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AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF VERBAL FORMS.

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This Flickering of Wit: William Empson and The Psychology of Verbal Forms

by

Michael Lillard Johnson

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Thesis Director's signature:

Houston, Texas

May, 1968
TO WILLIAM EMPSION

I thought to write another parody;
   But we are poets of quite different ranks,
      And you would scoff at a poem by me.

Yet I would try to mend disparity
   By saying to you unambiguous thanks
      For letting your lifetime become my degree.

Otherwise and more directly,
To my loving wife, Lee Ann
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INTRODUCTION

"The science of art is finally the science of human psychology...."

Herbert Read in Art Now

I

In 1963 in an article entitled "Empson at Cambridge," Martin Dodsworth observed that "everything Empson has done shows him trying to relate his knowledge to his experience in a wider frame than scholarship could offer on its own."¹ This is a characteristic portrait of Empson as the literary and intellectual world has come to know him, for his is one of the most polymath minds in modern literature and criticism. However, although he has been generally recognized as an important and somewhat revolutionary figure in the founding of modern critical thought, his work as a whole is not fully understood; and, despite a number of essays written about his poetry, he remains largely unread as a poet. It is the contention of this study that this neglect is due to the fact that an extensive consideration of Empson's work, both of the poetry and of the criticism, has not been undertaken. Dodsworth's observation holds the clue to the direction which we should take, for in order to comprehend the significance of Empson's contribution to literature one must define the "wider frame" in terms of which he has been writing during the last forty
years. Although this "wider frame" includes many things, it is defined generally by Empson's concern with what may be called the "psychology of verbal forms."

In their essay "Literature and Psychology" René Wellek and Austin Warren defined the province of the "psychology of literature" as follows: "By 'psychology of literature,' we may mean the psychological study of the writer, as type and as individual, or the study of the creative process, or the study of the psychological types and laws present within works of literature, or, finally, the effects of literature upon its readers (audience psychology)." The "psychology of verbal forms," as an epithet for Empson's work, includes all of these possibilities. In Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930) he is primarily concerned with the word, particularly the poetic word, as a focal point for analyzing not only the author's mind in the process of creation but also the reader's mind as it discerns the semantic interactions of the word, as it re-creates the poem. In Some Versions of Pastoral (1935) he is concerned with the "psychological types" present in literature, particularly in terms of their sociological and historical context. The Structure of Complex Words (1951) is concerned dominantly with "audience psychology," and Milton's God (1961) is a case study (faulty though it may be) in the psychology of John Milton. Such categorizations are not in any sense "pure," but they do allow the discernment of a chronological pattern of development in Empson's critical approach. Studying his critical work as a "psychology of verbal forms" not only allows one
to define his development as a psychological critic but also
directs attention to the fact that he is fundamentally an
analytical critic; that his psychology, except in the work of
the late 1950's and 1960's, is always a function of language,
always a function of mind as revealed through words. Even in
his most biographical criticism this is true to a certain ex-
tent.

Empson's poetry also is a "psychology of verbal forms,"
for it is characterized by the poet's attempt to define the
manifold complexities of human psychology in terms of words.
For Empson words are not simply the raw material of poetic
creation; they are, rather, the externalized forms of human con-
sciousness, and their processes are the processes of the mind
itself. "Ambiguity" is not simply a problem of language; it
is a fundamental mode of human knowledge: Empson's poetry is
complex because his view of the world is complex, because his
attempt to understand his own thinking is complex. The "flicker-
ing of wit" in "Sea Voyage" is the construct of the mind in
attempting to order its perceptions, and for Empson this con-
struct is verbal. Words are both a means of comprehension and
an illusory matrix of light erected to shield the poet from the
darkness of the abyss. Words may comprise an artificial order
for the staying off of chaos, but, as in Wittgenstein's Tractatus
Logico-Philosophicus, they are not a means to an eschatology;
they can yield no final answers because they are derivative of
human psychology and subject to its limitations. In Empson's
view, poetry can be redemptive to the extent that it becomes an
order continuous with the processes of the poet's mind. In the poetry, as in the criticism, he sees the necessity of allowing language to fulfill its richest possibilities for expression. By considering the poetry within the perspective of a "psychology of verbal forms," one may detect not only stylistic changes but also a shift in Empson's view of the rhetorical and psychological role of language in poetry. This shift may then be compared with the development of his critical theory and practice, for the poetry and the criticism are related in various ways and should be studied together. Empson's most important work in either discipline is "verbal" and "psychological" in the root senses of those words, and, as a poet-critic, he must be studied with an awareness that he has known both the critical and the creative realm and profited from their interaction.

Wellek and Warren's categories of the psychology of literature are helpful as a means of suggesting the province of Empson's concerns as a psychologist of language; but they should not be taken as foci for the discussions which follow, for his concerns cannot be easily nor fruitfully examined in terms of such foci; they are inter-categorical and informal. He is equally at home studying the mind of Dodgson's Alice, the psychosociological analogs of the sub-plot in Elizabethan drama or the Restoration reader's understanding of the word dog. Likewise, his poetry is concerned not only with the psychology of language in the most restricted sense but with the psychology of philosophical understanding as a function of verbal constructs in the
largest sense. He is a non-professional in matters of psychology, and informality is characteristic of his work as a psychological poet-critic.

Empson's thought concerning the psychology of language is more indebted to I. A. Richards than to any other single figure, but Freud, Piaget, and such psychosociologists as Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl occasionally color his thinking. Freud is particularly important, although Empson attempts to follow his thought systematically only in the essay on Alice in Wonderland in Some Versions of Pastoral. Seven Types of Ambiguity is a sort of literary student's version of Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious (an English translation was published in 1916), but it is impossible to detect a direct influence of Freud's book on his. Empson's Freudian interpretations are general and exploratory rather than clinically exhaustive. The same statement applies to his borrowings from linguists and other critics: he uses their ideas as stepping stones in the development of his own theses; they never govern his thinking entirely but suggest to him what its direction and purpose should be. Beyond his debt (which he readily acknowledges) to Richards and others, his concerns as a poet-critic are very much his own, and for the most part his psychological approach to a given poem or other literary work is defined by the case in hand rather than by an external theoretical framework. Even in The Structure of Complex Words, where he comes closest to a crippling systematization of his thought concerning language, his insistence on the particular work revealing its own psychology generally triumphs over the
rigors of his system; and even in his most complex poems, the interplay of language is more the function of a defined situation than of an external framework of theoretical assumptions. As a psychologist he is fundamentally a pragmatist.

II

Empson was born in Yorkshire on September 27, 1906. Before entering Magdalene College, Cambridge, in 1925, he attended Winchester, one of the finest public schools in England, where he devoted himself to the study of mathematics. He entered Cambridge on a mathematics scholarship, but, although his interest in mathematics and science continued during his stay there, he was gradually drawn toward literature. At the end of his third year he graduated with a "First" in the Mathematics Tripos, after having made a name for himself in campus literary activities as well. He remained for an additional fourth year, during which time he studied literature under the tutelage of I. A. Richards and wrote the seminal study for *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. After this remarkable academic about-face he completed the year with a "starred First" in the relatively new English Tripos, leaving the university at the end of the Easter (Summer) term, 1929. These four undergraduate years were extremely important in Empson's development as a man of letters, for during this time he not only wrote most of his first critical work but also most of his best poetry, and both should be seen against the background of his scientific and academic interests.
While at Winchester, Empson had become interested in debating. According to Dodsworth, he was a rather poor debater and was too radical to fit in well with the Wykehamist system. Again, in his first year at Cambridge he turned to speech-making, but he was too nervous a speaker and read his speeches inaudibly. His thought was evidently too subtle and radical for his peers as well, so he turned his talents to the writing of drama. His one-act play, *Three Stories*, reflects a growing interest not only in literature but also in psychology, sociology and the large questions of modern science. According to Dodsworth and Empson, the manuscript of the play has been lost, but it was produced in February of 1927 by the A.D.C. Although Empson says of the play that "It wasn't very good anyway...", one gathers that it was a rather impressive work for an undergraduate. Dodsworth, for example, quotes the following review from a contemporary issue of *Granta* magazine, of which Empson became the literary editor in the Autumn of 1927:

... He had achieved an almost complete mastery of his Oedipus complex, and used it for very intelligent purposes. A theme of the rebellion of an idealist young man led from an excellent Shawian comedy to plain, honest melodrama, and was framed within romantic scenes in heroic couplets and contrasted with a scientific disquisition fathered on Dracula. It sounds very complicated, but, if we interpreted it rightly, it amounted to something like this: that the ethical problems of life differ from the scientific problems only if one conceives them romantically, and even then, the apparent romanticism achieved, they become scientific again. The last line of the play, in which the hero, having slain his businesslike ogre, is compelled to proclaim himself a 'managing young man' we thought a triumph.  

Dodsworth reports that the *Cambridge Review* was equally enthu-
siastic. With this kind of encouragement and a growing concern with the contemporary arts, Empson started writing film and book reviews for *Granta* magazine, and he began to move toward the center of the Cambridge literary scene.

It is important to remember that Empson's early writing is very much a result of his being at Cambridge, and it is helpful to paint in some of the background of the milieu. His writing in *Granta*, as well as much of his later work, is, as Alfred Alvarez says, "the product of a particular place—Cambridge—and a particular moment—the late 'twenties—and a particular training—in a sceptical, semi-scientific tough-mindedness. His work has about it the same air of intellectual excitement as marked almost everything of the period." 9 Such a statement throws light on what must have been the central concern of *Three Stories*: a study of the human condition in terms of an aggregate perspective of Freudianism, ethics, sociology and literature. Intellectual life at Cambridge, as in the Western world in general, was undergoing a rapid change and renewal, and Empson assumed the role of the Renaissance man whose interests were varied and profound. A casual reading of his poetry will disclose that he has been very much involved in contemporary scientific and cultural questions ranging from Chinese history to the paradoxes of relativistic physics. It is this amphibious quality of mind which has allowed him to write both poetry and criticism with a unique and encyclopedic synthesis of vision.

The "intellectual excitement" of Cambridge while Empson was
in residence there should be briefly outlined. The scientific community was being agitated by Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity and all of the consequences which it was coming to have for man's vision of the universe, by Albert Michelson's relativistic experiments in measuring the speed of light, by the new science of quantum physics being developed by Max Planck and Arthur Compton and by many other innovations not only in physics and mathematics but also in astronomy, chemistry and the biological sciences. In her review of his Collected Poems (1955) Kathleen Raine discusses the influence this scientific renaissance must have had on Empson:

This need for a new imaginative synthesis of knowledge is one of the recurring human situations in a non-traditional society. Donne's poetry reflects one such moment, Empson's another, at which imagination had had to adjust itself to a new scientific world-picture at once alarming and inspiring. William Empson, himself a mathematician, was writing his poems at the University where Cockroft, Blackett and Kapitza, Hopkins and Haldane, Thomson and Adrian, were engaged in discoveries that had, at the time, just that incandescence of newly minted knowledge that goes to the making of metaphysical poetry. Einstein's theory of Relativity was making its impact upon philosophy and common knowledge through Whitehead and Russell, Jeans and Eddington. Wittgenstein and Dirac were writing their works. Anthropology was a new science. A poet with a sense of where contemporary thought was most living was bound to seek his material among the sciences. William Empson was not alone. Michael Roberts (also a mathematician) was already in this field, and his Faber Book of Modern Verse (1936) reflected this scientific trend. There was no sense, at that time, that a distinction ought to be kept between the arts and the sciences--rather, science was regarded as the raw material of poetic imagery.10

The major work of Jeans and Eddington was not published until
after Empson had left Cambridge, but there must have been a
great deal of excitement concerning what information was
available of their new cosmological theories.

Broadly speaking, knowledge of the research and events
of science came into the general academic community of Cam-
bridge through the works of Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand
Russell, both Fellows of Trinity College. Whitehead's *An
Inquiry concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge* (1919),
The *Concept of Nature* (1920), *Science and the Modern World*
(1926) and later *Process and Reality* (1929) were all being read
while Empson was an undergraduate and involved an attempt to
formulate a metaphysics founded on the principles of relativity
which is echoed in much of Empson's early poetry, as well as
in some of his writing for the *Granta*. Russell's *The ABC of
Atoms* (1923), *Icarus or the Future of Science* (1924) and *The
ABC of Relativity* (1925) outlined in simple but competent lan-
guage the importance of the revolutions occurring in modern
physical science, and he and Whitehead had previously defined
the direction of much of modern mathematics and symbolic logic
in their *Principia Mathematica* (in three volumes, 1910, 1912,
1913). This was followed in 1922 by Ludwig Wittgenstein's
*Tractatus Lógico-Philosophicus*, which was the point of origin
for much of modern analytical philosophy, and Wittgenstein him-
self came to Cambridge in 1929, becoming head of its philosophy
department in 1939. This activity in philosophy and in the
mathematical and physical sciences must have communicated a great
deal of its revolutionary energy to the larger intellectual
climate of the school and been responsible in part for the analytical and experimental attitude which Empson brought into literary thought.

This evolving scientific rationalism, enmeshed in a quietly desperate philosophical relativity, extended also into the realm of psychology, which was rapidly adopting a radically scientific attitude and a complex systematization and terminology. By the time Empson came to Cambridge psychoanalysis was an almost universal intellectual pastime. Many of Freud's major works were available in translations: Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1922); A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis (1920); The Interpretation of Dreams (1913); Psychopathology of Everyday Life (1914) and others. Likewise, much of Jung's work was available (his Collected Papers on Analytical Psychology was published in 1917) as well as the work of many apostles of the Jungian and Freudian schools, including popularizers of psychoanalytic thought, such as W. H. R. Rivers, D. H. Lawrence, Albert Mordell and André Tridon, who fostered misunderstanding as well as public and academic awareness of the significance of psychoanalysis. As Empson's early writing reveals, he was very much attracted to psychoanalysis as an instrument of literary explication, although from the very beginning his psychological approach, while including psychoanalytic concepts, particularly from Freud, was more general than any school of thought in vogue at Cambridge.

Besides the general fervour in science, philosophy and
psychology, there was also the pervasive force of Cambridge's principal literary figures, F. R. Leavis and I. A. Richards, as well as the Oxonian T. S. Eliot. Although Richards influenced Empson's thinking very directly, not only while he was under his tutelage in 1928 and 1929 but in most of his work since that time, Leavis and Eliot figure less directly in his development. There is little evidence that Empson responded very favorably to Leavis' approach to literature, although his later work, particularly Milton's God, has some of the "personal" moral flavor one would expect of a Leavis apostle. Generally speaking, it was Eliot who defined the literary Zeitgeist. Although Empson was drawn most strongly to the psychological and linguistic thought of Richards, one has the impression that Eliot was an influence in Empson's defining his role as a poet-critic in the modern world. He himself has said of Eliot that "indeed I feel, like most other verse writers of my generation, that I do not know for certain how much of my own mind he invented, let alone how much of it is a reaction against him or indeed a consequence of misreading him. He has a very penetrating influence, perhaps not unlike an east wind." According to James Jensen, Eliot was on the Cambridge campus in 1926 giving his (unpublished) Clark lectures on Donne, and Empson did indeed attend these lectures. The direct influence of Eliot is difficult to detect in Empson's work, but he must have been something of a shaping force in his thought about the role of language in poetry; and Eliot doubtlessly spurred his enduring interest in Donne and the
English poets of the Renaissance, thereby partly defining the province of much of his major criticism, as well as contributing to his development as a modern Metaphysical poet. Also, the fact that Empson prefaced his *Collected Poems* (1949) with the Buddha's "Fire Sermon" points to their common concern, as reflected in their poetry, with the psychology of sensuous exhaustion and the limitations of human perception and expression as modes of truth.

In the midst of the excitement and upheaval at Cambridge, Empson's reading, as reflected in the *Granta* reviews, was extremely wide and encompassed most of the important artistic and scientific events of the age. According to Jensen, his first review of a literary work was of Herbert Read's *Reason and Romanticism*. The review appeared in 1926 at the end of his first year at Cambridge. Already, at the age of nineteen, he had achieved a critical poise and dispensed his opinions with learned aplomb:

Mr. Read thinks that poetry ought to be made more complicated, and written about the quantum theory or the Oedipus complex.... There is, he claims, an absolute criterion of merit, it is "the quality of intelligence inherent in the poem." So "Science and poetry have but one ideal, which is the satisfaction of the reason," but the mathematics are still not quite the same as poetry, because "even intellectual poems cannot have value as art until they have been emotionally apprehended." ... *Read's* aesthetic theories, in the main, are true and valuable, especially when Mr. Richards has stated them already. But his ideas are associated rather than analyzed, and his drift is usually wiser than his definitions.  

Empson is already exercising his taste for polemics, and behind the statement concerning Richards is an implicit recog-
nition of him as his mentor. Like Richards he is interested in the interface of science and poetry as modes of communication and knowledge. Read's exhortation concerning the province of poetry might well be taken as a prompting to Empson's own poetic mind, for his early poems have just such concerns as the quantum theory and the Oedipus complex.

