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Seven Times Seven Types of Ambiguity: William Empson and Twentieth-Century Criticism

A crucial year in modern literary studies was 1928, when William Empson (1906–1984) wrote *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (published in 1930). That was eighty years ago. If Empson was always “brilliant,” and later in life perhaps “brilliant though idiosyncratic,” it has increasingly been borne in upon literary historians, looking back on the last century, that William Empson was the most brilliant English critic of the twentieth century. His reputation was created by that first book, but his later work would bear it out.

As a Cambridge undergraduate, he had taken the first two parts of the Mathematical Tripos, and turned to English Literature. Cambridge was a place of intense interest and intellectual ferment at the time. When Empson came up to Magdalene College from Winchester in 1925, the names in the air were Wittgenstein and Russell, and in the wider literary world, T. S. Eliot (who would come to Cambridge in 1926 to deliver his lectures on *The Metaphysical Poets*); but in the relatively new University subject of English Literature (separated from Classics only in 1913) there was by 1926 an array of talent whose names would become even better known as the decades passed.

The beginning of this fruitful period might be put even earlier: for in 1918 I. A. Richards and C. K. Ogden collaborated on *The Meaning of Meaning*. Frank Kermode (2009), in a recent collection of his reviews, comments on the era thus begun, also referring to Noel Annan’s memoirs, *Our Age: Portrait of a Generation*, where the historian and former Provost of King’s College, Cambridge defines a generation of post-World War II figures, comparing them with their post-World War I counterparts. In the earlier period at Cambridge (and here I speak of English studies), were to be found not only I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, and amongst the keen students, Empson himself, Queenie Roth (to become better known as Q. D. Leavis), Muriel Bradbrook (to become a noted Shakespearean and Mistress of Girton), Kathleen Raine (to become known as a leading Blakean poet – “seer”), Jacob Bronowski (a mathematician who would later become a celebrity through his television series, *The Ascent of*

Man), Hugh Sykes Davies (who would be an English don in Cambridge for the rest of his days), the novelist Malcolm Lowry, whose novel *Under the Volcano* would become a kind of classic, "E. E. Phare," who became better known as Elsie Duncan-Jones, an articulate critic who went to Birmingham to teach, and many others who played a role in the intellectual life of the Union (the debating society) and of the various periodicals edited by students such as *Experiment* and *Granta* (the world in which Empson first, as a mathematician, came to know the literary crowd and then published his earliest essays). In any undergraduate generation, it is students from a variety of different subjects who play a role in the "public life" of the University; think of Jonathan Miller, a medical student, who (in the generation of the late 1950s) became most famous for his role in student cabaret.

Of the Cambridge luminaries of the post World War I period, no doubt the most important for Empson was I. A. Richards, his mentor at Magdalene, whose obituary he later wrote for the *London Review of Books*. Richards's first lectures on *The Principles of Literary Criticism*, to be a major book, were given in 1924, when Empson was still a mathematics student; he heard only some (two, he said) of the lectures of 1929, which became the widely influential book *Practical Criticism*. But Richards also became Empson's Director of Studies at Magdalene College when he changed his subject from mathematics to English, as well as his supervisor (Cambridge parlance for "tutor") for Part I of the Tripos (a second-year examination). Thus he had demonstrations of "practical criticism" at first hand. The shoe may have been on the other foot; for the examples of poor reading by students given in *Practical Criticism* were far outstripped by the brilliant readings of Richards's best student. As Kermode (2009: 22), not given to unconsidered enthusiasm, writes in a book of his recently collected reviews, "And indeed, at this time Cambridge was virtually the world."

In 1930 Empson gained his degree in English, a First-Class Degree with Special Distinction, and was elected to a Bye-Fellowship by his College, Magdalene.

