. A word, a symbol, an image, can form the jumping-off point for an endless odyssey of the mind. In short, poetry is not susceptible of one fixed meaning; it has six, ten, a dozen, as many as the pioneering intelligence and pertinacity of the critic can discover in it. Never mind what the poet presumably intended to mean, for that problem cannot be solved. Even if the spirit of the poet could be resurrected and induced to reveal at great length exactly what he had originally designed to express, this would not be the end of the matter. For the unconscious cooperates actively in the art of expression and the poet may have unwittingly given birth to shades of meaning of which he had no express awareness at the time.

It is not surprising that Empson, carried away by his own fertile powers, furnishes exegeses that often seem incredible in their combination of scholarship, psychoanalytic insights, free associations, and imaginative reconstructions. He makes it seem as if poetic genius, working by intuition, composes passages replete with Janus-faced ambiguities and rich in dramatic irony and thus creates a semantic puzzle, a mystery, that a rationalistic critic of the 20th century would solve and give us cause to marvel. Yet these complex ambiguities were probably no part of the author's intention or design; their discovered significance is largely a conjuring act on the part of the critic, not intrinsic to the text. But if the method be accepted as valid, in part or as a whole, then one must follow its leadership, into no matter what wasteland or northpole of the imagination. It is not a method designed for the timid, the conventional, the academic; they can stick cautiously to the commonplace and the traditional, but they will never experience the ecstasy of new discoveries, of looking upon the Pacific of poetic ambiguity with a wild surmise, or enjoy the intoxication of surrealistically induced fantasies.

Empson, it so happens, is a poet as well as a critic. And his poetry is unintelligible to the uninitiated reader, just as his critical method, like the casement in "The Eve of St. Agnes," is diamonded with panes of quaint device, containing innumerable semantic stains and splendid dyes, as are "the tiger-mouth's

deep-damasked wings." In *Directions in Modern Poetry*, Elizabeth Drew and John L. Sweeney give as a prize specimen of complexity a poem by William Empson, "Note on Local Flora," which, were it not that the poet generously provided the clue, no amount of critical exercitation could possibly hope to unravel.

There is a tree native in Turkestan.
 Or further east towards the Tree of Heaven,
 Whose hard, cold cones, not being wards of time,
 Will leave their mother only for good cause;
 Will ripen only in a forest fire;
 Wait, to be fathered as was Bacchus once,
 Through men's long lives, that image of time's end.
 I knew the Phoenix was a vegetable.
 So Semele desired her deity
 As this in Kew thirsts for the Red Dawn.

The lines follow each other in apparent sequence; there is an apparent coherence of thought, a unifying theme; the words separately give off an aura of meaning, but the total effect is incomprehensible. The degree to which it is incomprehensible may be gauged by having the reader compare what he is able to make of the poem with what the poet declares he intended. Empson gives this interpretation.

So far as I can see, the thing only means more than what it claims to say—that is, applies to other things than this tree in Kew—and by a kind of generalisation: I felt that other people were *like* the tree in Kew.

There may be some obscurity of detail. The tree of course simply *is* in Kew, and my remarks about it come from a white label attached to it by the management. The Tree of Heaven is a translation of a Chinese name for a tree, one that grows normally in China, and I believe there is some kind of myth about its magical powers, so this tree is nearly magical too. Turkestan is cold, China is slow in growth and unwilling to change its way of life and (so far as Confucianism goes) rather chilly in its philosophy. One way or another the countries are supposed to fit into the habits of the tree. The cones of course carry the seeds, and the tree only casts them in a forest fire, if the white label is correct. The cones, therefore, only leave their mother when there is a violent event like the fire at the end of the world mentioned I think in the Apocalypse, but anyway a stock medieval idea. The cones are not wards of time because time does not 'bring them up' help them out; they grow up when something like the end of the world happens, and that is not time but eternity. *That image* refers back to the *forest fire*. Bacchus was born when Jupiter appeared to Semele in his own nature, as she had asked him to do, and burnt her up; the forest fire acts like the father God.

There is no point in quoting more of this fascinating commentary on the poem. It is altogether doubtful if any trained reader, however erudite and semantically resourceful, would have been able without these subjective contextual clues furnished by the author, to arrive at the extraordinary interpretation that Empson gives. Some readers would probably hazard a wild guess as to what was said, though many would be forced to confess that they could derive no intelligible meaning from the poem.

Thus subtlety is the keynote of Empson's work, both in poetry and criticism. He possesses in rank abundance the gift of verbal dissociation. A word in a given context stirs up in him a host of vibrant overtones, each one of which is capable of leading to intellectually rewarding conclusions. In *English Pastoral Poetry* (1938), his second volume of literary criticism, he finds riches where others perceive only the dross of dullness or the feeble glimmer of the common-place. He can make the eighteenth century poets come to life, catch the electric spark of creation behind the formalized rhetoric and the mask of rationalism.

Sometimes, however, he is much too subtle for the reader's comfort. His mind, capricious as a colt frisking in the spring fields, will jump and kick its heels at the slightest provocation. One thing invariably brings up another, and though he tries to control his stream of consciousness and bring order out of the welter of impressions and insights, his method does not always inspire confidence. For example, in explaining the ideological background against which a quatrain (taken from Gray's "Elgy" and containing the line, "Full many a gem of purest ray serene") was composed, he suggests that "blush" has a sexual connotation and refers to the Christian idea that virginity is good in itself. But he is at his best when he takes proletarian critics to task for their vagueness of terminology, their confusion and self-contradictions. The theory of proletarian literature, he soundly argues, is a bogus concept, and the worker that proletarian propaganda exalts is "a mythological cult-figure." Though literature is a social process, it is also "an attempt to reconcile the conflicts of an individual in whom those of society will be mirrored. (The belief that a man's ideas are wholly the product of his economic setting is of course as fatuous as the belief that they are wholly independent of it.)"