The list of books which Empson goes on to review includes Wyndham Lewis' *Time and Western Man*, Ellis' *Sex Relations without Marriage*, Haldane's *Possible Worlds*, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, A B C of Adler's *Psychology*, George Ryland's *Words and Poetry* and many others. Such a list is adequate testimony to the latitude of his involvements, and it was perhaps inevitable that such preoccupations would lead to a deep concern about the role of the writer in the modern world. In a review of Logan Pearsall Smith's *The Prospects of Literature* Empson makes the following statement:

> That in the disorder of this age there is no formula one can lose oneself in expounding, that poetry is not immortal, and the very language has lost its freshness, that the writer must therefore build for himself with slow labor and due regard for fame, a private cosmos, is hardly deniable.... But just now, when there are a lot of novelties, it is not wise to shut most of them out for tidi-ness' sake, because what is of most importance is to find out which is valuable. This period has, in fact, a formula, that the writer's business is to digest fads, and how can he do it without hunting them?15

Underlying this concern for the writer and his relation to the world is Empson's own creative consciousness, and one finds throughout his poetry attempts to "digest fads" and to examine
and evaluate the most immediate and transient contemporary situations in order to discern what is valuable and profound in the writer's experience. Here, too, in an embryonic state, is his interest in the axiology of verbal attitudes, in poetry as a means of making experience significant. This notion is related to his concern with the scientific and romantic ethical analogs in Three Stories, and behind the attitudes expressed in the play and in this review may be found Richard's theories of value and his speculations on the redemptive possibilities of verbal order. Such considerations will eventually lead Empson as a critic to elaborate the psychology and sociology of words in Seven Types of Ambiguity and his later works, and, as a poet, to affirm poetry as a means of evaluating experience.

Behind the tone of this and other reviews one begins to see that Empson is seriously concerned with the way in which the sensitive and intelligent creative intellect executes the balancing act which is the essence of artistic sanity. In a review of The Criterion he defines its "formula" as follows: "the artist must, by falling back on the organizing and centralizing intelligence, grasp in some enduring and inclusive mental order those scientific and political novelties by which he is at present overwhelmed." The call is for an integration and re-direction of the artistic psyche in an attempt to comprehend an order in the morass of modern technology and political activism. It is the responsibility of the artist to explicate and evaluate, in Kenneth Burke's phrase, the
"terms for order"\textsuperscript{17} of the increasingly complex reality which is the modern world. In the same review, Empson also says that "it is a fallacy that men of great abilities can produce what Mr. Eliot calls a 'synthesis' simply by explaining their mental habits; they must do it by producing a work of art."

The work of art is seen by Empson as a kind of mantra through which the artist may, by his creative intelligence, "tune in" to his time and order his understanding of its phenomena. He sees the words of a literary work of art as an extension of the psychology of understanding and synthesis. Like Richards, and unlike Eliot, he is tending to embrace art as a religion, as a means of redemption from the confusion of the age. Jensen, for example, notes that "Eliot was indeed deciding that art alone was insufficient, and after 1927 he and his periodical became more and more absorbed in the neo-Thomist revival of Jacques Maritain. In 1928, noticing \textit{Criterion} for the second time, Empson complains that it is growing 'dull.' Clearly his sympathies are with Richards."\textsuperscript{18} Empson, like Richards, was coming to understand art as the most effective and profound means of ordering and giving value to human experience. Thus, concern with art, and particularly with poetry, comes to be a concern with the recorded \textit{ultima} of experience. As Empson said in his review of \textit{The Criterion}, art is the ultimate means of synthesis; therefore, the province of art is potentially inclusive of all the orders of experience—humanistic, scientific, religious and so forth. As I. A.
Richards said some nine years later in his essay "The Command of Metaphor": "Words are the meeting points at which regions of experience which can never combine in sensation or intuition, come together. They are the occasion and the means of that growth which is the mind's endless endeavor to order itself. That is why we have language. It is no mere signalling system. It is the instrument of all our distinctively human development, of everything in which we go beyond the other animals."\textsuperscript{19} Literature is the writer's expression of the cosmos as it is comprehended and ordered by his use of language. As a poetic credo this idea is part of the implicit ideology of Empson's poetry; as a critical assumption, it is the foundation of his methodology of psychological and verbal analysis.

Another literary figure who was formative of Empson's thought during his undergraduate years was Robert Graves. He and Laura Riding wrote \textit{A Survey of Modernist Poetry} (1927), one of the most outspoken works on modern poetry written during the early part of this century. Their essay in that book entitled "William Shakespeare and E. E. Cummings: A Study in Original Punctuation and Spelling" supplied Empson with the original idea for his \textit{Seven Types of Ambiguity}. He acknowledges his debt to Graves, and Graves' influence will be considered in more detail in our discussion of \textit{Seven Types of Ambiguity}. A more interesting question, one more shadowed with conjecture, is that of Miss Riding's influence on Empson's work. Nowhere in \textit{Granta} does he review any of her work besides
the collaboration with Graves, but A Survey of Modernist Poetry is indelibly stamped with the mark of her mind, and one wonders how strongly Empson was attracted by the ideas in the other essays of the book. Her own ideas concerning the psychology of language are remarkably close to those being formulated by Empson during his years at Cambridge, and her poetry was certainly available for him to have read.

The dominant idea of her own poetics is that poetry is the fullest means of a subjective synthesis. Taking a hint from Graves that she was "the only one who achieved an unshakable synthesis....that is, if the premise of her unique personal authority were granted, and...that historic time had effectively come to an end," Jensen makes the following comments about her "synthesis" and its possible influence on Empson:

...it may suffice to say that it entailed an extreme subjective idealism, non-rational and vatic, which (like Richards in this single respect) placed great weight upon poetry as the means to a viable éclaircissement of the individual's contemporary dilemma; personal synthesis she considered of the first necessity, and it could be attained only by rejecting the external claims of society, mortifying the body, and cultivating an imaginative and resourceful inwardness. The exact extent of Empson's familiarity with Miss Riding's work is open to question. There is no particular reason to suppose, however, that he knew anything of her beyond her co-authorship, with Graves, of A Survey of Modernist Poetry (1927).21

There are, in terms of this delineation, some possible points of tangency between Miss Riding's ideas and those of Empson. There seems to be some evidence to support the claim that she may, more specifically, have influenced some of Empson's poetry,
particularly his "Poem about a Ball in the Nineteenth Century." The way in which she influenced his world-picture and his conception of the role of the poet is problematic, particularly when one comes to consider her "subjective idealism." One would be hard pressed to construe Empson as a subjective idealist, but much of his poetry is characterized by a radical subjectivity; and his interpretations of poetry tend to involve an identification of the author's psychology with his own. As Jensen notes, her influence is open to question, but it is interesting to speculate that she was formative in his early development. 22

However one may attempt to define the source of Empson's thinking about the problem of synthesis, such thinking is at the very foundation of much of his work, not only in the Granta and the early poetry but in Seven Types of Ambiguity and his later critical and poetic effort as well. Synthesis is "this flickering of wit": the attempt to create or to understand the poetic construct as an order of words which is continuous with the complexity of human perception. Furthermore, all syntheses involve ambiguity, because human existence is itself a condition of ambiguity, of equilibrium, of contradictions and resolutions. Two final quotations from the Granta illustrate Empson's thought before he wrote Seven Types of Ambiguity and during the time he was writing his earliest poetry. The first is from a review of the film The Rainmaker, written in 1927, the second from a review written later in 1928:
Well, count up the theologies, the echoes, the levels of interpretation; did the producers do it from muddle-headedness, or from knowing their public, or their anthropology; is it fundamentalist finance, or Euripidean innuendo? Anyway, the thing was half-baked, it gave you half-heartedly whatever you look for; an equilibration of magical attitudes, or a tiresome sentimental film.23

Extremely often, in dealing with the world, one arrives at two ideas or ways of dealing with things which both work and are needed, but which entirely contradict one another. Very often in the past a new idea or way of dealing with things has been found, which includes the two old ones, and when you think back to them as particular cases they "obviously" don't contradict any more. Scientific examples not yet resolved are the static and dynamic atom models, the corpuscular and wave theories of light. I can't at the moment think of any already resolved, one forgets them because they no longer seem contradictory.24

As in much of his poetry, Empson is attracted to scientific analogies as models for more general literary and psychological questions. The "equilibration of magical attitudes" is the typical modus of the work of art, and it involves problems of ambiguity, such as paradox or irony. Scientific knowledge, like all other knowledge, is included in the process of synthesis, in the creative act which substantiates experience through metaphor. Like Richards, Empson is in the last analysis concerned with metaphor as the means to achieving a synthesis of vision whereby the contradictions of perception and cognition are suspended and the fragments of reality are brought together in a verbal unity, whereby the multiple and ambiguous character of human experience can be fully recorded. For Empson the meta-logical resolution of the idea that light is both particles and waves is essentially the
same process as that of his own metaphysical poetry: the intentional use of language as a means of demonstrating an ambiguity which is at the very heart of man's understanding of himself and his world. Likewise, Empson, as a critic, is most strongly attracted to poetry and other literature which is characterized by paradox, contradiction, irony or other modes of ambiguity that are fundamentally psychological.

The above statements comprise a sketch of Empson's interests during his first two years at Cambridge before he began publishing his poetry in The Cambridge Review in the Spring of 1928, as well as an extrapolation from and an explanation of those interests in terms of some of his later work.25 Certainly not all of his work can be said to be defined by his concern with the "psychology of verbal forms," but his most important work is; and it is that with which we shall be involved in the following chapters. His reviews in the Granta reflect a dominant interest in the psychology of literature and thus are an appropriate introduction to a study of his poetry and criticism, which will be treated in chronological order, beginning with his early poems in The Cambridge Review and Experiment written during his last two years as an undergraduate, and ending with his criticism written since Milton's God. This chronological perspective most clearly reveals Empson's development as a psychological poet-critic, and through it one may come to understand more fully his "psychology of verbal forms" and his contribution to modern literature. Furthermore, it is the purpose of this study not only to examine that portion
of Empson's work which is well known but also to clarify much that has been less widely read and understood.
NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

1. Review, Special Number: William Empson, 6 and 7 (June 1963), p. 3.


3. For information concerning Winchester one is referred to John Rodgers' book Old Public Schools of England (London, 1938), pp. 31-34.

4. See Dodsworth, p. 3.

5. Ibid, p. 3. The tripos or "final examination" at Cambridge is administered to a student in his particular course of study at the end of nine terms (or three years) of residence, after the passing of which he receives his B. A. degree. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica (Eleventh Edition, under "Cambridge"), the course of examinations leading to the "ordinary" and "honours" degrees is as follows:

"(1) Previous examinations or Little-go (usually taken in the first term of residence or at least in the first year), including classics, mathematics and a gospel in Greek and Paley's Evidences of Christianity, or an additional Greek or Latin classic and logic. (2) General examination in classics and mathematics, with a portion of English history &c. (3) Special examination in a subject other than classical or mathematical. Candidates for honours are required to pass the previous examination with certain additional subjects; they then have only a 'tripos' examination in one of the following subjects--mathematics, classics, moral sciences, natural sciences, theology, law, history, oriental languages, medieval and modern languages, mechanical sciences, economics."

This information is somewhat out of date but is, to my understanding, a generally valid picture of what would have been Empson's academic situation at Cambridge in the late 1920's. The English Tripos is not mentioned here, and it was really new even while Empson was there. It was founded during the time of World War I and was first administered in 1919. Its foundation involved an extensive controversy concerning the place of the study of English literature as opposed to the English language and the new aesthetic-critical study of literature as opposed to the older textual-historical study. Thus, its founding was something of a landmark in the development of modern criticism, at the very least making it possible for Empson to write a book as iconoclastic as Seven Types of Ambiguity, which could not have been done there 15 years before. Among the founders were Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch and E. M. W. Tillyard, and Tillyard's The Muse Unchained (London, 1958) is an excellent account of the work which made the tripos possible and includes its original syllabus.


13. Ibid., 351.

14. Granta, June 12, 1926, p. 477. This and the following quotes from Granta are taken from Jensen's article cited above.

15. Ibid., November 25, 1927, p. 154.


22. Empson may have known Laura Riding's later book, Contemporaries and Snobs (1928), which is a much clearer statement of her beliefs than is A Survey of Modernist Poetry, but it would not have figured in the ideas which he was expounding in the Granta reviews in 1927. In that book, her devotion to the "poetic absolute" involved the idea that the artist must escape from the Zeitgeist (a more radical extension
of the ideas in the earlier work); that he must create in exile from his time. Although Empson's own poetry written at this time is outside the developing mainstream of experimentation, and although he has never written poetry with the social and political engagement of W. H. Auden and the Oxford poets, he did then believe that it was the artist's duty to "digest fads," rather than to ignore them through exile. Aside from speculation concerning her influence in specific instances, it must be admitted that Empson's own ideas concerning poetic synthesis seem to be largely derivative from Richards' thought, although his less objective and more solipsistic tendencies may well owe something to Laura Riding.


25. Additional biographical information about Empson may be found in *Twentieth Century Authors*, First Supplement, eds. Stanley Kunitz and Vineta Colby (New York, 1955), pp. 307-308, as well as in Dodsworth's article previously cited.
CHAPTER I

THE EARLY POETRY

Et, ceci nous amène naturellement à une conception toute nouvelle et moderne du poète. Ce n'est plus le délirant échevelé, celui qui écrit tout un poème dans une nuit de fièvre, c'est un froid savant, presque un algebriste, au service d'un rêveur affiné. Cent vers tout au plus entreront dans ses plus longues pièces.... Il se gardera de jeter sur le papier tout ce que lui soufflera aux minutes heureuses, la Muse Association-des-Idees. Mais, au contraire, tout ce qu'il aura imaginé, senti, songé, échafaudé, passera au crible, sera pesé, épuré, mis à la forme et condensé le plus possible pour gagner en force ce qu'il sacrifie en longueur....

Paul Valéry in "Sur la Technique Litteraire"

I

Morse Peckham records that Edmund Wilson once remarked that the New Critics were "a lot of foolish young men who had made the discovery that poetry is made up of words." Peckham goes on to say that "Wilson is an old-fashioned critic, and in many ways a superb one, but his notorious weakness is poetry. Actually, the discovery, or perhaps rediscovery, that poetry is made up of words was a momentous occasion." The "rediscovery" of words is the very essence of Empson's psychological-analytical approach to the writing and study of poetry. He was not the first to make it, for it began, for the modern period, sometime in the nineteenth century, perhaps with Mallarmé
and the *Symbolistes*. With it came a regeneration of verbal consciousness. Critically speaking, it was the foundation of the New Criticism; poetically speaking, it gave the twentieth century the poetry of T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden and William Empson, among others. Verbal analysis is as much a part of Empson's poetry as it is of his criticism; in either case, the "word" is taken as the primary unit of meaning. He, like many of his peers, is as fascinated by language as was the poet of the Renaissance, and there is in his poetry a very traditional but refreshing sense of his making words act as both matter and medium of expression, rather than simply as one or the other.

Empson, perhaps more than any other poet of this century, is the artist of verbal dialectics. He uses words to form the argumentative tensions of an extremely intellectual poetry. His original model was Donne: "As a writer of verse myself, I grew up in the height of the vogue for the seventeenth-century poet Donne, and considered that I was imitating him more directly than the others were. We all said we admired him because he was so metaphysical, but I can see now that I really liked him because he argued, whereas the others felt that this side of him needed handling tactfully, because it did not fit the symbolist theory."² In another perspective, however, it is clear that the metaphysical character of the poetry which he imitated involved the use of elaborate metaphor as the means of argumentation. Donne's conceits were the most complex kind of verbal rhetoric known before the advent of associational psychology, and Empson, in his own way, is also as facile with association
as Eliot or Pound. His criticism has an argumentative form similar to that of his poetry, and the two developed from basically the same seminal world-picture which he created as a young man at Cambridge. His poetry, like his criticism, is concerned with the possibility of a necessarily limited but synthetic and analogical-verbal view of human experience, one based on a consideration of all the ramifications of the particular instance. It is the poetry of intellectual and emotional induction, of the psychology of verbal knowledge.

Colin Falck, in an article entitled "This Deep Blankness," has explored some of the linguistic-philosophical background of Empson's poetry. He begins with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations*, claiming that the first involved a limited view of language as being either descriptive of reality or as probing after the "inexpressible" through the medium of the pseudo-statement, while the second saw language only as "activity," a view which ignores the essential character of language as a constantly changing mode of communication. This positivistic theory of language having reached a state of philosophical paralysis, modern poetics, he says, "has in fact been a series of attempts to rationalize and domesticate the Romantic-Symbolist tradition." Much as Empson would probably dislike this as an estimation of his poetic effort, it is true, providing one is willing to recognize the problem of definition involved. If one takes the *déjàglement* of Rimbaud as the Romantic extreme of language, and the positivism of Wittgenstein as the mathematical one, then modern poetry must be taken largely
as an attempt, consciously or unconsciously, to mediate between the two. In Empson's criticism, his acceptance of the multiply referential potential of language obviously involves an acceptance of the philosophical minima of Wittgenstein's position. To this extent, of course, he is a rationalist. However, as Falck notes, language as a kind of descriptive shroud over reality is not a very human idea; that is, it ignores the fact that language is used by human beings and modulated by their own consciousness of the world. From this one can posit the other theoretical pole, language as the activity of the individual, not considered as an objective and universal description of reality. He contends that a Kantian-Hegelian view of language is responsible for the mediation and transformation of these polarities. Poetic language is the concrete-universal which is always undergoing a creative change in the focal point of the human imagination. Thus, both of Wittgenstein's theoretical positions are modified and synthesized in the modern view of language: "...a coherent account of language must see it under both aspects, as a vision of the world and as human behaviour. And then it becomes clear that the only possible philosophical picture is of separate and unique individuals living in a single world and continually developing their language through the use of old words in new concrete situations. Which is to say that the organic principle of all language is metaphor." The Coleridgean theory of the poetic imagination is a lived fact of the modern sensibility.