It is striking now to realize to what extent that was a beginning point for all our thinking about English Literature as a university subject, both theoretically and in practice. When I arrived in Cambridge in the mid-sixties, many of those people were significant figures on the scene still, notably Dr Leavis, and those who opposed him. E. M. Forster was at King's. The New Criticism, which had taken root in the United States as the reigning doctrine, was the product of Richards and his interpreters; John Crowe Ransom in his 1941

book *The New Criticism* acknowledged *Seven Types of Ambiguity* as a model, much to Empson's dismay, as he disclaimed any wish to distance himself from the author's intention or from historical circumstances. In an otherwise respectful review of Cleanth Brooks's *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* in 1939, he had already summed up his final judgement: "the things Mr Brooks's theory excludes cannot be excluded in practice" (Empson 1987: 342). The New-Critical duo Wimsatt and Warren, whose ban on biography (in "The Intentional Fallacy") became a shibboleth, were only shaken off as followers of Empson when Empson himself deployed biography so cunningly, and not at all biographically, in *Using Biography* (published in 1984, the year of his death). When later it was suggested he was also a forerunner of continental Deconstructionism, he was equally quick to demur. It was not easy to remain independent of his own impact. In Cambridge when I began to teach, "Practical Criticism" was a compulsory examination paper in the English Tripos; a strong option was Basil Willey's "Moral Sciences" paper, originally influenced by Richards's 1924 lectures (*Principles*).

However, there was one notable absence. William Empson himself was not in Cambridge at that time, and had not been there since 1930. Almost immediately on his election as Bye-Fellow a scandal had erupted: in July his bedder (College servant) discovered contraceptives in his room, and after a hearing he was deprived of his Bye-Fellowship by the College Council and required to leave Cambridge. Richards, who might have been able to prevent this heavy sentence, was away in China at the time.

In the same year, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* was published by the Hogarth Press, where Virginia Woolf and Leonard Woolf took the young man's side, as did many others, against the Magdalene action. His assured academic career removed at a stroke, his reputation was nevertheless made.

Casting about for what to do, he was recommended for a Chair of English at Tokyo University, a three-year appointment; here begins the other career of William Empson, in the Orient. Returning from Japan to live in literary digs in Marchmont Street in London, he eked out a living by reviewing, published his first book of poems, and wrote a second brilliant critical book: *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935). This is perhaps the most attractive of all his books, with grace and acuity tracing the pastoral element from Shakespeare to his revelatory chapter on *Alice in Wonderland*.

After this *annus mirabilis*, he accepted an appointment in China, at the National Peking University; and here I. A. Richards was instrumental in arranging it, for Richards's interest in the promotion of Basic English in the Far

East had taken him there and he wanted Empson's help. Empson arrived in time to experience the invasion of China by the Japanese, and to teach English through thick and thin, in considerable danger. When he returned to England again it was to a country itself about to undergo attack, and he joined the BBC as a Far East expert.

When I arrived in Cambridge, then, Empson was (from 1953 to 1978) Professor of English at Sheffield University, and I had the good fortune to hear one of his later lectures, on Coleridge (which was my own thesis topic), and I will never forget the slightly shambling, mandarin-bearded figure who played acutely to the galleries, fishing dramatically for famous quotations which he had stored on little slips of paper in all his pockets and in his trouser turn-ups and which in any case he knew by heart. Indeed, he was renowned for his phenomenal memory for poetry, teaching in China during the Revolution in makeshift rooms without books, and later, in 1971–72, in Oxford giving one of his Waynflete Lectures on Donne's manuscripts during the blackout of an electricity cut – for which gallant feat he received a standing ovation (Haffenden 2007: 560–61). Empson not only had a phenomenal memory for poetry, he was a brilliant, unpredictable lecturer even when not in dangerous circumstances; as he noted of the Buddha's Fire Sermon, "On one occasion when the Buddha was preaching, the magic of his words became too much for him and he rose forty feet in the air, but he shouted down to the audience begging them to pay no attention; it would be over in a moment, and wasn't of the smallest interest compared to what he was saying. Any lecturer can sympathize with this point of view" (Notes, Empson 2000: 142–43).