English Pastoral Poetry, like *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, is too consistently clever in its exploitation of poetic meaning to be

entirely convincing. The contention that the unconscious is responsible for these deceptive tricks of language and complexities of connotation begs the question. Who shall fathom the ways of the unconscious? About the unconscious, as about taste, there can be no argument. Indeed, one begins to suspect after a while that Empson is himself chiefly responsible for this legerdemain, that he is the magician who performs all these tricks of dissociation, extracting the last ounce of verbal irony resident in puns and jokes.

Empson is soaked in Freudianism and detects sexual analogies and implications to which the untrained, innocent eye is blind. He is quick to discern hidden, bawdy allusions and Freudian complexes in a literary work. He likes particularly words on which queer changes can be rung, words with double or triple meanings, and authors who delight in exhibiting the multiple ambiguities and ironies of poetic expression. The degree to which the Empsonian doctrine of multiple interpretation has spread, and is spreading particularly in America, brings up the important question of critical method. Though the method is supported by a plausible scaffolding of arguments, Empson, as we have pointed out, permits himself a latitude of analysis that is hardly within the pale of scientific reasoning. Psychoanalyzing a poem, he finds embedded within its stratified layers of meaning secret clues that escape the untutored intelligence. In short, he is better able to fathom the multifaceted complex of meaning of a passage than the poet who composed it. How can Empson decide what was once in the poet's mind? How can he play the role of a literary detective with such canny skill and insight?

It is true, as Empson points out, that poetry, which employs emotive and not symbolic or descriptive language, is concerned with many statements—statements of value—that cannot be verified in the natural world. The propositions that the poet introduces in his work are not definite and their range of application is limitless. Empson assumes, of course, that what a verbal ambiguity represents for an alert reader of the 20th century is exactly what the author himself succeeded in expressing. Empson maintains, however, that the internal dynamics of meaning—the play of irony—exists, and he scours far and wide in search of evidence to support his thesis. Like Sherman's army marching to the sea, he leaves the poetic landscape bare and desolate, denuded of crops, vegetation, and fruit. For Empson the business of critical interpretation is a most complicated affair.

The method he uses is not unrelated to modern tendencies, one psychological, the other poetic, which have strongly influenced the course of contemporary literary criticism. The value of psychoanalysis in relation to criticism still remains to be objectively appraised. The critical as well as creative mind has begun to spy on itself, to observe with fascinated curiosity the mysterious operations of the unconscious, striving to bring the night-life of the mind within the framework of rational explanation. Ideas and images and recurrent symbols can be traced back to genetic sources. Freudian concepts and psychoanalytic techniques help the critic to sharpen his tools and techniques. Psychopathological states, hallucinations, fantasies, the irrationality of dreams—these furnish him with animated pictures of the creative unconscious in action. By virtue of this clairvoyant insight, the critic is able to disclose meanings and motives that were not apparent to the writer himself. His unconscious betrayed him into utterances of this kind. The law of identity is overthrown and the law of polarity established. Meaning in poetry is a dialectical composite of reconciled opposites, a process of discontinuous associations as illogical as the flow of images in a dream.

The second tendency is an outgrowth of the first; the creation of poetry that is, as in the case of Hart Crane and William Empson, irresponsibly introspective, indifferent to the demands of communicative efficacy. In these uninhibited emanations from the unconscious, these products of the free and fortuitous association of ideas, intelligibility is no longer the *sine qua non* of poetic communication. The poet steers his course in joyous freedom, his intuition leading him aright through mazes of mystery more profoundly revealing than anything the conscious intellect alone can disclose.

This is not to deny the baffling complexity of the human mind, especially the creative mind of the poet when caught in the throes of composition. Associations are formed, not additively but according to the law of geometric progression. Unquestionably there are difficult passages that defy strict syntactical analysis, passages that lend themselves to multiple interpretation. But to regard these as a charter of liberty for unchecked speculation is to go beyond the warranted limits of critical analysis and to erase the line between legitimate, empirically supported interpretation and private fantasy-building.

Empson, an agile and extremely resourceful critic, carries this method to an extreme and specializes in psycholanalytic

detective work. The straight becomes crooked and the crooked straight, the simple is transformed into the complex. A chance word in a passage is enough to start him off on a wild goose chase of potential meanings. One allusion leads to another in an ever-widening circle of conjecture. He performs an amazing feat of versatility, but this method overreaches itself in its intellectual cleverness. It is more than far-fetched; it is an exercise in boxing furiously with shadows, in chasing will-o'-the-wisps all over the place. One does not get a glimpse into the mind of the poet but into that of his ultra-modern commentator, who assumes the privilege of a collaborator. He creates a new, more richly freighted poem on top of the old. The poem is torn apart, but it is never seen as an organic whole. The remedy for such emphasis on dissociation, with its tendency to impose a gratuitous gloss on the poet's text and its appeal to "scientific methods" of validation, is to return to common sense, to depend once more on the integrity of the aesthetic response. For those who enjoy this sort of thing, the Empsonian strategy undoubtedly has its value. For those who are interested primarily in poetry and only secondarily in the virtuosity of the critic, Empson's work and that of his followers must be rejected as misleading, sometimes dangerously so.