Falck's statement covers much of the thought which is
implicit in modern critical theory, including that of Empson and the New Critics. The fundamental idea involved is that the poem is a concrete-universal metaphoric construct of an experiential situation. This idea underlies the theoretical assumptions of Empson's critical approach, and it is also the most obvious directive of his poetry. As a scientist of language he is fully aware that language must be used as a logical instrument of expression, but as a poet he recognizes the limitations of logic as an expression of the relation between reality and the human organism. That is to say, he recognizes that language cannot describe the entire range of human experience; that the "logic of metaphor" is ultimately the only means of even approaching such a description. His poetry is written in terms of elaborately metaphorical logic, and such poetry necessarily involves probing the boundaries of language as a vehicle of meaning. This view of language as complex metaphor is the foundation of his theory of poetic ambiguity and points out another analogical relation between the poetry and the criticism.

Empson as a critic assumes some of the pose of the scientist who attempts a thorough examination of the causative factors in the meaning of a poem. It is important that this pose also be seen as part of his role as a poet, for much of his poetry does have the feeling of having been written by one whom Valéry calls "un froid savant," and, besides that, Empson carries many of his scientific interests into the writing of his poetry. The kind of scientific data and theory which forms the matter of many
of his best poems is intended to give a coldly objective parameter of knowledge, to reduce an experience to its lowest common denominator and expand it to a universal truth at the same time. However, this rationalist-Wittgensteinian aspect of his mind is always reacted upon by his own sensibility, so that his poetry involves a self-conscious awareness of the limitations of scientific truth. He is always aware that even scientific hypotheses are "pseudo-statements," models by which one may pretend to comprehend the meaning of the human situation. This is another aspect of the polarities of vision which are dominant in his poetic attitudes. He is the mediator between the large and general and the minute and particular, between the rational and the irrational, between the pretensions of human knowledge and the ultimate ineffability of perception. He is the "subjectivist" who wants to measure objective models of the world against his own experience, and his poetry is for the most part about the meshings and disjunctions of these two bases for making judgments about the meaning of knowledge. His voice is that of the scientist who pretends detachment but who is too honest to contend that he is totally uninvolved with his experiment.

If verbal language is somehow inadequate to the activities of the human spirit, then poetry is necessarily a rather limited medium. If the conditions of human understanding are contradictory, paradoxical and ironic, then poetry must attempt to rise to the occasion of taking those facts into account. If poetry is a verbal fiction which can only approximate the needs of man to understand his existence, then it must be of a form comprehensive
enough to allow as full a picture of reality as possible, as far as the poet is able to see and see through the situation which is his concern. If poetic language is metaphorical, then complex metaphor is the essential requirement of any poetry which would pretend to account for the complexities of human vision. Such a process of thought is an approximation of the assumptions made by Empson as a poet. For him the particular, the concrete and the simple are transformed through the process of poetry into the general, the universal and the ambiguous. These conceptual categories are equated and extended toward one another through the process of metaphor. Poetic knowledge, as Allen Tate has said, is a process of tension. The polar aspects of poetic vision exist simultaneously: everything implies its opposite; every unification is a contradiction; or, as Cleanth Brooks contends, poetry involves the language of paradox and irony.

These ideas are formative in practically all of Empson's poetry, and through them his poetry becomes a form of creative despair. Poetic creation involves what he called in 1931 "the prime intellectual difficulty of our age," the necessity of a contingent frame of mind, embracing the awareness of contradictions, the consciousness "that true beliefs may make it possible to act rightly; that we cannot think without verbal fictions; that they must not be taken for true beliefs, and yet must be taken seriously; that it is essential to analyze beauty; essential to accept it unanalyzed; essential to believe that the universe is deterministic; essential to act as if it was
not. Richards' ideas concerning "false beliefs" and the Wittgensteinian polarities lurk behind such a statement, as well as the debates of the Cambridge ethicists, such as C. L. Stevenson and G. E. Moore. There is some of the flavor of Yeats' "Meru," the "desolation of reality," and it is this aspect of Empson's thought which lends to his poetry a quality of tragedy achieved by few of the modern poets. He does not face his historical time with the political immediacy of Auden and the Oxford poets; rather he detects in the situation of modern man an echo of his past as it was seen by Sophocles or the Eleatic philosophers: man is Faust; his knowledge drives him to desperation and the abyss. Empson as a poet is like Oedipus. He probes at the meanings of his thought until his curiosity leads to a vision of some fundamental horror, until an unmentionable connection is made, and then he writes it down, complete with the analogs which prove its applicability.

Such a summary of Empson's thought is not applicable to all of his poetry, of course, but it is to most of his early work; and it accounts for the mood of a number of the later poems. As a metaphysical poet, he is concerned with the essential correspondences between various levels of human experience, and he builds these correspondences into a structure which generally points toward something like Wittgenstein's "inexpressible," toward some basic truth which language cannot finally evaluate. If Donne's conceits direct the reader to an affirmation of man's relation to God, then Empson's direct him to a contemplation of whatever is metaphysically opposite to that security. The
despairing world-picture implicit in such poetry probably
accounts in part for the small volume of Empson’s poetry, and
his reaction against it led to a change of style in the later
work. However, it is still active there in more subtle ways
and is certainly behind much of the bitterness of Milton’s
God.

The rediscovery of words, of which Peckham wrote, is not
a simple matter to discuss. Doubtlessly the French poetry of
the nineteenth century, Eliot’s rediscovery of the seventeenth
century, the New Criticism, and many other manifestations of
its actuality may be discerned, but in the case of Empson, none
of these can account for the manner in which he writes poetry.
He is not a Symbolist or an Imagist, although his poems are
partly indebted to both traditions; nor is he, strictly speak-
ing, a modern Donne, for he is also indebted to Pope, Milton
and Shakespeare. Also, he is stylistically closer to Marvell
and the late Metaphysicals than to Donne. His conceits are
not as consistent as those of Donne, and his interest in words
leads him to an excessive use of the connotative aspects of
language as well as of abstraction, so that his poems tend to
become verbal cross-word puzzles, a fact for which he has been
rather severely taken to task. His poetic style, like his
approach in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, is to some extent deriva-
tive, but it is finally very much his own. It is a product of
a double sensibility. In his poetry, as in his criticism, he
is concerned with the intensive reaching of language beyond its
extensive and logical norms. He has an objective and scientific
interest in the subjective and Romantic aspects of language. He is a kind of Byronic mathematician.

One of the reasons why Empson's poetry is so distinctively of its own particular style is his conception of the role of poetic creation: The English poet of any merit takes, I think, a much more clinical view of his own products than many modern poets. The first or only reason for writing verse is to clear your own mind and fix your own feelings, and for this purpose it would be stupid to borrow from people, and for this purpose you want to be as concentrated as possible.  The idea of poetic creation as a means "to clear your own mind" is expressed in Heinrich Heine's lines in "Die Schoepfung," where it is a psychosomatic purgation:

Krankheit ist wohl der letzte Grund
Des ganzen Schoepferdrangs gewesen;
Erschaffend konnte ich genesen,
Erschaffend wurde ich gesund.

This is a classical conception of the poet's psychology: creation is the catharsis that cures or (literally) "clarifies" experience. It is the process whereby the poet redeems himself from the confusion that is his despair and becomes whole again. In Empson's conception, the poet must find the terms for clarification within himself: he cannot rely on the expediencies of the past; he cannot, like Eliot, hope to purge himself through assimilating the past; he must "cure" himself on his own terms. According to Empson, he must be clinical and intensive in this process, writing in a form that will allow him to focus the
entire range of his poetic situation, and he must create through a distance: "It is true I think that all Despair Poetry needs a good deal of 'distance' (of the poet from the them); you can only call despair a profound general truth when you are looking beyond all the practical particulars, ...."¹⁰ This statement was made in reference to Housman's More Poems, but it is relevant to Empson's own practice as well. It is an aspect of the clinical pose taken by the artist, similar to Joyce's idea of the artist as off "paring his fingernails," utterly removed from his art. Detachment is more a pose than an aesthetic directive for Empson, however, because his voice is present in everything he writes, and he constantly risks writing a parody of himself, of his own style.¹¹ Elaborate metaphor and extended analogy are part of the attempt to distance the poet from his theme, to refine the personal and particular into the universal and general; but in Empson's poetry this technique is an idiosyncratic habit of mind, so that he is never far removed from his theme.

Indeed, the "general truth" of his poetry is always built from "practical particulars" which have the earmarks of his own private interests, be they scientific or literary. This involves an essential contradiction between the two statements made above. Empson wants to write a kind of despair poetry from which he is removed, but he also wants to write it in terms of a non-derivative formulation of experience. Although, like Eliot, he is frequently given to allusion, Empson's allusions are always transformed by the qualities of his own sensibility; they are all framed
into a central argument which the reader can almost watch as it forms in his mind. In spite of any philosophical problems involved, it is nonetheless true that this contradictory stance is partly responsible for the qualities of psychological tension and balance which characterize his poetry. It is this tensional quality, coupled with what he calls "concentrated" language, which makes much of his poetry so intellectually rich. To learn from his poetry is to learn through the complexities of an elaborate argument posed by a Socrates who only pretends to be detached, and what is learned is not forgotten. His poetry is in a very real sense the inversion of his criticism: in the latter he argues from the whole effect back to its cause in the atomic units of language; in the former from atomic units to the formulation of larger and more complex effects. In either case the psychology of language is the key to his thought, and "ambiguity" and all that it implies is the primary concept of order.

II

"...the point of that ill-named theory of relativity is not that everything became relative but that a new thing (not space but the velocity of light) was found which could be treated as absolute. Before (for instance) the Michelson-Morley experiments it was necessary to fix space, if not really for physics, then habitually for the imagination."

Empson on E. A. Burtt's The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science
Empson's first published poem was entitled "Poem about a Ball in the Nineteenth Century," and it appeared in the Magdalen College Magazine in the June issue of 1927.\textsuperscript{13} It is a kind of verbal Picasso which Ian Hamilton has called "a striking instance of that sterile naughtiness which helps to disable more ambitious poems ..."\textsuperscript{14}:

Feather, feather, if it was a feather, feathers for fair, or to be fair, aroused. Round to be airy, feather, if it was airy, very, aviary, fairy, peacock, and to be well surrounded. Well-aired, amoving, to peacock, cared-for, share dancing inner to be among aware....

Empson is doing here something similar to what Laura Riding saw Gertrude Stein as doing: he is recording "pure, ultimate obviousness."\textsuperscript{15} The writing is certainly not automatic, for it is calculated to evoke the mood of the scene, which is rather fin de siècle, with the art nouveau peacock at the center of consciousness. The poem is an attempt to create through language the total scene as well as its associations occurring within the mind of the speaker. It is an attempt to state the totality of an objective event (a ball with its pride and pomp) in terms of its presence to a reacting sensibility (which enacts a moral reduction in the final line, "Only a feathered peacock on the stair") and is, therefore, an exploration of the limits of language as a referential form. Thus, it looks forward to Empson's elaborations of the permutations and combinations of meanings inhering in the juxtaposition of words in Seven Types of Ambiguity. The extrapolation of "very," "aviary" and "fairy" as phonological variants of "airy" ("atmospheric," "pompous," etc.)
and "fair" or, perhaps, of "feather," is a process of subjective association which, when it occurs, is very much like his construing of verbal meaning in the early criticism. The extrapolation seems arbitrary, and it seems arbitrary in Stein as well, until one realizes that it involves a process of association which is both older than and psychologically beyond the normative processes of language. It is partly an attempt to recover the language of Piaget's child or the primal moods interrelating sound and meaning: a use of language which involves a movement toward physiological foundations or the Ricardian theory of language pushed to a Romantic extreme in an attempt to show the ultimate relation of thing and mind through a maze of verbal reference. This is not simply "sterile naughtiness," for it involves Empson's early formulations about language, and the poem works as well as anything written by Stein.

In 1928 Empson published a series of brilliant poems in The Cambridge Review. Together with the poems he published in Experiment and the Magdalene College Magazine during the same year, they comprise a poetic output which makes 1928 his annus mirabilis as far as poetry is concerned. As Dodsworth suggests, Richards was doubtless partly responsible for these publications, which moved Empson into the center of literary attention at Cambridge.16 Not only did he publish more poems in this year than in any other since, but he also wrote well most consistently in his early style during this time. These poems embody and reflect not only his wide-ranging and eclectic interests but also his growing concern with poetic diction. They are dominated
by a remarkably sustained strength of feeling, and their philosophical and psychological concerns are profound indeed. One finds in this work a kind of tough-mindedness which is rarely associated with a young poet, while at the same time it is full of a kind of sensitivity and openness to experience which is characteristically youthful. Perhaps even more impressive, from a literary viewpoint, is the polished sophistication of form and style as well as the mastery of psychological insights which would allow him to write *Seven Types of Ambiguity* with such authority of mind.

The first of these poems is "To an Old Lady," which many critics regard as Empson's best poem. H. A. Mason has called it "a triumph of tone," and that is a very apt judgment of its basic merit.\(^{17}\) It expresses Empson's love and reverence for his mother through an astronomical conceit involving the motions of two planets:\(^{18}\):

Ripeness is all; her in her cooling planet
Revere; do not presume to think her wasted,
Project her no projectile, plan nor man it;
Goods cool in turn, by the sun long outlasted.

Our earth alone given no name of god
Gives, too, no hold for such a leap to aid her;...

The opening phrase is from *King Lear* (spoken by Edgar to Gloucester, V,ii,11). In the "Notes" to his poems, Empson says that "our earth without a god's name such as the other planets have is compared to some body of people (absurd to say 'the present generation') without fundamental beliefs as a basis for action."\(^{19}\) She is a separate being who has achieved the fruition of a life-
style, and, by an ambiguity, her "ripeness" is also her nearness to death, as well as her age and completion. She has a religious basis for existence which the poet and his world lack, and there is a fundamental distance between them which is suggested by the planetary separation. In the same metaphoric schema, the sun is identified with his father, who overshadows her existence through the duration of energy and strength is this stanza, and through the conditions of the solar system and the earth's rotation in the last stanza where she "shares my sun. He curtails her from sight; / And but in darkness is she visible." She cannot be visible in the daytime of fatherly domination but only at night when she is seen among the inaccessible lights of the others planets and stars which also fill his night, suggesting some primal situation of interpersonal alienation. She is to be revered, but he cannot reach her. She is separate, with a strength of her own kind, with "Wit used to run a house and to play Bridge; / And tragic fervour, to dismiss her maids." "Years her precession do not throw from gear" involves a very Empsonian ambiguity: she, as a planet, wobbles little on a steady axis; she as a revered figure is not changed from the proud "procession" of her existence by the action of time.

The consistency of the astronomical metaphor is maintained with a seeming ease, and the various added analogs of the basic metaphoric situation do not seem to disrupt its development; rather, they contribute to it and augment the mood of the whole. Empson intentionally uses the scientific metaphor as a means of
demonstrating a personal situation which is fundamentally impersonal. Thus, the poem is not as personal as one by Donne, though Empson's conceit is used with the same kind of continuity (unusual for him) which one finds in much of Donne's poetry. In spite of this, however, the poem is full of a creative and argumentative energy which keeps it from seeming a sterile experience or merely being about a kind of alienation of generations. It is clearly a love poem, and the astronomical metaphor is the means for exploring the complexity of that love.

What Empson admires mostly is the decorum or style of her existence, her ability to operate so well within her situation, to be heroically involved in the diurnal and yet transcendent to the triviality of the ménege. As Alvarez has said, this "heroism" is a keynote in much of Empson's poetry. The quality which he admires in his mother becomes identified with his own stance as an intellectual and as a poetic stylist. The "mannerism" of his writing grows from a recognition of the fact that one must choose a modus of comprehension and action which will be the means of a redemption from the confusion of modern existence. For Empson this redemptive stance involves a kind of tough-minded attempt to maintain the balance of one's mind in the face of any and all perceptions; it involves a willingness to discern truth without invoking traditional resolutions; it involves learning "a style from a despair."

The slight tone of irony in Empson's reverence for his mother's style is indicative of his own style, for he cannot really take her values as his own: his style is that of the
skeptic who sees clearly but without total acceptance. This accounts in part for his use of scientific metaphor, because it allows him to maintain a certain distance from his subject, to pretend to have an objective formulation for a human experience in which he is ironically deeply involved. As in Three Stories, he is concerned with a poetic synthesis which will allow an equation of scientific and ethical problems so that they might be understood through one comprehensive process of the intellect. However, he also knows that such an equation is a verbal fiction, and that knowledge is always an underlying irony in his work.

Falck finds a number of problems with "To an Old Lady," particularly with reference to what he calls the "undignified possibilities" inherent in the mechanics of its astronomical metaphor: "'Precession' is meant to suggest the dignity of 'procession', but to some people it could suggest the relative indignity of, say, bicycle wheels; in fact there is too much machinery around altogether."21 Thus, he says, the poem tends toward absurdity. What is in question is as much a matter of taste as of technique. One could make similar accusations about Donne's "Valediction Forbidding Mourning," but that would not invalidate the emotional strength involved in the application of a scientific conceit to a human situation. Empson, of course, is using this kind of technique in order both to focus and to generalize experience, and in this poem he is using it also partly as an instrument of tonal control. The "machinery" is present in a large number of his poems, and, unless one is willing to be
open to its possibilities, it can seem very clumsy indeed; but it is part of Empson's style and can be a very effective vehicle of meaning.

In the next poem, "The Ants" (originally "Sonnet"), his scientific interest involves a radical shift in terms of the perspective through which experience is understood, for the "We" of the poem is the ants themselves. The poem is a kind of parabolic commentary on the human condition and is concerned with the simultaneous equation and differentiation of the human world and that of the ants. It develops in terms of the kind of reductive-inductive vision which one comes to associate with Empson's style: experience is at once reduced to a primal model and elevated to an ironic paradigm which includes all the fundamental ambiguities of human cognition. One can see this same kind of vision operative in Seven Types of Ambiguity, where ultimate understanding of a poetic text is less important than a consideration of possibilities, and cool analysis is more relevant to poetic knowledge than making final conclusions which can never be based on sufficient evidence. Verbal thought can be discussed and developed, but it can never answer entirely to the implications which grow outwards from its constructs. Like the relativistic universe, it is finite but unbounded.