Empson's criticism never lost its fine edge, and new modes of ambiguity kept bubbling to the surface. "Seven" types were not sacred – or rather, the number 7 was sacred, but did not limit the possible types of ambiguity and certainly not the number of ambiguities. In 1961 his book *Milton's God* took on a set of formidable critics and scholars whom he felt were endangering literature and literary criticism by their open espousal of a Christian point of view, beginning with Eliot, whom he had much respected, but whose public conversion to the Anglican Church in 1927 just after his Cambridge lectures had, in Empson's view, conjured up a group of avowedly "Christian critics," who he felt were sacrificing both literature and humanity to a sectarian interest. Far from backing down in the face of his well-placed antagonists, he carried the controversy further in his writings on other seventeenth-century poets, John Donne (whose use of the new scientific outlook he was the first to engage with) and George Herbert. Just as he would not concede the ground to the New Critics,

so he would not concede it to the neo-Christians. He maintained a humanist position which now had been extended and enlarged by his experience of Taoist and Buddhist world views in China and Japan.

It was also in the Waynflete series in Oxford (where some of the antagonists to his views, such as Helen Gardner and John Carey, were leading figures) that he gave a lecture entitled "The editorial choice of a text of a poem: examples from Donne and Coleridge," an apparently dry title, in which Empson displayed his ability to combine original insights into the poet's text and mind with the traditional tasks of the editor, which was exemplified also in his edition of the same year (1972) of *Coleridge's Poetry: A Selection*, in particular of "The Ancient Mariner," with its 100-page introduction. Here he carried his battle against the neo-Christian critics onto new ground.

There is still no more acute comment on Coleridge as poet and thinker (in my view) than Empson's analysis of the difference between "The Ancient Mariner" in the text of 1798 (published in *Lyrical Ballads*) and that of 1817 (in *Sibylline Leaves*) with the marginal glosses added, which subtly repositioned the poem in line with Coleridge's return from Unitarianism to Anglicanism. The neo-Christian critics were busily trying to win Coleridge, the youthful radical and Unitarian, for the Anglican interest, by reading his own later, more conservative stance back into the poetry written in his early period. Empson's brilliant reading restores the young Coleridge's poem.

Empson's first essay on this theme was "The Ancient Mariner," a substantial review essay that appeared in the *Critical Quarterly* in 1964 (Empson 1987: 297–319). His introduction to the new selection from Coleridge's poetry is virtually a small book in itself. The book made a considerable stir, and gave rise to some disagreements with Empson's co-editor David Pirie, varied press responses, and Martin Amis's support at the time for the restoration of the original pantheistic version of the poem.¹ Later criticism came from Jack Stillinger in his *Coleridge and Textual Instability: The Multiple Versions of the Major Poems* (1994) from the influential point of view of the new "pluralistic concept" of the text (that is, the view that "the text is paradoxically constituted by all of the authoritative versions one after the other") (Haffenden 2007: 569). This editorial principle is, of course, inapplicable to a case where precisely what is under consideration is the successive historical alterations in the text. J. J. Mays adopted a non-committal position as the editor of the variorum poems in the

¹ Haffenden (2007: 563–574) gives a summary of the controversies over the text of "The Ancient Mariner."

Collected Coleridge. But none does full justice to the brilliance of Empson's readings of "The Ancient Mariner." Empson made the point that Coleridge's antagonism to the slave trade made the guilt manifest in the poem political, which has been elaborated by recent New Historicist critics.² Empson points to Coleridge's "submerged politics" as well as his submerged and excessive feelings of personal guilt. To make its effect the poem had to leave the nature of the guilt unspecified and beyond any immediately visible cause.

Perhaps the most insightful review was by Charles Rosen, the distinguished American pianist and scholar of Romanticism, who grasps Empson's witty but profound point that "'The Ancient Mariner' warns us of the awesome consequences of religious guilt, and it is in this sense a deeply antireligious poem" (Rosen 1973: 12, 28). Haffenden thinks Empson's major contribution is his stress on the neoplatonic daemonography in "The Ancient Mariner," which is not Christian and not "mere" pantheism but animism – the more primitive state of fear and superstition. This, of course, accords with the interest of Coleridge as a schoolboy, famously reported by Charles Lamb, in Thomas Taylor's translation of the Neoplatonist philosophers. In a recent book *Platonic Coleridge*, James Vigus has explicated the uses Coleridge made at different times in his life of these texts.