A similar concern with the psychology of metaphor is to be found in "Invitation to Juno," which is surely one of the most enigmatic poems Empson has written:
Lucretius could not credit centaurs;  
Such bicycle he deemed asynchronous.  
"Man superannuates the horse;  
Horse pulses will not gear with ours."

Johnson could see no bicycle would go;  
"You bear yourself, and the machine as well."
Gennets for germans sprang not from Othello,  
And Ixion rides upon a single wheel.

Courage. Weren't strips of heart culture seen  
Of late mating two periodicities?  
Could not Professor Charles Darwin  
Graft annual upon perennial trees?22

The poem is written in terms of a series of analogous situations,  
which, when taken together, comprise a kind of pastiche metaphor describing the relation between the poet and the goddess.  
It is one of his poems which has irritated critics because of its pretensions to a kind of private or clique language; because its interpretation seems dependent on knowledge which is not directly available from the text. Empson's note, however, is helpful: "Dr. Johnson said it, somewhere in Boswell. Iago threatened Brabantio about gennets 29Othello, I,1,147. Ixion rides on one wheel because he failed in an attempt at mixed marriage with Juno which would have produced demigods, two-wheeled because inheriting two life-periods." David Ormerod has written a short but thorough interpretation of this poem, so there is little point in accounting for all the specific interpretative problems at any length, and it is beyond our purpose to do so.23 One can, however, examine the process of language which is occurring in the poem without completely overlapping Ormerod's work. The thing that is most obvious after reading the poem several times is that its meaning becomes clear
without the need of reverting to the sources to which it alludes, although such a reversion is useful in confirming one's analysis of particulars. Lucretius' discreditation of centaurs (De Rerum Natura, V, 11.878–881) involves the idea that two kinds of animals (two kinds of life—"cycles") cannot be combined in one form. This meaning of "bicycle" is then combined in a pun with the "bicycle" ("wings") which Johnson said could not be used by man, thus adding another degree of discreditation to the combination of two different beings. Othello and Desdemona did not give birth to Spanish horses as Iago had taunted Brabantio that they would, so that another analog denies the possibility of union between poet and goddess. Ixion, as a mythological type of the poet, attempted to make love to Hera but was led by Zeus into embracing a phantom resembling Hera instead. Although his punishment was to be chained to a wheel which revolved perpetually (another suggestion of man's being confined within one cycle of existence), he did succeed in producing a centaur as a result of the union. Thus, some hope of "bicyclic" union seems possible, even if strange and mythological, so that the poet summons courage for himself and his goddess. The original pulses of man and horse that were asynchronous and would not gear are next seen translated as "strips of heart culture" which might be transplanted and thus mate "two periodicities," giving a scientific corroboration to the possibility of the union of two cycles. The final reference to Darwin's experiments with grafting annual (mortal) and perennial (immortal) trees gives the ultimate ground of hope for the union of poet and goddess, the basis of a courage for love.
Thus, through a process of metaphoric argument, taking the ambiguities of "bicycle" as the fulcrum, the poem has developed from objective incredibility to a personal faith in the possibility of mortal-immortal love. This level of metaphor may then be interpreted to show that the poem is in fact dealing with the possibility of human love on any basis, and one is reminded of the love poetry of Donne. "Invitation to Juno" doesn't involve a use of metaphor which is like that of Donne, because Empson's metaphor is too eclectic: it doesn't involve the exhaustion of a single comparison but the interaction of several. The poem is very unlike Donne in technique, and yet it has the kind of tone and intention which one associates with Donne, as in "The Flea" (especially in comparison with Empson's original version) or perhaps in "The Sunne Rising."

On the other hand, one can interpret the poem more strictly in terms of the bicycle metaphor, which works not so much through a mechanical analogy as through an exploration of the plurisignative potential of the word "bicycle" itself. It is an early example of a "complex word" used as the basis for a poem, and here, as in Seven Types of Ambiguity and The Structure of Complex Words, one may see that Empson's thought is dominantly verbal; the poem from its inception is grounded in a verbal, rather than an emotional, perception. There is also a sense of irony present which will be increasingly important in his later poetry and in Some Versions of Pastoral: the idea that in every impossibility is an implicit possibility; that negation leads to ironic affirmation. This is the vision which makes a style of despair.
In the next two poems, "Rolling the Lawn" and "Une Brioche pour Cerbère," Empson's concerns (like his style) are more involuted and complex. The first poem is exemplary of several problems which are involved in much of his poetry. The pun on rolling the lawn flat and flattening despair ("Our final hope/ Is flat despair") is a rich metaphorical comparison, but Empson's expansion of the metaphor to include parallel ideas does not work as smoothly as it did in "Invitation to Juno." The movement of the whole is strangled by his attempting to "pack" the implications as tightly as possible, by his forcing of ambiguities from the word roll ("Holy Roller," "I roll ours flatter and flatter," "Roll not the abdominal wall;...," "World, roll yourself," "...bear your roller, soul," and "when God calls the Roll"). The poem is too obviously a work of verbal artifice, grounded in a puzzle involving the inclusion of as many variants as possible, rather than in a perception of some truth. The definition of reference is difficult, and the note is of little help, indicating only that there is a certain arbitrary obscurity about the language. In this poem is the same intellectual difficulty that is in the criticism when Empson insists on pushing an analysis to extremes that are only accidentally supported by the text. The whole is more a static agglutination of meanings than an argument developing through verbal dialectics. Ellipsis is another problem ("...the walls of Troy/ Lead, since a plumb-line ordered, could destroy"), as is imagery. There is no ground upon which to base one's reaction to the poem's situation, and the religious references seem added only because
they contribute to the possibilities of the word roll.

"Une Brioche pour Cerbère" suffers from many of the same problems, although it does not come so close to succeeding in its intention. Even though it involves a clumsy mingling of Miltonic, scientific and mythological references, it almost redeems the whole through a process of universalizing the experience of exits and entrances. Its rhythmic pace is similar to that of "Rolling the Lawn," and it shows a similar ease with rhyme; but its language is too simple to carry the load of meaning which it seems to imply. Its scientific references are not a part of its fabric, as in many of the later poems, but rather super-added. The deliberate copying of Donne's phraseology is very strained and tonally irrelevant, as in "So can the poles look in each other's eyes" and "Pcrter, report not my heart contraband." There is too much fragmentary quotation woven into the lines, and the syntax moves in a jerky fashion which does not seem justified by the mood involved. The whole is doubtless supposed to succeed through a cumulative and ambiguous interaction of contexts, but the final connections are incomplete.

"The World's End" was originally titled "Relativity," and the latter title more fully suggests the poem's theme. It is the first work of Empson's which involves Einsteinian physics as its ultimate frame of reference, in one direction; in the other, it leads to a consideration of the prison which is the human condition. It is fundamentally a poem about knowledge and freedom, and it is his best work since "To an Old Lady":
"Fly with me then to all's and the world's end
And plumb for safety down the gaps of stars;
Let the last gulf or topless cliff befriend,
What tyrant there our variance debars?"

Alas, how hope for freedom, no bars bind;
Space is like earth, rounded, a padded cell;
Plumb the stars' depth, your lead bumps you behind;
Blind Satan's voice rattled the whole of Hell.

On casonioned air what is such metal worth
To pierce to the gulf that lies so smugly curled?
Each tangent plain touches one top of earth,
Each point in one direction ends the world.

Apple of knowledge and forgetful mere
From Tantalus too differential bend.
The shadow clings. The world's end is here.
This place's curvature precludes its end.

The original version is more clearly a love poem ("Fly to the world's end, dear"), but the final version is a much more polished performance. Its rhythm is more regular, as is the meter in some places, although Empson's revision has changed the whole very little in terms of wording. The first stanza still contains the love theme, and it is an exhortation to leave the earth in quest of a traditionally poetic freedom and largeness of experience. It is reminiscent of Wagner and the Romantic quest for an ultimate and eternal ground for human emotion, an escape from this world into the vastness of space which is sufficient to the desires of the human spirit. There will be no "tyrant" there to control one's freedom; there will be no boundaries to the spirit's movement. In the second stanza, the irony is developed: there is nothing from which to escape, nor to which to escape. There is no freedom to be achieved, and the situation of man in the universe is that of a lunatic in an
asylum: there is no standard against which to judge one's position. Man cannot escape "to all's and the world's end," because there is no end to the world, to space. The old models of the universe do not apply; the poet is in an Einsteinian time-continuum, and the universe of Einstein is metaphorically "curved." Thus, if one were to "plumb" the depths of the universe by the projection of a plumb line to the depths of the farthest stars, he would find that the plumb would return to his original position. The universe is finite though unbounded. In the relativistic universe where there are neither spatial nor psychological absolutes, all movement is a function of time, and "Each point in one direction ends the world."

Satan's role in the poem is rather ambiguous. By a transferred epithet, he is blind like Milton, which fact seems to indicate that he represents a prototype of man trying to escape from heaven only to find himself in hell—which is itself another aspect of heaven, another "world's end" which ends where it begins, for it is still the realm of God. Also, of course, his voice at one spatial point can rattle "the whole of hell" because all other points in hell can be relativistically equivalent to the point where he stands. More important, however, is the fact that he signals the sundering of the Miltonic world picture: the Miltonic universe has been replaced by a far more alien and incomprehensible system, one replete with epistemological and ethical ironies. Time itself is the central governance of the universe, not God. Ptolemy, Copernicus and the relative securities of their astronomies have been displaced as no longer accurate
or applicable in the modern world. As in the age of Donne, there is a revolution in scientific knowledge which demands a revolution in poetry; Empson is writing the poetry of a new metaphysics. Likewise he is a metaphysical poet with a revolutionary pattern of metaphors, and the twentieth century is an historical repetition of the seventeenth. A new and more frightening Renaissance of human thought is taking place, and "The World's End" is the kind of poem which must be written if the poet is not to delude himself into believing solely in the comforts of his traditions.

The final stanza is a capitulation of the relativistic situation. Man is like Tantalus: he cannot grasp the "Apple of knowledge," nor can he submerge himself in the Lethe ("forgetful mere") which would allow him to escape from the awareness of his condition. Empson's note is of some help in realizing the full implications of this last stanza: "Differential: they follow his movements exactly, as if calculated like the differential coefficients used in forming this view of the world. Precludes: 'stops from happening' and 'already shuts.' End in space but blurred onto end in time conceived as eventual justice--'what there is of it occurs here.'" The relation between man and his reality is no longer direct and literal or algebraic; it is now governed by the subtleties of the relativistic calculus. He can find neither certainty of knowledge as a basis for action nor the oblivion which would remove the need for comprehension. Like the Eleatics, Empson has discovered a fundamental paradox in the human situation, and it is an extended
and sophisticated retelling of the same old story: man exists in a state of alienation because his fictions ultimately deny him an absolute ontology. The universe extends forever and yet is bounded; there is no end to the world and yet "The world's end is here." This is the existential apotheosis of Einstein: man's pretensions to the ultimate lead him back to himself. "This place's curvature precludes its end": there is no end (teleologically, too) of the world; the end is already achieved—the end of time is already fulfilled and man is only what he is right now. There will be no end, and yet the poem is the annunciation of the end. Man cannot flee his condition, for it is the basis of his teleology and, by implication, of his axiology.

"The World's End" is an important document in Empson's development both as a poet and as a psychological critic. Like "To an Old Lady," it is a fine metrical performance, and its thematic concerns are similar: both poems involve a recognition of the necessity for a personal world-picture, for a style which shall serve as an ontology of the personality and as a ground for sanity in a world of contradictions. The final stanza involves a use of poetic ambiguity as brilliant as any in modern poetry, and it is easy to see the mind behind Seven Types of Ambiguity at work; but more important, perhaps, is the fact that the poem involves the foundation of Empson's philosophy of literature. It has a kind of autobiographical bent which anticipates the extremely personal criticism to be found in Milton's God and is exemplary of his belief in the necessity of a compre-
hension, a synthesis, which is enacted in terms of the self, and this in turn involves what Jensen has called his "subjectivism." A statement like "Our final hope/ Is flat despair" involves a radical world-picture. In terms of such a picture literature, particularly poetry, is in one sense only a verbal fiction through which the writer analyzes his despair or codifies the paradoxes of his knowledge. This explains the genesis of a poem like "The World's End." It also explains Empson's insistence, as a critic, upon sanctioning the complexity of his interpretations of the work of other poets. In the early work this involves no dogmatism but simply the necessity of discerning a richness of meaning which questions the capabilities of language.

Like "The World's End," "Letter II" (originally "Letter") is ostensibly a love poem but actually involves considerations of human emotion and knowledge which transcend the immediacy of the lovers' situation and yet at the same time comment profoundly on its fundamental character. Again, it is a poem about man's Oedipal quest for knowledge and the completion of understanding; it is about the exhaustion of the mystery inhering in human relations or in man's understanding of the world. Like the criticism, the poem is both exploratory and didactic, and Denis Donoghue has claimed that Empson is much more like Pope than Donne in this last respect. It is certainly to be admitted that Empson betrays this inclination; but "Letter II" is stylistically much closer to the Metaphysicals, although the fear which lurks at its center is character-
istically modern. Dodsworth offers an accurate and concise summary of the poem's theme:

...the lover in this poem is like the beetle in "Value is in Activity," exploring further and further the cave of love which in the end will fall in on him. The pleasures offered are pictures on the cave wall; as the light strikes them they crumble: they represent joys so evanescent that there is nothing by which to compare them (there are no standards, as in "Value"). As the love explorer progresses, he is aware that "The new is an emptier darkness than the old," for the number of pictures left to see, like the beetle's food, steadily decreases. Such love is only an attempt to mitigate the futility of a world without value; the lovers search their bounded Darkness for a last acre to devour.

As Empson puts it in his note: "They have a ground in common only so long as there is something to find out about each other." [7]

Like the pastoral figure in Some Versions of Pastoral, the poet-lover's private quest assumes a heavy load of symbolic and universal meaning. This quest is understood as leading to disaster, but there is a kind of fascination about its undertaking, a compulsion which makes it a necessity. There is an undeniable and deep desire to discover the despair underlying the love relationship, but there is also a kind of comfort in this vision of thanatos:

Only walk on; the greater part have gone;
Whom lust, nor cash, nor habit join, are cold;
The sands are shifting as you walk; walk on,
The new is an emptier darkness than the old.

This is a portrait of the human mind as being governed by a psychological determinism, of the Faustian intellect probing to
the edge of the abyss and yet preserving a beauty and truth in the vision of despair which results. The pretended cool, naturalistic reduction of the final stanza does not so much annihilate the humanity of the experience involved as it adds a dimension of tragedy, the feeling, again, that the human spirit is tragically confined; that human relationships can never be infinitely rich but must at some point be exhausterible. Love can be sustained only through fictions; once they are examined little is left but the brutality of matter, the world of the beetles.

"Letter II" is different from "The World's End" or "Rolling the Lawn" in that it is not dependent on verbal tricks, such as punning and interactions of ambiguities. Its conceit is virtually an allegory. There is something of the feeling of the intellect being "at the tips of the senses," as Eliot so suggestively has characterized Metaphysical poetry, but one has the impression that the disparity between tenor and vehicle is rather large; that the metaphor of the cave of love is elaborated beyond the poem's occasion; that the conceit is too excessive and tends toward an irrelevant ingenuity. This is a frequent critical complaint about many of Empson's poems, and it is paralleled by the accusation that his analyses in Seven Types of Ambiguity are far too elaborate for the text at hand. Geoffrey Strickland compares "Letter II" to Marvell's poem "The Gallery" and finds the latter to be the better poem. According to Strickland, the weakness of Empson's poem is that it lacks any real object to which the poet is addressing
himself—it is too abstract—whereas Marvell's poem is remarkably concrete. In the second stanza of "Letter II," he claims, the poem becomes a poem about a rock-gallery rather than about the lover whose face was seen in the first; that is, the vehicle is detached from the tenor, the thing said from the thing meant. He does, however, admit that the final stanza shows Empson's talent as a poet. The problem is that it is too detached from the rest of the poem.

This statement is closely related to many made about the criticism as well as about the other poetry, and Empson should be defended as far as possible against them. In terms of rather objective criteria, such as meter, rhyme and the general mechanics of poetry, Empson is obviously a good poet. The much more subjective criteria of technique, or style and tone, for instance, are difficult to apply. Empson's conceits in "Letter II" or in "Invitation to Juno" are rather strained, if one considers the verbal relations involved, but in both cases they succeeded to a great extent—'their psychology is credible. If one is willing to accept scientific and other extreme forms of metaphorical comparison, then the poems work admirably, given the seemingly unmanageable matter of their origins. The reason for this success, contrary to Strickland's arguments, lies in Empson's control of mood. His conceits have the "feel" or "sense" of being related in some very immediate way to the situation from which they are spun out. In "Invitation to Juno" this "sense" is very intellectual, almost mathematical, but in "Letter II" it is
full of the contortions and ambiguities of a human relationship:

Crossing and doubling, many-fingered, hounded
Those desperate stars, those worms dying in flower
Ashed paper holds, nose-sailing, search their bounded
Darkness for a last acre to devour.

As in Seven Types of Ambiguity, Empson depends on his reader
to make implicit connections which are not easily discerned
and which cannot be discussed simply in terms of the mechanics
of a sequential word-order. Strictly speaking, this final
stanza is a violation of the unity of the original conceit,
but a second look will tell one that the worms in their tunneling
and devouring are another conceit extended from the original.
This second conceit is parallel to the first and enriches
its connotations.

Empson's poetry is full of these multiple conceits, or
patch-work metaphors, and they can be very powerful instruments
of meaning. They elaborate a basic situation to extremes of
particularization and universalization in such a way that every
poem truly becomes a cosmos, a verbal image of the poet's own
understanding of the world or a documentation of his psychology.
In his poetry, as in his criticism, Empson has the ability to
make one feel what it is like to participate in the movement
of a poem; his suggestiveness leads one on to discover the full
implications of the argument at hand. Like Valéry's "froid
savant," he has concentrated the entire implied realm of the
poem within a very few lines. He has carefully calculated the
effect of the whole, and yet the very purity or freedom of the
whole from being limited by the particular causes it to evolve meanings which extend far beyond the text itself.

"Arachne" is a typical Empsonian poem, and more has been written about it than any other. Empson's critics generally agree that it is a very good poem, and, more interestingly, they generally think so for many of the same reasons—a fact which applies to very little of the criticism written about the other poetry. Denis Donoghue claims that it should be read with the same kind of attention which one would grant to Eliot's "Ash Wednesday," Wallace Stevens' "Sunday Morning," Herbert's "Church Monuments" or Jonson's "To Heaven," and many critics have praised the poem for its brilliant use of the terza rima, which is a form extremely well suited to Empson's concentration of language and rigorous progression of argumentative thought. More important than these, however, is the fact that in this poem, more than in any other, Empson's critics have discerned his particular kind of "wit" and the kind of "psychology of the poet" which is the keynote of his style and theme in the best poems. To recognize these two aspects of "Arachne" is necessary not only for reading the poem well but also for understanding an essential relation between the poetry and the criticism.

F. R. Leavis was among the first of Empson's critics to recognize his stature as a poet in the tradition of the Metaphysicals, and Leavis cited "Arachne" as exemplary of his finest work. It is a beautifully clear philosophical work. Its movement from beginning to end is subject to a remarkable
control of tone, and the correspondence of theme and language
is extremely close:

Twixt devil and deep sea, man hacks his caves;
Birth, death; one, many; what is true, and seems;
Earth's vast hot iron, cold space's empty waves:

King spider, walks the velvet roof of streams;
Must bird and fish, must god and beast avoid;
Dance, like nine angels, on pin-point extremes.

His gleaming bubble between void and void,
Tribe-membrane, that by mutual tension stands,
Earth's surface film, is at a breath destroyed.

Bubbles gleam brightest with least depth of lands
But two is least can with full tension strain,
Two molecules; one, and the film disbands.

We two suffice. But oh beware, whose vain
Hydroptic soap my meagre water saves,
Male spiders must not be too early slain.

Empson's note to the poem is not really necessary to its inter-
pretation, but it does illustrate the intellectual and emotional
logic that was the source of the finished product:

The caves of cavemen are thought of as by the sea
to escape the savage creatures inland. "Man lives
between the contradictory absolutes of philosophy,
the one and the many, etc. As king spider man
walks delicately between two elements, avoiding the
enemies which live in both. Man must dance, etc.
Human society is placed in this matter like in-
dividual men, the atoms who make up its bubble."
The spider's legs push down the unbroken surface
of the water like a soft carpet, which brings in the
surface-tension idea. The bubble surface is called
land, the thin fertile surface of the earth, be-
cause the bubble is the globe of the world. The
water saves the soap because the soap alone couldn't
make a bubble. Arachne was a queen spider and
disastrously proud.

The poem is not difficult to understand, providing one is
willing to brush up on the physics of surface-tension and
arachnology. The thematic movement is from a consideration of
man as the philosophical middle term, after the classical fashion, to the physical position of man between the earth's molten core and the vacuum of outer space. Man is like the spider walking on water who is delicately balanced between two media, water and air—which extends the original analogy. He is then also, by extrapolation, on the surface of a bubble maintained by surface tension, which system of tension is an analog of his balanced social interrelations, compared in turn to the fragility of the bubble. By another extension, he and another person are the minimal two molecules required to maintain the tensional situation which keeps the bubble intact. Then, in the final stanza, in a rather shocking effect, the two molecules are himself and his love. Two molecules suffice to hold the bubble, to sustain a basic sanity of being, but they just suffice; there is no abundance of interpersonal stability. By an ambiguity, he as a water molecule needs her as a soap molecule, and she as a soap molecule needs him as a water molecule. Finally, they are both spiders, recalling the original "King spider" of the metaphor, and she as the female must not devour him too early, else she herself will die without bearing her young. There is an ultimate vision of the horror and grotesquerie which necessitates the dependencies of love, and this vision refers implicitly to the original philosophical position of man and to the terror lurking at the very basis of the delicate balance which is human existence. The poem is addressed to Arachne, his love, the other term of a cosmic symbiosis. He himself, etymologically, is
"Arachne," the proud "King spider" who walks his delicate tight-rope of existence, his surface-tensional world. Her vanity and "disastrous pride" are his as well; both are skilled weavers in their mutual dependency against the void. The poem is about the metaphysical condition of their love. The note of finality in thematic logic is parallel to that which characterizes their situation, and the terza rima, as Denis Donoghue has noted, ends with a finality to which that form yields only with great pressure.  

The foregoing analysis is not meant to be a conclusive interpretation of the poem, but it does illustrate some important points concerning Empson's role as a psychological poet-critic. "Arachne," like many of his poems, manifests what Falck has called a "surrealism of the intellect"; that is to say, it gains its effects through an argumentation which proceeds through a pattern of involuted conceits and reflecting meanings which are generated through a radical juxtaposition of analogically related situations. This technique is representative of the kind of "wit" which H. A. Mason and Hugh Kenner discern as one of the central defining qualities of Empson's style as a poet. His wit is related to what may be called his "poise," and both are inherent in the idea of the "style from a despair." They are qualities of mind which have evolved from the concerns of Empson's "world," which Kenner has defined as being composed of "Carrolean nonsense, Eddingtonian quasi-nonsense, logical rigor, witty surprise, social decorum, conversational informality, undergraduate fun and adult
seriousness, \( \text{which} \) are exhibited with the honesty and miniature brightness of a Gothic doll's house."\(^{35}\) Perhaps the keynote of such a statement is the implicit figure of the polymath man of letters. For Empson the psychology of this figure involves a tension between "honesty" and what Horst Meller calls his "elegante Dunkelheit der Aussage."\(^ {36}\) His poetry is an attempt to create an order of experience, and he is at once involved in the construction of that order and, like Valéry's "froid savant," detached from it. His sense of despair necessitates the maintenance of a certain ironic distance, an idea which is partly derivative from the developing skepticism of his intellectual environment. As Meller says, in another suggestive Teutonic phrase, his thought can be partially defined as an "Ironisch sezierender Intellektualismus auf dem Hintergrund eines desillusionierten Engagements."\(^ {37}\) The kind of Wortlabyrinth which is characteristic of his poetry is constructed from a desperation. Anthony Hartley sees Empson as exemplary of the Metaphysical poets in that his poems represent the "creation of a kind of working model of the cosmos out of the chaos of ideas," but he is a modern poet in that he has no given order from which to derive his model and hence "must induce that order."\(^ {38}\) This "induction" of order is an idea which is at the very heart of his work as a poet-critic: it is the style from despair or a kind of existential psychology of words.

This order in "Arachne" is its tensional matrix, its system of balances which reverberate across the various levels of implication, and there is a certain tragic recognition involved
in its delicate structure. Strickland has said of the poem that "The virtuosity is so much within the poem, caught in the acrobatics of the spider and the dancing angels, that it has itself become part of its main created theme."39 "Le style c'est l'homme": the style, the wit of the poem is a function of the poise of the poet, of his world-picture; the poem is a model of the man, of his life. Compare the meaning of "Arachne" with the following statement from the Seven Types of Ambiguity: "The object of life, after all, is not to understand things, but to maintain one's defenses and equili-
brium and live as well as one can; it is not only maiden aunts who are placed like this";40 or compare it with Empson's statement in the note to "Bacchus" that "life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can't be solved by analysis." The poetry, like the criticism, is born of the human necessity to analyze, but in either case Empson refrains from dogmatism because all the evidence can never be in, a final understanding never effected. The poetry, again like the criticism, involves a descriptive analysis which pretends to no final decisions, and Empson affects the pose of the detached sage who hands down a complex observation. However, one must expect no final answers. What one does receive, of course, is, nonetheless, a personal statement, in any case, for both his creations and his interpretations bear the stamp of his style. In the later poetry and criticism this presence of the per-
sonality tends to be destructive; Empson's criticism becomes personally dogmatic and idiosyncratic, and he stops writing poetry
altogether, perhaps because despair cannot always be a sufficient ground for order.

This mood of a desperate intellectual balance can occasionally shift toward a very loose and strained rhetoric, as in "New World Bistres," where despair seems to gain the upper hand over intelligence, and one finds the trite phrasing of a pun on the title ("The darkest is near dawn, we almost butter.") or extremely artificial word-play, such as "That ever rain, manna (the manner born,/ The man born of the manor, and that bourne/ Turn Cardinal Bourne...)." In "Value is in Activity" (originally "Inhabitants"), however, one finds Empson quickly recovering his poise.41 It is reminiscent of "Letter II" and is another horror poem about human knowledge, another ambiguous order created from a vision of despair:

Celestial sphere, an acid green canvas hollow,
His circus that exhibits him, the juggler
Tosses, an apple that four others follow,
Nor heeds, not eating it, the central smuggler.

Nor heeds if the core be brown with maggots' raven,
Dwarf seeds unvelled a last frost has scolded,
Mites that their high narrow echoing cavern
Invites forward, or with close brown pips, green folded.

Some beetles (the tupped females can worm out)
Massed in their halls of knowingly chewed splinter
Eat faster than the treasured fungi sprout
And stave off suffocation until winter.42

Empson's note is very short, confirming rather than expanding one's thought about the poem: "The beetles live underground (inside the globe of the earth) and are only compared to the creatures that may be in the apple; hence to the juggler." The
synthesis of ambiguities is the central mental process, and
man is again the middle term of the synthesis because his
consciousness is the focal point of the whole puzzle. The
"Celestial sphere" is both the earth (like the bubble in
"Arachne") and the apple. The juggler tosses the apples, and
the earth which "exhibits" him may, by the ambiguous place-
ment of "Tosses," be juggling him as well. (The punctuation
and placement of words are very important to the development
of the poem's ambiguities, and they become increasingly so in
a poem like "Bacchus." One should keep in mind, of course,
that such concerns are the foundation of the analytical techni-
que in Seven Types of Ambiguity.) The juggler, then, accord-
ing to Empson's note, may be seen, like the "central smuggler,"
as within a world which is being juggled—but in his case by
the processes of the cosmos. The concentration of multiple
meanings within the first stanza is extremely complex, for
Empson is constructing a paradox of astronomical dimensions
which includes both the macrocosm of man and the microcosm of
the "beetles." As in Leonardo da Vinci's drawing, man is
the universe in small, but the correspondence of proportions
involves an uncomfortable irony rather than a secure symmetry.
Empson's "New Science" holds more terrifying possibilities than
that of Donne.

The "Celestial sphere" is the "circus" itself, the proto-
type of all the other models of worlds within worlds. The
juggler does not realize what may be within the apple ("maggots'
raven" or "close brown pips, green folded"—evil or good, etc.)
because he does not eat it, and he refrains from eating it by his ceaseless juggling. In the same way he does not discover the ultimate truth about his own world, within which he is contained, and so forth. It is in any case his activity which saves him from discovery, from knowledge. Thus, the title was ironic: human activity is not Aristotle's happiness as an activity in accordance with virtue; it is merely juggling which has value only as an oblivion, a postponing of ultimate questions. If the juggler were to eat the apple, then his knowledge might be of either good or evil, of decay or of fertility; since he doesn't eat of it, he will never know. His situation is that of Adam before he ate of the apple from the Tree of Knowledge. Some of the ironic bitterness which Empson exhibits in Milton's God may be seen in an embryonic state here, for Adam was a juggler who tired of his oblivion and took the fatal step toward knowledge. In this poem the question of eating the apple is philosophical; in Milton's God the whole problem is construed as one of God's "blood-curdling" jokes.43

The last stanza, then, following the Edenic analogy, is concerned with the psychology of the post-lapsarian condition. The poem tends to reduce knowledge and ignorance to the same level, each being seen as a different aspect of a more problematic situation than either can remedy. "They are," Dodsworth says, "both forms of decay because life is rendered equally meaningless by either," and

The real question of life is: what gives our actions value? And it is unanswerable. We cannot tell whether the juggler is a maggot in an apple being
juggled in an infinite succession of jugglers and apples; and in any case, were there one or were there many jugglers, we should still have no standard by which acts might be valued. However, the poet does show us one way of characterising the thinker as opposed to the non-thinker; he is like a beetle who eats faster than the fungi upon which his survival depends can grow; he eats up the apples, so that in the end there is nothing left to juggle with, and with the cessation of activity, like the beetle, he dies. 44

The thinker is Adam who eats the apple and brings about his destruction. It is an open question whether it would be better to eat or to juggle; that is the poem's central ambiguity. The oblivion is safer, but it has no humanity or meaning. The knowledge involves a more positive action, but its end is certain "suffocation" once one has pushed the quest to the abyss and the "winter" of despair has begun. The poem really begins at its end: the sexually fulfilled females having been dismissed as foreign to such involutions of metaphysics, the beetle-thinkers (of which the poet is one) get down to the problem of evaluating their understanding of human existence; and the poem at hand is the fruit of one such evaluation. So, one finds again the figure of the poet-thinker as centrally located in the poem's landscape. He includes the figure of the juggler as well, for he always pretends that oblivion is a possible escape from despair, though he knows that it isn't once the apple is eaten. (One wonders if, by another ambiguity, the "halls of knowingly chewed splinter" comprise another "circus," containing, by means of a Popean satiric sweep, the members of academe.)

As is evidenced by the success of "Arachne," Empson's style
has an affinity for the terza rima form as a means of patterning the progressive and gradual unfolding of a metaphorical matrix. In writing "Villanelle" he turned to the similar villanelle form borrowed from the Provencal troubadours. Its style is much simpler than that of the preceding poems, and it reflects a different interest in poetic language. It is an early piece which looks forward to the later poetry in which Empson has turned away from the use of rich and complicated ambiguities toward a more literal and emotional use of language. The fever metaphor is traditional and involves no discourse on the enigmata of human knowledge, although it does involve a sensitive exploration of the psychology of love and memory. However, "Villanelle" is only partly a success. Although it betrays what Falck has called an "outward ungainliness and paralyzed feel," it is a serious and skillful love poem. It shows the signs of Empson's skill with metrics (the caesural stops are very effective in the development of the complainte tone), but, as Donoghue notes, the "quasi-elegiac" tone of "It is the pain, it is the pain, endures" falls away from the chemical imagery, so that the whole has a somewhat fragmentary unity. Fragmentation is, of course, the great danger involved in writing in the villanelle form, which demands a thematic variation of the refrain lines without the variations becoming detached phrases, and the weakness of "Villanelle" is the fact that the imagery is not fully enough related to the refrains. What Dodsworth calls the "poison-fever-love associations" indicate Empson's awareness of the complainte tradition, and
those, as well as a line like "Rich that your grace safely
by heart I knew," show his very conscious imitation of Donne.
For all the clumsiness of its texture, the poem is a remarkably
sensitive piece, and the restrained sentimentality of the final
stanza is very moving:

You are still kind whom the shape immures.
Kind and beyond adieu. We miss our cue.
It is the pain, it is the pain, endures.
Poise of my hands reminded me of yours.

This is less complex language than Empson generally uses in
the early poetry, and the result is that the poem is controlled
by a very clear sincerity of feeling, uncomplicated by the
dereper intellectual concerns which demand the mask of the savant.
(This same strong simplicity of expression is found in "Missing
Dates," a later villanelle which succeeds beautifully.) A
poem like "Villanelle" reminds one that behind even Empson's
most difficult cross-word puzzle of language or behind his most
verbally rigorous piece of analytical criticism, there is an
extremely open sensibility.

"Sea Voyage" is the first of Empson's really problematic
poems. Its thematic concern with evolutionary process and its
complex elaboration of ambiguity look forward to "Bacchus,"
and the two poems share a common pseudo-Miltonic eloquence of
language. Empson says in the preface to his notes that "the
better poems tend to require fewer notes," and "Sea Voyage" is
heavily annotated. It has also been extensively revised, and
Empson seldom revises to any great extent. A comparison of the
two versions of the first stanza, which contains the only
important revisions, will demonstrate the manner in which Emp-
son was attempting to compound the poem's meanings. The
original is as follows:

Re-plyed, extorted, oft transposed, and fleeting
(Tune from plucked cotton) the cat's-cradle pattern
Dances round fingers that would scratch in meeting,
And lasting fosters their disowned kitten.
Drawn taut, the flickered crystal, wit to these,
Dures, diamond, to grave that's filigrees.

The version in Collected Poems appears as:

Re-plyed, extorted, oft transposed, and fleeting,
Tune from plucked cotton, the cat's-cradle pattern
Dances round fingers that would scratch in meeting
And dures and fosters their abandoned kitten.
Drawn taut, this flickering of wit would freeze,
And grave, knot-diamond, its filigrees.