From the first review in *Argufying*, and more fully in the substantial Introduction to the re-edited text Empson burrows his way into the period, into the nascent Romantic movement and its interest in "unusual states," and into Coleridge's own states of mind, his groundless feelings of dread and guilt throughout his life, to reread this poem as it presented itself in 1797.³ Such a reading would include Coleridge on the biblical criticism of the Unitarians and of the German higher critics as he experienced it in the 1790s and laid the groundwork for his later, informed and imaginative ways of dealing with its querying of the dating and authorship of first the Old Testament, then the New – far from the kind of outright rejection that these dangerous doctrines met with in the Church of England until 1891. Empson on superstition and its psychological states meshes finely with "the mythological school of criticism," which arose in response to the "higher criticism" (Shaffer 1975: chaps. 1–2).

Most important in Empson's view – and still vital for the understanding of the poem in its time and in itself – is the pantheistic argument of the poem.

² See Ebbatson, Kitson and Keane.

³ See also Shaffer (1975) on Coleridge's knowledge of the new "higher criticism" of the Bible at the time of writing "The Ancient Mariner."

Coleridge was deeply affected by the debate over pantheism, which in Germany had seen Spinoza and after him Lessing castigated as a pantheist (and therefore as an offender against Christian views of the overlordship of God); his own bent in the early Romantic years was towards pantheism, or the spirit that dwelt in all nature, “the One Life within us and abroad,” as one of his finest poems puts it. The *Mariner’s* whole experience is within nature, creating the “natural supernatural.” It is this birth of the divine terror within and through nature that is sublime. The poem’s permanent power resides in this. Only later, as Empson saw, did Coleridge, turning back from Unitarianism to the Church of England and struggling to come to terms with Trinitarianism, feel called upon to reinterpret his own poem through the more orthodox doctrines represented by the marginal glosses of the 1817 version, a position still defended by some powerful voices bent on reducing Coleridge’s early radicalism and his later trenchant criticism of the Church and relocating him in an Anglican mainstream that with Wordsworth marched staidly down the Victorian age.⁴ Thus Empson was peeling the later interpretations off the poem to retrieve the original as written in 1797. Empson the editor, like Empson the critic, always read as a poet. It was as a poet reaching for Coleridge’s original vision that he went beyond his merely editorial function.

“It is the intellectuality of the creature that turns a state of need into a state of pleasure” (qtd. in Haffenden 2005: 191). This crux of his aesthetics lay in his rational humanism, and he turned it first against I. A. Richards’s behaviourism, which Richards had taken from the psychologist John Watson, making his Theory of Value merely a behaviourist, unconscious gain: a form of involuntarism. He never turned against Richards personally, but very early on he became aware of his major disagreement, the one that most directly leads to *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, with Richards’s distinction between “meaning” and “emotional responses,” that is, the notion that a given passage had one “meaning,” while other responses were merely “emotional.” Empson later turned the same argument against Christian stances. “Ambiguity” permitted the loosening of this unitary and limiting claim without letting slip the quest for critically justified interpretation.

Empson arrived early at the fundamental strategies of ambiguity. He had already given a talk on ambiguity as early as 20 January 1929 and published in *Experiment* in February 1929 the analysis of Shakespeare’s Sonnet xvi, which

⁴ See, for example, Seamus Perry, “Empson’s Coleridges” in *Some Versions of Empson*, ed. M. Bevis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 104–130.

would go straight into *Seven Types*. Further comments he made on an essay on Valéry and Hopkins at the time show that Freud also entered into his thinking on ambiguity, as the Seventh Type (that is, opposites or full contradiction) explicitly acknowledged.

A major influence which sometimes goes unnoticed was the book co-authored by Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), with its elaborate multiple readings of Shakespeare's sonnet cxxix, "Th'expençe of Spirit in a waste of shame." Empson annoyed Graves and Riding by crediting only Graves as a source; only much later did Empson admit that he had first been struck by a passage in Graves's *On English Poetry* (1922), in which Graves attributed two separate meanings to the phrase "mine eyes dazzle" in the famous line in *The Duchess of Malfi*: "Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young." Graves had argued that "dazzle" does duty for two emotions at once, "sun-dazzled awe at loveliness, tear-dazzled grief for early death."