As Donoghue has said of the second stanza of this poem, the
intertwining of verbal possibilities involves a "great, though
pathetic, ingenuity." Consider, for example, Empson's gloss
on this stanza: "The first and third verses are supposed to
describe the sea-cat's claws, and cat's cradles are foam tumbling
and sliding back. Replied: bent back, like a sharp answer.
Dures: hardens the product and lasts long in itself. Abandoned
by the wave its parent, and a wicked little thing anyway. Taut:
the lines of string in the game would make a knot, the water
ice, the salt a crystal." Read in terms of the associative
fluidity of the rest of the poem, the six lines are full of a
wealth of implications, and it is obvious that the revision was
intended to push the multiplication of meanings to as high a
degree as possible.
The "sea-cat" (or "sea puss") is the undertow which causes the break of the wave; it also refers to the cradle itself, both as a string-game and as an analog of the structure of the wave's movement, and may include, through the evolutionary framework, the ocean cat fish or its higher analog, the sea lion—which is a mammalian step toward the land. The first line describes both the motion of the wave as it breaks and folds under on the beach and quickly flows back and the manual process of forming the cat's cradle; and, of course, one can pluck a tune from the strings of the cradle. The ocean itself is the "cradle" of life, and that idea is picked up again in the last stanza, as well as being implicit in the second, where man sails his paths back and forth across the sea, becoming a "Son of Spiders, crucified to lace." The lace or mesh of lines is comprised of the roads of his quest, all of which are finally the one interstellar evolutionary path of the solar system moving toward the constellation "Hercules." The lace, of course, is also the interwoven pattern of the cat's cradle, which is an analog of "thought's inter-reached trapeze," a metaphor which gains force through its relation to the "Son of Spiders"; thus, it is the spider-web of man's mental constructs. The cradle itself is the model for a crystallization of order, but there is a sacrificial character to this order, as one sees in the image of crucifixion. The "sea voyage" is not only the quest in general; it is also the evolutionary struggle of life from the sea which has its highest form in man, who crucifies himself with his own consciousness, his "flickering of wit," which freezes in a
pattern of meaning capitulating the syntheses that are his
knowledge. Though bound toward Hercules, he is "Earth-bound"
and cannot escape his condition. He is thus the "abandoned
kitten" created by the ocean or the child of the abstract order
of the cat's cradle. 49

This is hardly an exhaustion of the connections which
are potentially operative in the poem. Such a partial inter-
pretation may be wrong in certain particulars, but the point
is that there is nothing in the text which discourages such
exploration. Donoghue has attempted no analysis of the poem,
but his observation rings true: there is something of the
"pathetic" in the fact that the poem doesn't gel; the maze of
possible connections remains just that. For all of the rich-
ness of significance which it suggests, the poem fails to com-
plete itself. Again, one is reminded of Seven Types of Ambi-
guity, where Empson frequently lends more weight to suggested
meanings than to those capable of textual justification, e.g.,
the analysis of Herbert's "Sacrifice." As in some of his
analyses, there is too much ambiguity, too many possibilities
of plurisignation, to allow for the synthesis which a richness
of meaning can sometimes affect. A comparison of the two
versions above shows rather clearly that in the later version
he was trying to reenforce certain oscillations of meaning
which were only remotely implicit in the original; for example,
consider the use of the word "dures." The use of "flickered"
and "flickering" also shows that he was uncertain about the
play of meaning involved, and such is the case with "grave" and
the rather heavy but vague punning involved in "knot-diamond." He also added a line to the end of the later version: "We sum in port her [The eringo's] banquet of degrees." There is a suggestion here of the Type V equation (the "nonce-equation") which Empson discusses in The Structure of Complex Words, for an example of which he turns to Pope:

Where Bentley late tempestuous wont to sport
In troubled waters, but now sleeps in port. 50

Basically the same pun is involved, and, as in Pope, it is more a display of wit than an integral part of the whole poem; in Empson's words, it carries "no doctrine." The poem as a whole also carries no doctrine, although it reaches out in many directions in an attempt to demonstrate, much as a poem by Pope would, the relation of man to the rest of creation. The language is far too elliptical, so that though there are a number of possible interpretations, none of them meshes very thoroughly with the others; and the whole is not so much a sketch of the complexities and destiny of human consciousness, as it is a confused psychological construct, an aborted cat's cradle.

"Legal Fiction" is, from one viewpoint, a kind of Popean disquisition on the magnificence and absurdity of man's pretensions; from another, it is an allegory of human consciousness. From either, it is similar to "Arachne" in that man figures as the middle term of creation and similar to "Sea Voyage" in that it is a poem about the fictive constructs through which man attempts to order his perception of reality. Its theme is
the irony and ambivalence of the human condition. Law is
taken as a type of the fictions invented for the purpose of
defining a meaning for human action, of lending a standard
of certainty by which man may feel secure in the universe, but
Empson extends these fictions in order to explore their impli-
cations:

Law makes long spokes of the short stakes of men.
Your well fenced out real estate of mind
No high flat of the nomad citizen
Looks over, or train leaves behind.

Your rights extend under and above your claim
Without bound; you own land in Heaven and Hell;
Your part of earth's surface and mass the same,
Of all cosmos' volume, and all stars as well.

As Saul Touster observes, he has elaborated the poem's structure
from a basic stipulation of law: "The legal fiction (taken
to be a 'rule of law which assumes as true, and will not allow
to be disproved, something which is false but not impossible')
that is the theme of the poem is the maxim *ouius est solum ejus
est usque ad coelum, et ad inferos*—or "Who owns the land, owns
all above it to the sky, and all the depths below it."^{51}
As in Three Stories, his primary concern is to demonstrate the
identity of ethical and scientific problems or, in this poem
particularly, the ambiguous character of all human knowledge.
The legal fiction is related to the relativistic model of the
universe: both imply a reality which is paradoxically finite
but unbounded. According to John Wain, in this poem as in
many others, the scientific imagery has a genuine function in
developing the poem's theme and structure, and Empson, he says,
may be distinguished from Auden, for instance, in that his scientific thought is at the very center of the poem's movement, rather than at the periphery.\textsuperscript{52} Such an equation of fictive models is an aspect of Empson's idea of synthesis, and it is fundamental to his metaphysical style. Psychologically, it means that all of man's fictions are variations of one central act of intelligence: the attempt to define artificially the order of reality, primarily through verbal language.

All attempts at ordering one's perceptions in terms of fictions ultimately end in a vision of paradox or irony which is the ground for creative despair. In "Legal Fiction," as Dodsworth says, "The paradox of finite but unbounded worlds repeats itself in every sphere of human life, and this brings to the individual despair of ever settling on a code of behaviour answerable to all occasions."\textsuperscript{53} Man has his "rights," but he is ultimately a kind of Sartrian "nomad" who cannot define a concrete ontology for his existence nor a universal ethics his action. His scientific world-picture recapitulates the fallacies of his thinking:

Your rights reach down where all owners meet, in Hell's Pointed exclusive conclave, at earth's centre (Your spun farm's root still on that axis dwells); And up, through galaxies, a growing sector.

You are nomad yet; the lighthouse beam you own Flashes, like Lucifer, through the firmament. Earth's axis varies; your dark central cone Wavers, a candle's shadow, at the end.

Both modern law and Newtonian mathematics are brought into
question as models of consciousness. The geometry itself is a fiction internally multiplying the ambiguities of the poem's existential uncertainties. Man's projection of himself into the universe falls through the infinite darkness just as Lucifer did in Paradise Lost. Earth itself is no ground for security, for its axis varies and brings into question any definition of real estate owned below its surface. Man is again "King spider" who lives on the surface of a bubble; his attempts to define a three-dimensional world end in a vision of despair, for it has a fourth dimension which, as in Werner Heisenberg's "Uncertainty Principle," can never be fully taken into account because of the limitations of human perception and cognition.

Empson's next poem, "Letter One" (originally "Letter"), was published in the first number of Experiment magazine in November of 1928, at which time he was under Richards' tutelage and must have begun preliminary work on Seven Types of Ambiguity. According to Dodsworth, his critical reviewing for Granta did not exceed Michaelmas Term of 1928, and after that he devoted more time to contributing poems to Experiment, although during the period from November of 1928 until the last number of Experiment (7) in the Spring of 1931, he also had poems published in the Magdalene College Magazine, The Cambridge Review, The Venture (a rival to Experiment started by Sir Michael Redgrave) and in a pamphlet entitled Songs for Sixpence, edited by J. Bronowski and James Reeves, both on the editorial board of Experiment. Experiment also published some of Empson's early critical work, including sections from Seven Types of
Ambiguity, as well as the poetry of John Davenport, Basil Wright and Richard Eberhart, among others, and Edward M. Wilson's Empsonian translations from Gongora's Soledades, some of which were later published in Cambridge Poetry 1929. During the magazine's short life Empson was its shaping spirit; and the poems which follow are exemplary of his work during that time.

"Letter I" is another love poem with a metaphysical setting, and, like "To an Old Lady," it is concerned with the possibilities and impossibilities of interpersonal communication. Again, individuals are metaphorically equated with stars separated by astronomical distances and existing within the context of a "non-Euclidean predicament." This is another exploration of the similarity of the ethical and scientific analogs of the human condition, and it involves poignant metaphors of human alienation. Man's existence is a deterministic isolation, and his world has a Pascalian terror about it:

You were amused to find you too could fear
"The eternal silence of the infinite spaces,"
That net-work without fish, that mere
Extended idleness, those pointed places
Who, being possibilized to bear faces,
Yours and the light from it, up-buoyed,
Even of the galaxies are void.  

This is the voice of Empson the existentialist, and it betrays an apprehension that there may be no ground even for the communication of this poem itself. The poet can communicate with his love only if there is a common body of assumptions about the nature of language and behaviour, only if they are connected
by a commonality of being and consciousness:

Only, have we space, common-sense in common,
A tribe whose life-blood is our sacrament,
Physics or metaphysics for your showman,
For my physician in this banishment?
Too non-Euclidean predicament.
Where is that darkness that gives light its place?
Or where such darkness as would hide your face?

There is a note of hope in the determination of the will to
love despite the alienation and darkness; but the problem re-
ains, and human relations are just as mysterious as those
between the distant stars.

In a later poem, "Your Teeth are Ivory Towers," in The
Gathering Storm, Empson conceives the juxtaposition of stars
as an archetypal situation of the poet:

He who tries
Talk must always plot and then sustain,
Talk to himself until the star replies,....

Strickland observes that "'Stars' are frequently, in Empson,
individuals trying to communicate across an Einsteinian void
in space and time. Here in "Your Teeth are Ivory Towers"7
and elsewhere he is closely concerned with the difficulty people
find in conveying to each other any but the crudest and most
approximate meanings of what they would like to say. It is
only when words exist in a context of related meanings and
values which are shared by the people who are 'trying talk' that
they get across at all.59 The alienation of modern man is not only
a function of the limitations of language. It is ultimately a
manifestation of the dissolution of human community through the
fragmentation of the tribal mind, or as Empson says in his note to the poem, the stars "are compared to two people without ideas or society in common, hence with no 'physics' between them in what F. M. Cornford said was the primitive sense of the word. Lacking a common life-blood shared from one totem (showmen "human?" because tragic hero) they are connected by no idea whose name is derived from 'physics.' " The existence of such a profound alienation prompts the role of Empson the poet-critic, who sets as his task the re-integration of the psychological community of man through an understanding of the way in which he uses language. Such a concern was Richards' own, and he passed it on to his pupil. His critical work, like Empson's, is concerned with nothing if not with probing the full complexity of human language and using it, as a poet, as rich a vehicle of meaning as possible. Unlike the Elizabethans, modern man has no common canon of knowledge about his language, and to that extent he is ignorant not only of his own mind but of the minds of his fellow men. Empson is concerned with language both as a means of delineating the psychology of modern man and as a means of making it more sane and unified, and his sense of despair frequently points toward a tentative hope.

The last three poems published in 1928, "Part of Mandevil's Travels," "Disillusion with Metaphysics" ("Dissatisfaction with Metaphysics" in the *Collected Poems*) and "Fighting for Duck" are stylistically less good than most of those before; and, while showing an interest in the possibilities of language similar
to that in the earlier poems, they are somewhat less serious in their concerns. Although "Dissatisfaction with Metaphysics," like "Invitation to Juno," is a very concentrated and problematic exploration of the possibilities of metaphorical analogy, "Flighting for Duck" is much less so and points toward the more fluid and emotional style of the later poems, where Empson's psychological interests are more subtle and less intellectually heavy. "Camping Out," the first poem of 1929, is a short piece concerned with the astronomical analogs of human existence and shows a renewed interest in man as a creature who exists, as in "Arachne," in terms of a series of tensions. This idea is developed more fully in the next poem, "Earth has Shrunk in the Wash," which is concerned with the fate of technological man. Empson's extreme use of ellipsis is an attempt to include all the complexities of the case in hand, and it causes the poem to be cryptic and complex; but the sincerity of his involvement succeeds in coming to the surface:

They pass too fast. Ships, and there's time for sighing; Express and motor, Doug can jump between. Only dry earth now asteroid her flying Mates, if they miss her, must flick past unseen;...

In his note Empson explains the nature of the new world which man is creating through his technology: "'Earth has Shrunk in the Wash': thus becoming an asteroid without enough gravitational force to keep its atmosphere. (Civilized refinement cutting one off from other people and scientific discovery making a strange world in which man has dangerous powers.) Douglas
Fairbanks jumped from motor to express in some film, but they were going in the same direction. . . . Under the new conditions man is exposed to the dangerous rays of the sun, . . . not made to stand up straight by the tensions of a normal life, and only able to get such food as there might be on another planet, which he couldn't digest." He acknowledges the need for a tensive state of mind as a means of survival. The theme is, in A. E. Rodway's interpretation, "the danger of a lack of tension such as may be brought about by such 'benefits' as too much hygiene or convenience. Life needs its contradictions; without them it collapses, physically or morally."61 One should be wary of easy solutions to the problems of humankind:

He who all answers brings
May (ever in the great taskmaster's eye)
Dowser be of his candle as of springs,
And pump the valley with the tunnel dry.

This is the apocalyptic vision which is the other pole of the poet's vision of despair: if man accepts his contradictions, then he must exist in a state of existential despair; if he attempts to annihilate them, then he will destroy his own humanity, if not his physical world.

Man is again the middle term, for he must understand his world as fundamentally a reality of tensions, and if he is to survive, he must have the intelligence to maintain a psychological balance of these tensions. This idea is implicit in Empson's attempt at a synthesis of the modes of knowledge through which he comprehends his environment, and it is implicit in his thought
concerning the function of language, which must always be interpreted as an attempt in one degree or another to communicate the full complexity of the situation which it represents. Man is increasingly turning to his technology for easy answers to fundamental questions. Such an appeal is ultimately grounded in his having shut himself off from the religious explanations of the past, and Empson, much like Richards, is arguing that he must maintain a fullness of mind sufficient to allow him to preserve the fundamental equilibria of all being. Empson's poetry illustrates and most of his criticism is concerned with the complexities of language which act as a foundation for this supreme sanity.

Empson published only six more poems in 1929 after "Earth has Shrunk in the Wash" and only three in 1930. The despair style was exhausting itself, and he was turning more toward the style of the later poems, although the use of ellipsis and the compression of ambiguities was still a keynote. In "Sleeping Out in a College Cloister" he is experimenting with language as a medium of description as well as of intellection, and in "Letter III" his style is very self-consciously personal. During this time his concerns are not so heavily psychological and philosophical, and he gives his language more rein than in the earlier poetry; but the poems are not as skillful. Empson writes his best poetry in moments of deeper and more tragic vision, although there is a kind of ironic sense of humor in almost all of his work, and it comes clearly to the surface in such later poems as "Homage to the British Museum" and "Just a Smack at Auden."
The uncollected piece, "UFA Nightmare," is the most interesting poem published during this period just before the publication of Seven Types of Ambiguity. Like "Earth has Shrunk in the Wash," it is concerned with the plight of the human psyche in a technological world:

Gramophony. Telephony. Photophony.
The mighty handles and persensate dials
That rule my liner multi-implicate
Ring round, Stonehenge, a wide cold concrete room.
(I run the row from A to O, and so
--To and fro; periscope, radio--
We know which way we go)
"If we can reach the point
Before the tide, there is another style,
I shall checkmate, given the whole board;
Juggling the very tittles in the air
Shall counterblast the dreadnought machiner."
(Scamper, scamper, scamper.
Huge elbows tumble toward chaos.
Lurch, sag, and hesitation of the dials.)
A tiny figure, seated in the engine,
Weevil clicking in a hollow oak,
Pedals, parched with the fear of solitude.

This is a kind of McLuhan-esque horror-fantasy in which the technological extensions of man's brain and nervous system have entombed him and reduced his existence to that of an encapsulated weevil. There is a dream-like, surrealist quality about the poem which makes its tragi-comic tone all the more powerful because that quality is such a fundamental amplification of reality. The first line, with its repetition of "-phony," characterizes the way in which man attempts to live in the modern world. The final lines are a strikingly visual evocation of the consequences of an artificial and inhuman existence, where the enigma of human consciousness has simply been reduced to a response to the control of the machines. Again, as in many
of the earlier poems, the pervading theme is that of alienation and isolation: man maintains a fake communication with his machines but cannot transcend the barriers of interpersonal psychology. The first line points implicitly to the need to understand human communication, and in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* Empson turns to that task, "Juggling the very tittles in the air...."

If poetry is a kind of pseudo-statement which enables the poet to be redeemed from despair, then he must make it as imposing a monument as possible, a bulwark against the abyss. It must be a statement of sufficient complexity to attempt to answer the poet's desire to see his condition thoroughly. It must concern itself with fundamental questions without a turning-away of the attention. As Dodsworth has phrased it, "The best thing one can do is to know the worst." Empson embraces language as basic to the redemptive vision. Einstein's theory is an epistemological model in terms of which language can be made to yield tentative explanations, or rather descriptions which lead to knowledge and a kind of creative wisdom. The same is true of poetic ambiguity: it is a method whereby language can be understood as bearing the heavy load of oblique meanings which are at the heart of human experience. This is an idea which is basic to *Some Versions of Pastoral*: language is incapable of describing human experience in the same way that life itself is insufficient to the desires of the human spirit. One can, however, deny neither life nor language, and the manifold ironies inherent in each can be made bearable only through accepting
each as fully as possible. As Empson himself is something of a stoic with respect to life, he is something of a skeptic with respect to language as a medium of understanding. Nonetheless, he allows each to fulfill itself to as great an extent as possible. He is a liberal with respect to either one; and his poetry is full of a sense of tragedy, because irony is but a comic masking of the tragic recognition which occurs when man exercises his Oedipal curiosity.
NOTES TO CHAPTER I

4. Ibid., p. 49.
5. Ibid., p. 50.
8. Quoted from Dodsworth, p. 13.
11. In "William Empson in Conversation with Christopher Ricks" (Review, Special Number: William Empson, 6 and 7 /June 1963), p. 33), Empson says that the feeling that he was beginning to parody himself caused him to think that much of his poetry was "too narrow" and "bad in a way." Indeed, such thinking probably had much to do with the fact that his change in style from Poems (1935) to The Gathering Storm (1940) was rather marked. His poetry, both because it is so idiosyncratic and because so many of the poems are similar in style, is very susceptible to parody. I know of only two parodies, both of which are written with a sincere appreciation for Empson's work. A good parody is partly an act of love, and both poems are remarkably interesting in their own right. The first, by Dylan Thomas, is from Horizon, VI, (July 1942), 6; the second by L. E. Sissman, from Review, Special Number: William Empson, 6 and 7 (June 1963), p. 75:

Request to Leda

Homage to William Empson

Not your winged lust but his must now change suit.
The harp-waked Casanova takes no range.
The worm is (pin-point) rational in the fruit.
Not girl for bird (gourd being man) breaks root.
Taking no plume for index in love's change
Not your winged lust but his must now change suit.

Desire is phosphorous: the chemic bruit
Lust bears like volts, who'll amplify, and strange
The worm is (pin-point) rational in the fruit.

Just a Whack at Empson

We rot and rot and rot and rot and rot.
Why not cut badinages to the bone?
Alas, cockchafer's cuddle. We cannot.

We recognise the hand upon our twat;
Unfortunately X is always known.
We rot and rot and rot and rot and rot.

Unfortunately X is always not
Quite what we had in mind to end our moan.
Alas, cockchafer's cuddle. We cannot.

Why must we be contained within our pot
Of message that we have so long outgrown?
We rot and rot and rot and rot and rot.

Your physic beauty made my inwards hot
Whilst talking to you on the telephone.
Alas, cockchafer's cuddle. We cannot.

Each greening apple has its browning spot;
"The rank of every poet is well-known".
We rot and rot and rot and rot and rot.
Alas, cockchafer's cuddle. We cannot.

12. See his review in Criterion, X (October 1930), 168.

13. As in the "Introduction," I am indebted to Martin Dodsworth's article (op. cit.) for information about the chronology of Empson's early career. The poetry will be treated in terms of the chronology of publication. I will, however, cite and analyze the poems as they appear in the Collected Poems (New York, 1949), referring to the originals when textual revisions are important, although Empson has revised very little. Bibliographical information concerning all of the poems is to be found in my bibliography. All published poems not in the Collected Poems may be found in Richard Eberhart's article "Empson's Poetry," Accent, IV, (Summer 1944), 197-199, except
for "Essay," which was published in the Magdalene College Magazine, IX (June 1929), 79.


15. Contemporaries and Snobs (London, 1928), p. 189. Miss Riding had also written some poetry in the style of Gertrude Stein by this time; see, for example, "The Lullaby" and "Elegy in a Spider's Web" in her Collected Poems (New York, 1938). Although she and Robert Graves had a rather marked influence on Empson's early criticism, it is doubtful that her poetry exerted much influence on his, except perhaps for this first poem, the style of which was rather widely "in the air" in 1927. Her poetry may have stirred Empson's interest when he was writing his early poems, for they are both extremely cerebral poets, although with a limited similarity of subject-matter. Both are also rather idiosyncratic in their writing, and, as has been said before by Jensen, they seem to share something of the same subjective world-picture. However, their styles are radically different, Empson's being much more formalized; and he is certainly the better poet.


18. Alvarez says that Empson said that he wrote the poem to his mother in "A Style from a Despair: William Empson," Twentieth Century, CLXI (April 1957), 349.

19. The "Notes," presented as an appendix in the Collected Poems, are from the 1935 edition of Poems (London: Chatto and Wonders) with some additions for the later poetry. They are frequently helpful in interpreting Empson's work, and some of his poems (e.g., "Bacchus") could not be read very thoroughly without them. This fact has generated some controversy about the merit of his work, particularly among critics who are concerned with the autonomy of the text. His idiom is extremely complex, and, like David Jones in Anathemata or T. S. Eliot in "The Waste Land," he wants his audience to understand his intentions as clearly as possible. He cannot assume that his audience shares the same knowledge of all subjects about which he is concerned; that was really possible only in the age of Shakespeare or Pope or in older poetic traditions. Once one has digested his notes, the poems are much more easily and richly read (except when his notes are frivolous), and there seems to be little point in the critic being offended at Empson's helping him brush-up on his college physics or become acquainted with the mating habits of beetles.

21. Falck, p. 56.

22. This version is two stanzas shorter than the original, the last three stanzas of which were:

Hybrids, at least, have been extremely sterile.
I know, of that cross, no recorded female.
And can we, my dear, smile
At mule or hinny our estates entail?

Courage. Weren't strips of heart culture seen
Of late mating two periodicities?
Could not Professor Charles Darwin
Graft annual upon perennial trees?

Your triple brass, my trimorphic money
(No clean-run Stock) in such a Cross enskied
Shall breed that three-fold Trinity
Saint Athanasius thrice denied.

It is much more clearly a love poem and much more obviously indebted to Donne. The removal of the third and fifth stanzas accounts in part for what Edith Sitwell has called the "unfortunate curling-up" of the last in the final version (see "Four New Poets," London Mercury, XXXIII (February 1936), 384). The final version is only implicitly a love poem, but it is much the better for the removal of the two stanzas, the third of which is trite in tone, while the fifth involves an unnecessary confusion of metaphors.


24. It is particularly interesting in one instance, for as Ormerod notes, the reference to Johnson's "bicycle" is not in Boswell but in Rasselas where the prince is confirmed in his belief that man is a creature of the earth because he has not contrived the "wings" with which to fly.


27. Dodsworth, pp. 11-12.

29. Discussions of "Arachne" appear in a number of articles devoted to Empson's poetry, but two essays are of particular importance: Horst Meller, "William Empson's 'Arachne': Eine Interpretation," Archiv für das Studium der Neuen Sprachen und Literaturen, CCI (August 1964), 185-190; and Denis Donoghue's article, "Reading a Poem: Empson's 'Arachne,'" previously cited.


32. Donoghue, 225. Another problem which arises in the interpretation of the poem is that of the "spider-man" metaphor as involving a reductive vision of man which leaves the whole tonally blank or simply absurd. Donoghue argues that there is more than reduction involved because the two terms of the metaphor react upon one another in such a way that the metaphor is not simply illustrative but "contemplative," generating a complex of meaning which transcends the possible reduction (222). He quotes Wimsatt and Eliot in support of this view of metaphor, but it would be perhaps more interesting to see the "spider-man" conjunction as illustrating the action of what Empson (in The Structure of Complex Words) calls an equation of Type IV, a mutual metaphor whereby each term predicates the other and in doing so evolves a rich interanimation of meanings. Such a view would be very useful in interpreting the ambiguities inherent in the poem's structure as well as in accounting for the rather oblique role played by Greek mythology.

33. Falck, p. 57.


35. Kenner, 155.

36. Meller, 186.

37. Ibid, 189.


39. Strickland, 249.

40. Seven Types of Ambiguity (Cleveland and New York, 1963), p. 279.

41. The original version carried an epigraph from Aristotle's Ethics: τὸ ἀνθρώπινον ἄγαθον ψυχής ἐνεργείαν γίνεται ματ'/ἀρετὴν ("Human happiness is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue"). As is the title, "Value is in Activity," this quote (à la Eliot) is in ironic contrast to the meaning of the poem.
42. It is interesting to note, with Edith Sitwell ("Four New Poets," 384), that Empson is caught in a kind of "Laocoön entanglement" with s's and soft c's, not only in this poem but in many of the others from the early poetry. This fact may account in part for a monotony of sound which characterizes some of his poetry.

43. Dodsworth (p. 9) makes an interesting comparison between Empson's conception of man in this poem and that in "An Essay on Man," when Pope calls man "Safe judge of truth, in endless error hurled:/ The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!" ("Epistle II," ll. 17-18). In both the poetry and the criticism Empson's didactic pose reminds one of Pope.

44. Dodsworth, p. 10.
45. Falck, p. 57.
46. Donoghue, 226.
47. Dodsworth, p. 8.
48. Donoghue, 222.

49. The mythology of the cat's cradle is obscure. A great deal of anthropological research has been devoted to collecting and discerning the significance of the hundreds of variations of the game which are found throughout the world. With how much of this Empson was acquainted, or what of it he intended to figure in the poem, is a matter of speculation. The note is of little help here, but one may assume that he knew something of the mythology involved. The cradle is not only almost a cultural universal, it is an archetypal form within the context of its universality. As far as I know no psychologist has explored its meaning, although it is commonly associated with the relation between man and the after-life (particularly in Hawaii and the Polynesian Islands). It is also related in some way to the sea. In Kurt Vonnegut's novel, Cat's Cradle, a substance called "ice-nine" transforms the world's water to ice. Empson says the "lines of string" would make "the water ice, the salt a crystal." Fundamentally, of course, the cradle is a "crystal" structure of lines produced from the "fluidity" of string, but it is difficult to discern how far one is to push such an analogy, both in the mythology and in "Sea Voyage." Such a meaning may be central to a resolution of the poem's ambiguities, but one would be hard-pressed to justify it in terms of the text. By way of suggesting connections between the poem and Empson's knowledge of the traditions potentially involved, one might compare the first line of the third stanza, "Earth-bound. Blue-sea-bound, the crisp silver foam," with the following lines from a chant which accompanies the construction of the Hawaiian cat's cradle called "Aloha Aiku" ("Unceremonious Love"): 
Ke neenee i kahakai me ka huahua  
Me ka alaala paina poha.

("Moving seaward with the foam,  
With the bursting Portuguese men-of-war.")

(See Joseph S. Emerson, *Hawaiian String Games* [Poughkeepsie, N. Y., 1924], p. 17).


54. See his *Philosophic Problems of Nuclear Science* (New York, 1966), for a discussion of the phenomenology of scientific measurement.

55. See Dodsworth, pp. 6-7, for additional information about Empson's work with *Experiment* at this time.


57. See Wilson's preface to *The Solitudes of Don Luis de Góngora* (Cambridge, 1965) where he discusses his translations. The book is dedicated "To Dámaso Alonso and William Empson." Beyond speculating on the extent of Empson's influence on these translations, it is interesting to compare his poetry with Góngora's, for both are extremely Metaphysical stylists.

58. The last two lines of this first stanza were originally "(Pascal's or such as yours) up-buoyed/ Are even of universes void," and there was no fourth stanza as in the *Collected Poems* version.

59. Strickland, 246.

60. In his note to "High Dive" Empson explains that according to F. M. Cornford "the order behind the 'physical' world was originally thought of as the life-blood of the tribe, so that it changes when that does." Thus, a re-integration of the psychological community of man implies a unification of φύσις, so that his world becomes whole again because he can achieve an ontological harmony with it.

62. This "visual" quality of the poem is perhaps related to the fact that Empson, according to Dodsworth (pp. 5-6), derived the title from the German UFA film studios and the subject-matter from Fritz Lang's film Metropolis (which Empson reviewed in Granta), where "we are shown workers in a vast underground city mastered by their machines, which take on the semblance (literally) of pagan idols. In the poem the machines have taken over the lonely liner of Buster Keaton's comedy The Navigator."

63. Dodsworth, p. 11.
CHAPTER II

SEVEN TYPES OF AMBIGUITY

Non satis est puris versum
perscribere verbis.

Horace, Satirae I, iv, 54

Criticism is a child of time, and it changes as times change. The catchwords of critics have tended to echo the ideals of their respective periods. Thus a whole epoch is summed up in the term 'decorum,' and another by the shibboleth 'sublime.' What is our keyword? 'Ambiguity' is not my own suggestion; it is an obvious recommendation from our contemporary masters of critical terminology. Their stronghold, be it Axel's castle or Kafka's, is not the old allegorical castle of love or war, of perseverance or indolence; it is a citadel of ambiguity.

Harry Levin
in Symbolism and Fiction

I

In the prefaces to both the first and second editions of Seven Types of Ambiguity Empson acknowledges Robert Graves as the source of his critical methodology. According to Jensen, Empson never reviewed A Survey of Modernist Poetry while he was writing for the Granta, but he does make reference to Graves' criticism as "only impressive when the analysis it comploys becomes so elaborate as to score a rhetorical triumph; when each word in the line is given four or five meanings, four or five reasons for sounding right and suggesting the right things. Dazzled by the difficulty of holding it all in your mind at once,
you feel this at any rate is complicated enough, as many factors as these could make up a result apparently magical and incalculable.\(^3\) This statement doubtless refers to Graves' and Riding's analysis of Shakespeare's Sonnet CXXIX ("Th'expence of Spirit in a waste of shame") where they had attempted a total synthesis of the poem's meaning in terms of grammar and semantics. Furthermore, in a 1955 Review of Graves' book *The Crowning Privilege*, Empson acknowledged that "Modern literary criticism was invented by a number of different people, but by Graves as much as by any other individual."\(^4\) He was obviously very much impressed by Graves' and Riding's essay, and in an article, "Ambiguity in Shakespeare Sonnet XVI," published in *Experiment* early in 1929 when he was working on *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, one can easily detect their influence.\(^5\) The sonnet is analyzed with a meticulous attention to the interplay of words. The analysis is grounded in considerations of syntax and grammar, but Empson's *explication de texte* goes beyond the work of Graves and Riding because of his interest in the psychology of the poetic processes at work. This interest is derivative of Richards' thought concerning the psychology of meaning and aesthetics. Thus, one may consider *Seven Types of Ambiguity* as having grown from the interpretative technique of Graves and Riding and from the aesthetic psychology of Richards.

Richards recalls that when Empson came under his tutelage, he

...seemed to have read more English literature than I had, and to have read it more recently and better, and so our roles were soon in danger of becoming reversed.
At about his third visit he brought up the games of interpretation which Laura Riding and Robert Graves had been playing with the unpunctuated form of "The expense of spirit in a waste of shame." Taking the sonnet as a conjurer takes his hat, he produced an endless swarm of lively rabbits from it and ended "You could do that with any poetry, couldn't you?" This was a Godsend to a Director of Studies, so I said, "You'd better go off and do it, hadn't you?" A week later he said he was still slapping away at it on his typewriter. Would I mind if he just went on with that? Not a bit. The following week there he was with a thick wad of very illegible typescript under his arm—the central 30,000 words or so of the book.6

Richards has little sympathy for Graves and Riding, but he was obviously impressed with Empson's work. When the finished book was published in 1930, it was based on an elaborate classification of the types of poetic ambiguity in terms of grammar, semantics and psychology, which Empson outlined as follows:

First-type ambiguities arise when a detail is effective in several ways at once, e.g. by comparisons with several points of likeness, antitheses with several points of difference, 'comparative' adjectives, subdued metaphors, and extra meanings suggested by rhythm.... In second-type ambiguities two or more alternative meanings are fully resolved into one.... The condition for third-type ambiguity is that two apparently unconnected meanings are given simultaneously.... In the fourth type the alternative meanings combine to make clear a complicated state of mind in the author.... The fifth type is a fortunate confusion, as when the author is discovering his idea in the act of writing....or not holding it all in mind at once.... In the sixth type what is said is contradictory or irrelevant and the reader is forced to invent interpretations.... The seventh type is that of full contradiction, marking a division in the author's mind.7

As all of Empson's work in Seven Types of Ambiguity is predicated upon these verbal-psychological categories and the aesthetics which they imply, it is important to consider their background
in the thought of Richards, which is the ultimate sanction for the book, as well as of others who may have influenced Empson's formulations.

In his earliest book, *The Foundations of Aesthetics* (1921), Richards was concerned with a reorientation in the study of aesthetics. From a preface quotation from the *Chung Yung*, one gathers that the key word underlying the new aesthetics is the Chinese word *Chung* (鼎), meaning "equilibrium." Artistic beauty, according to Richards, involves a systemization of impulses which "must take the form of such an adjustment as will preserve free play to every impulse, with entire avoidance of frustration. In any equilibrium of this kind, however momentary,...we are experiencing beauty." Such an aesthetic concept implies the significance of verbal ambiguity, an equilibrated plurality of meanings, as a fundamental mode of poetic creation. In *The Meaning of Meaning* (written with C. K. Ogden, 1923) Richards was more directly interested in the study of language than in a general aesthetics, but his central concern was with the relation between language and thought or with what one might call the "phenomenology of language." He was attempting a categorization of language in terms of its symbolic and emotive elements, a differentiation of its referential and non-referential aspects. In doing so he was laying the foundation for a problem that would continue to haunt his own work as well as that of Empson. According to Richards and Ogden, these two modes of language are basically different in terms of human psychology: "What is certain is that there is a common and important use of words which is
different from the scientific or, as we shall call it, the strict **symbolic** use of words.... The symbolic use of words is *statement*; the recording, the support, the organization and the communication of references. The emotive use of words is a more simple matter, it is the use of words to express or excite feelings and attitudes. It is probably more primitive.¹⁰ In his later work Richards is not nearly so willing to recognize such a clean dichotomy, and Empson's book is testimony to the fact that poetic language can indeed be a very complex rather than "a more simple matter." The dichotomy may be the result of a false set of premises for thinking about language, and perhaps a more complete psychology of language could eliminate the need for it entirely. Nonetheless, it is a central problem in Richards' and Empson's critical work, and it is important to recognize its source in Richards, for it leads directly to his *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1925), in which he attempted to establish the foundation for criticism as an aesthetic science and thus did lay the foundation for Empson's work in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.