Graves, in another book, *Impenetrability, or the Proper Habit of English* (1926), cited the brilliant double possibility in Keats's line in "The Eve of St Agnes," where Madeline is "clasped like a missal where swart paynims pray," which may be interpreted as either "fastened with a clasp of holiness" or "held lovingly in the hands," if the Paynims (pagans or heathens) are converted Christians, or as "shut and coldly neglected" if the Paynims are unconverted (qtd. in Haffenden 2005: 1.219). Empson said he had cited the later book by Graves and Riding that offered the analysis of a full poem (the Shakespeare Sonnet), rather than the earlier examples of single lines, but had first got the idea of fruitful ambiguity from the earlier book by Graves alone.

Moreover, Empson in rejecting Richards's notions of the "equilibrium" brought about by poetry (Richards's version of Kant's more systematic account of the aesthetic effect of "harmonizing the faculties"), finally stood closer to Graves's notions of conflict, both mental and societal, which are to be resolved but also represented in poetry: "the poet [. . .] must stand in the middle of the larger society to which he belongs and reconcile in his poetry the conflicting interests of every group" (1925).

In *Seven Types of Ambiguity* he espoused a version of this "conflict theory," if only to reduce the directly Freudian element:

There is a variety of the "conflict" theory of poetry which says that a poet must always be concerned with some difference of opinion or habit between different parts of his community; different social classes, different ways of life, or modes of

thought; that he must be several sorts of men at once, and reconcile his tribe in his own person. (qtd. in Haffenden 2005: 228)

While his view of it was primarily psychological, still the element of political and social differences is made explicit. It is here that his mode of practical reading through the subtleties of ambiguity not only maintained the free-thinking and enlightenment elements strong in Richards, but suggested the possibility of entering a larger arena of conflict. He is still, like Graves, speaking of “his own society;” yet through the subsequent widening of his political and his cultural horizons well beyond Cambridge his grounding in values he had located in his own mode of reading his Renaissance texts did not play him false. It is here that one may ask whether, and even suggest that “close reading” may indeed develop through Empson’s later work into a mode capable of dealing with the ambiguities that beset cross-cultural interpretation, the ambiguities of today.

As so often, Frank Kermode made the most judicious summing up of Empson’s place as a critic. Despite the fact that he had had his own disagreements with Empson, over Donne and Herbert, both their general positions and specific readings, (though he found some of Empson’s views of Donne – that “POEM” was written from the vantage point of the planet Venus – peculiar, and doubted Empson’s stress on Donne’s adherence to the “New Science”). In an essay “William Empson: The Critic as Genius” he wrote, shortly after Empson’s death:

At a time when there are so many models and techniques that can be got up and assiduously applied, there are individual and eccentric gifts which remain the prerequisite of the best criticism; and Empson possessed them in the degree of genius. Second, there are at the moment attempts to enlist him posthumously in the ranks of a theoretical avant-garde; one sees why, but he does not belong there, and would have said so with his customary asperity and emphasis.

(Kermode 1989: 3–4)

Another voice that would come to carry weight was that of Christopher Ricks. Ricks greatly appreciated his insights, and helped establish a friendly circle at Oxford. He attempted to elect Empson to the Professorship of Poetry, which Empson twice withdrew from competing for, on the grounds that Sheffield, which had permitted him to refuse the duty of Dean on grounds of ill-health, would be surprised to hear he was up to the arduous job of Professor of Poetry. Ricks’s befriending of Empson may well have been a stratagem in his own battle to restore Milton’s reputation against Leavis’s attack, but that it was also a genuine and lifelong admiration can be seen in the brilliantly

Empsonian style of Ricks's Milton Lecture at Christ's College, Cambridge in 2009, the 400th anniversary of Milton's birth.

Other interesting critical opinions, apart from the extended battles with Rosamond Tuve over George Herbert and with Helen Gardner over Donne and Milton, were voiced by the waspish John Sparrow, who had been at Winchester with Empson, and would later become Warden of All Souls, Oxford, writing in 1930 of the probable consequences of Richards's *Practical Criticism* that the ignorant opinions of students reported in that book would in time lead to interviewing "crossings-sweepers and barkeepers" on their views of Shakespeare and Milton. This is indeed just what happened in the aftermath of the Constance school of reception studies that places stress on the "reader" as opposed to the author when (nearly half a century later) random passers-by were interviewed in the U.S. as to the meaning of texts (N. N. Holland, *Five Readers Reading* 1975)! Italo Calvino in his novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* brilliantly parodied the variety of extremes into which a "reader-oriented" criticism fell. Empson always remained dedicated – for all his own wit and inventiveness – to the attempt to understand the author's processes, the author's struggle not only to express his own thoughts, but also to imagine his effect on his own audience. As Empson (1981: 28) put it,

At bottom, you are trying to imagine the mind of the author at the moment of composition, but this may be too hard taken alone, so you need to remember that he was intensely concerned at that moment with whether the words he had found "expressed" what he was trying to say, that is, whether they would have the effect he wanted upon the audience he was imagining.

And this committed the critic also to attempting to understand the historical context which the author and his imagined audience inhabited. In short, "ambiguity" was not to be cheaply bought by mere ignorance, nor by the alteration of meaning or response over time. But the author's mind included a place for an audience response – set into the time shared with the author yet unreadable in advance for his own text might change it. Thus there is an ambiguity or unavoidable tension in the writer's own intention. Often Empson's witty sallies are based on unexpected but accurate historical "placing," for example when he attributes T. S. Eliot's reliance on "moral paradox" to the fact that Eliot "was young in the great days of Oscar Wilde" (Empson 1981: 30). And often he is, with great subtlety, disambiguating.

Empson's development of the idea of ambiguity and its uses included a moral dimension. To draw this out fully would take more time and space than

we have here. But it has recently come to light again in a dramatic way through the story of one of his students and self-styled disciples, James Angleton. Angleton, a student at Yale, learnt of the art of reading a text according to the notions of the New Criticism, and he was especially taken with Empson's notion of the ambiguity of any prose statement. He corresponded with Empson (among other poets and critics), edited a journal and wrote poetry, and after graduation he went to work for the OSS in counter-intelligence. He began to apply the methods of the New Criticism to the dark matter of spotting double agents. He was encouraged by his superior Norman Holmes Pearson, who had himself been an instructor at Yale before joining the OSS. Angleton became an "expert" in winking out turncoats and traitors (or "moles") by analyzing their prose statements. He made serious errors, which may perhaps be traced to the way he transformed Empson's flexible notion of "ambiguity" into a kind of lie detector, claiming that "read with sufficient care, all texts, no matter how thoroughly encoded, would yield at least two messages: the overt meaning and the hidden meaning' (qtd. in Hawkes 2009). Angleton's overzealous application of his method, however, led to accusations of treason. Reviewing Angleton's travesty of Empson's theory, Terence Hawkes points out that Empson himself rather than using ambiguity as a clue to separating the "true" from the "false" was willing to entertain the possibility that conflicting statements might both be true. In a striking statement, which undoubtedly points both to his extensive experience of war and politics in China, Japan, and Britain, but also to everyday life in any company, Empson wrote of the need for irony, or a special kind of ambiguity in moral matters:

[P]eople, often, cannot have done both of two things, but they must have done either; whichever they did, they will have still lingering in their minds the way they would have preserved their self-respect if they had acted differently; they are only to be understood by bearing both possibilities in mind. (qtd. in Hawkes 2009)

This is an extraordinarily generous yet characteristically acute insight, and does much to explain people's life experiences, their own self-images, and the capacity for responding to an idea of the better that still resides within the less good. For Empson, it is also a moral insight that the lifelong reading of literary ambiguity may induce and confirm.

William Empson was and remains a great original mind, a singular figure, founder of schools he would have shrugged off, and the finest critic – at root a poet – writing in the English language in the twentieth century. After all the schools and systems have passed away, the unique and unmistakable style of an

individual mind remains, to remind us to continue to comprehend the humane enjoyment we experience in poetry. T. S. Eliot in his last lectures suggested that there was a great succession of poet-critics in English, from Philip Sidney to John Dryden to Samuel Coleridge to Matthew Arnold, and, in the twentieth century, he strongly implied, the mantle fell upon himself – but he could not altogether suppress the name of William Empson, putting him aside only on the grounds, he intimated, that Empson was as a poet not quite up to the mark. However posterity may judge of that, William Empson is in the best company.

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