In the *Principles of Literary Criticism* he is committed to the value of art and to fulfilling the need for a critical approach which can comprehend that value as it exists in literature. His aesthetics is ultimately a psychological calculus of value and is implicitly moral. C. I. Glicksberg summarizes Richards' ideas in that book as follows:

> If life has any purpose, he declares, it resides in the effort to organize its impulses in such a manner that the greatest number of the most important impulses are released. The degree of resistance which
the deprivation of an impulse arouses, is a measure of its importance. Therefore the organization of impulses which is least wasteful, which results in the least curtailment, is the best. This is the naturalistic morality which Richards constructs for leading a well-balanced life, and it is also the foundation for his theory of value. A critic is, at bottom, a judge of value.11

Richards carries his technical interest in language through all of his work, but it is obvious that here he is concerned with literary criticism not only as a science of language but as a psychology of verbal forms, particularly of poetry. Like Empson after him, he is trying to effect a synthesis of scientific and literary approaches to literature, and this involves a recognition of the complexity of poetic language. Implicit in the summary above is that idea that the best poetry would be the most multiple in meaning and effect or, in Empson's vocabulary, the most "ambiguous."

By this time, Richards' interest in art, and in poetry in particular, was becoming ersatz-religious. In *Science and Poetry* (1926) he further elaborates the ideas contained in *Principles of Literary Criticism*, moving toward an apocalyptic or Arnoldian consciousness of the redeeming value of poetry. The fundamental question which he poses for himself concerns the importance of poetry in the present and future of an age of technology which is annihilating man's consciousness of the "magical" and organic nature of the universe and substituting a radically more mathematical and unemotional possibility.12 Concerning the difference between scientific and poetic uses of language he makes the following statements:
Most words are ambiguous as regards their plain sense, especially in poetry. We can take them as we please in a variety of senses. The sense we are pleased to choose is the one which most suits the impulses already stirred through the form of the verse. ... In its use of words poetry is just the reverse of science. Very definite thoughts do occur, but not because the words are so chosen as logically to bar out all possibilities but one. No. But because the manner, the tone of voice, the cadence and the rhythm play upon our interests and make them pick out from among an indefinite number of possibilities the precise particular thought which they need.

Furthermore, "the poet is not writing as a scientist. He uses these words because the interests which the situation calls into play combine to bring them, just in this form, into his consciousness as a means of ordering, controlling and consolidating the whole experience." Empson's understanding of such statements as these underlies his own ideas concerning the synthesis of experience as the keynote of a work of art, and, as we have seen, he was, like Richards, interested in human communication in the wasteland of modern technology. The idea that poetic experience is multifold and "whole" leads naturally to a theory of the semantic plurality of poetic language, to a theory of "ambiguity."

The Ricardian ersatz-religious implications of such statements reside in the fact that poetry, by being a means of ordering experience and attitudes towards experience, assumes the traditional province of religion in its sublunar aspect. With the "neutralization of nature" arises the question of the maintenance of moral attitudes, and poetry is the means through which one may fictively order his behaviour without the benefit of supernatural sanctions which no longer apply. The leitmotif ordering these two books of Richards is that of the possibility of art
as a means of saving the human mind from chaos. The language of science is monotonic and indifferent to human emotionality; the language of poetry is that which can accommodate the complexity of human feeling. If the scientific universe does not take account of man, then man must take account of himself through artistic order. It is the complexity of human order and its contradictory and irrational premises which allow art to be a pluralistic form involving ambiguity.\textsuperscript{15}

In \textit{Practical Criticism} (1929) Richards' generalized theories had become more psychologicistic and more relevant to critical practice. It was the purpose of this book to demonstrate the practical dimensions of actual critical problems in an age when the literary sensibility seemed increasingly tending toward an intellectual numbness. As its conclusions were based on the responses of Cambridge undergraduate literature students to a carefully selected group of poems, it is safe to assume, with Richards, that the results comprised an exemplary profile of the intelligent reader's problems in reading poetry. Having discovered these problems, he then wanted to define the critic's work in relation to them in such a way that he could be a meaningful and effective mediator between the poet and his audience. Richards defines the four kinds of meaning resident in poetry in terms of sense, feeling, tone and intention.\textsuperscript{16} Since these are the four modes of meaning, they are also the four modes of misunderstanding. Thus, the very richness of poetry is its greatest possible potential flaw as a means of communication. It is the richness and paradoxically interanimated character of
poetic meaning which makes it capable of multiple implication, of ambiguity. A good poem maintains the multiplicity and equilibrium of its emotional impulses only through the most careful ordering of its language. Echoing again the aesthetic alluded to previously, that of Confucius' *Chung Yung*, Richards notes that "Condensation and economy are so often necessary in poetry—in order that emotional impulses shall not dissipate themselves—that all means to it are worth study."\(^17\) The process to which he refers is similar to Ezra Pound's idea of "charging" language, and it is this very process which Empson investigates in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.

It was Richards' interest in the process of construing meaning which led him into psychological criticism, for it is the failure to be able to construe meaning on the part of the audience which prompts the role of the critic. Recognizing the ambiguity of poetic meaning as one of the basic problems of the critic, Richards virtually wrote an introduction to Empson's book, when he observed in *Practical Criticism* that "Every interesting abstract word (apart from those that have been nailed down to phenomena by the experimental sciences) is inevitably ambiguous—yet we use them daily with the pathetic confidence of children...and no fully satisfactory account of poetry can be forthcoming until their ambiguities have been exposed."\(^18\) Empson and Richards are, of course, interested in "concrete" words as well, but this statement virtually delineates the task which Empson was to undertake in writing *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. For him, the most important duty of the critic is to explain and
clarify textual meaning through verbal and psychological analysis. As his poetry reveals the necessity of understanding the psychology of human communication, so his criticism is an attempt to fulfill that necessity.

Besides the technique of their essay in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, Graves and Riding also contributed, in a broader sense, to Empson's psychological approach, because he learned from them the importance of evaluating the subjective response to literature. Jensen summarizes that influence as follows:

...clearly, in adopting the prose techniques of Graves and Riding, Empson was also accepting more than a little of their subjectivist orientation, a tendency toward which, as the *Granta* reviews indicate, he had shown early in his career. This inclination, reinforced by the Gravesian methodology, increasingly pulled him away from the more objective and rationalistic susceptibilities of Richards, causing a separation in outlook which became qualifiedly but explicitly present in his later work. *Seven Types*, then, is but a synthesis of syntheses. Yet Empson has consistently been aware of the claims of both the rational and non-rational poles of literary experience, of their ambiguous ability to interpenetrate and thereby to compromise or enhance each other. And it is just this consciousness, this capability of working both the objective and subjective sides of the track, which constitutes the essential and considerable value of his critical example.¹³

It is a matter of speculation as to how much Empson was drawn to Miss Riding’s "solipsism," but it is undoubtedly true that Empson’s faith in his own response to literature is grounded in the kind of supremacy which Graves and Riding granted to themselves as critics. Empson is an extremely sensitive poet, despite his pretensions to the mask of objectivity, and it is that very sensitivity which contributes to making even some of his most subjective interpretations fruitful critical examples. F. R. Leavis and
T. S. Eliot may also have been instrumental in a similar way in the formation of his critical attitudes in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, for they too were preaching the ascendency of the critic's personal response as a standard of literary experience. Following the suggestion from Richards, Empson is fundamentally concerned with interpreting the reader's psychology in responding to a poem, and this interest necessitates a faith in his own understanding; but, as Jensen says, he generally substantiates that understanding with objective data concerning word meanings and grammatical forms.

In his book on Graves, *Swifter Than Reason*, Douglas Day strikes the note from which one might detect the resonances of critical difficulties inherent in Empson's assumptions about the explication of poetic texts. According to Day, it was the "precise and meticulous scrutiny of the logical, rhetorical, and grammatical aspects of poems considered as autonomous" which Empson found impressive about the Graves and Riding approach. The word "autonomous" is problematic, for Empson does make radical assumptions about the autonomy of the text. In *Seven Types of Ambiguity* he considers many poems as autonomous which might be better explicated if their context were more fully taken into account, but his ignoring of context in an attempt to get at the pure verbal interplay of a poem's words was a radical but perhaps necessary step in order to push his methodology far enough to show its value in contrast to traditional methods of rhetorical criticism. Rosamund Tuve criticized this method when she began the controversy concerning Empson's explication of George Herbert's
poem "The Sacrifice": "...a reader familiar with the traditions out of which this poem sprang will find Empson's reading inadequate.... How can we know the dancer from the dance? It may be that criticism of "the poem as poem" requires a division between creation and creator which is not possible because of the nature of "meaning" in language.... Hence it is that--little as modern criticism cares to acknowledge it--meanings of elements or motifs in poems, like meanings of single words, are clarified by knowledge those elements have carried before the poem was written and, as we think, 'outside' it."21 Criticisms such as this may have caused Empson to become more aware of context and cultural history as he did in The Structure of Complex Words, but the important point is that his methodology in Seven Types of Ambiguity does not in fact assume complete autonomy of the poetic text.

His idea, stated at the very beginning of the book, that ambiguity involves "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language" (3), comes to be a matter not only of reading the poetic text but also of describing the psychology of the author's mind--particularly in the fourth, fifth and seventh types. Empson is a true disciple of Richards, for his criticism is very largely an interpretative psychology of semantics. He is, however, concerned with the text as autonomous in so far as it is the primary datum from which one is to discover the poem's meaning, and that discovery involves an attempt to interpret the state of the author's psyche as the fundamental basis of the poem's ontology. Although some critics, such as W. K. Wimsatt, would label such an approach
as fallacious, it is nonetheless critically valuable if not relied on excessively, and it is derived from Richards' idea of intention as a category of poetic meaning. Empson's interest in and reliance upon the delineation of intentionality is one of his critical attitudes which makes him seem "subjective," but such an attitude is derived as much from Richards' objective approach as it is from Laura Riding's critical solipsism, or from traditional and non-systematic approaches. Furthermore, the idea that the critic is to explain the author's intention is inextricably wed to the notion of the critic as a moral philosopher. This conclusion is explicit in Richards' thought and implicit in Empson's until Some Versions of Pastoral where it becomes more explicit, and The Structure of Complex Words and Milton's God are both largely about the moral judgments inherent in the use of language. The author's choice of words in writing a piece of literature is a function of his psychology, and to be concerned with his psychology is to be concerned with axiology and telcology.

In essence, then, Empson's method involves an attempt to recreate the psychological situation of the poem through an elaborate explication de texte, and this, in turn, involves returning to the poem's origins in the author's mind. Thus, for Empson, the psychology of ambiguity is central to the study of the ambiguity of language. Such a concern is partly derivative from Empson's interest in Freud and from the general atmosphere of Freudian thought in the 1920's. He mentions Freud several times in Seven Types of Ambiguity, and it is obvious that some of
his interpretations are partly dependent on Freudian readings of the text, particularly those concerned with Crashaw's translation of the "Dies Irae" and Herbert's "The Sacrifice." He may have gotten part of this Freudian direction from reading Graves' writings on the psychology of literature, which were concerned with the interpretation of unconscious impulses as manifested in literature. (Graves' ideas were derived from the psychoanalytical theories of the Freudian disciple W. H. R. Rivers.) Regardless of the sources involved, such ideas led Empson to an enduring belief in the text as a complex of conscious and unconscious meanings, to a defining of the critic's role as one involving the dual concerns of language and psychology.

For Empson, the text is a central nexus of meaning, an ordered form which is the product of a continuous dialectic of meanings taking place within the author's mind. Explication is thus never a complete process: the dialectics continue without a final equilibration in the reader's mind; or, as Graves and Riding stated it: "It is always the most difficult meaning that is the most final. (There are degrees of finality because no prose interpretation of poetry can have complete finality, can be difficult enough.)" This is a reiteration of the notion of poetry as an ultimate means of synthesis, a synthesis which is necessarily incomplete but which the critic can attempt to explicate in terms of his responses. Since this idea of an imperfect synthesis involves ambiguity, one must first understand what Empson means by the term "ambiguity."

Philip Wheelwright has suggested that "plurisignation" is
perhaps a better word for the phenomenon of multiple meaning with which Empson is concerned. The word "ambiguity" traditionally carries a derogatory judgment, as the word is generally used to describe a fault of language whereby the author may be seen as losing control of the effects he wishes to create; whereas Empson's use of the word involves a recognition of very complex modes of control in the use and enrichment of language as a medium for communicating a very broad range of feeling and thought in a concentrated form. His idea of ambiguity involves "multiple definition" or "multiple implication," language "charged with meaning" in Pound's phrase or "polysemous" language, in the traditional semantic terminology. According to Stephen Ullmann, a traditionally-minded semanticist, there are "pathological situations" of polysemy which arise "whenever two or more incompatible senses capable of figuring meaningfully in the same context develop around the same name" (Ullmann's italics).

According to this definition, there are cases of polysemy in Empson's explications which are "pathological"—but that is the view of the linguistic scientist, not of the poet or of the critic. (However, Ullmann's view here is typical of some of Empson's critics who would claim that many of his explications involve pushing language to the point of "pathological polysemy," and there are very central problems in some instances, especially in those which, like his explication of "The Sacrifice," involve elaborating the implications of language in terms of modern psychology instead of in terms of the author's world-picture.) On the other hand, a more modern view of ambiguity in language, such as Wheelwright's
explanation of plurisignation in *Metaphor and Reality,* is very helpful in understanding the theoretical assumptions behind Empson's approach.

One of the basic forms of tension in language, according to Wheelwright, "arises from the overtones of universality that may be implied in an utterance." The fundamental polarity of this tension, which is the basis of plurisignation, is expressed in Richards' pair of words, "tenor" and "vehicle," which denote the two aspects of metaphorical meaning, or as Richards explains the terms: "'The original idea' and 'the borrowed;' 'what is really being said or thought of' and 'what it is compared to;' 'the underlying idea' and 'the imagined nature;' 'the principle subject' and 'what it resembles' or, still more confusing, simply 'the meaning' and 'the metaphor' or 'the idea' and 'its image.'" Wheelwright outlines the action of tensive language in poetry as follows:

Poetic language generally, by reason of its openness, tends toward semantic plenitude rather than toward a cautious semantic economy. The power of speaking by indirection and by evoking larger, more universal meanings than the same utterance taken in the literal sense would warrant, is one species of semantic plenitude. But it may also be that the tenor of an image or of a surface statement is not single; the semantic arrow may point in more than one direction. When two such diversely intended meanings are sharply opposed, the result is paradox. But even when the doubleness of meaning is not pushed to the point of contrariety, it may often be the case that more than one meaning is suggested simultaneously by a certain word or phrase or image. Or, more characteristically, there may be a group of verbal symbols, put together in a certain syntax and suggesting certain images, some more overtly than others, with the result that the interplay of meanings and half-meanings is far more copious than any literal paraphrase could ever hope to formulate. The greater instances of such plurisignation do not
lend themselves to brief exposition, for they usually require patient analysis of an entire poem. On the other hand, a plurisign that is small enough to reside in a word or phrase is likely to seem, when shown out of context, to be little more than a pun or verbal trick.\textsuperscript{31}

Similar delineations are implicit in Allen Tate's idea of poetic "tension" and John Crowe Ransom's theory of the "concrete universal,"\textsuperscript{32} and all such ideas are derivative of the concept of metaphor as the characteristic verbal mode of poetry. As Wheelwright is careful to note, the poetic function of language is dependent on the semantic dialectic between the word, phrase or image and its context. Richards has summarized the foundation of these ideas in his "context theorem of meaning" or "meaning as the delegated efficacy of signs by which they bring together into new unities the abstracts, or aspects, which are the missing parts of their various contexts,...Now that is itself a summary account of the principle of metaphor. In the simplest formulation, when we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction."\textsuperscript{33} These statements comprise a reasonable summary of Empson's basic assumptions concerning ambiguity on the implicit or theoretic level.

The essence of the process of comprehending poetic meaning in terms of ambiguity is the act of defining the interactions between the words which generate the poem. As Empson says in \textit{Seven Types of Ambiguity}: "...two statements are made as if they were connected, and the reader is forced to consider their relations for himself. The reason why these facts should have been
selected for a poem is left for him to invent; he will invent a variety of reasons and order them in his own mind. This, I think, is the essential fact about the poetical use of language" (30). The basic difficulty with this method of interpretation is psychological and centers in the problem of the relations between words: how they are justified; how elaborately they can be made; considering intentionality, how many are inherently present; or how many are the product of the critic's construing. These are complex questions, and Wheelwright wisely leaves them open, but they are central to any critique of Empson's approach to poetry. His tendency to allow for a plenitude of verbal interrelationships in a poetic text is partly due, in Seven Types of Ambiguity, to the fact that he frequently does not take adequate account of the poem's historical context, and, of course, that fault could also be traced to his adoption of the Graves-Riding subjectivist approach. However, his own honesty concerning the limitations of any of his interpretations can occasionally be very disarming, and he betrays a mild skepticism about his readings from time to time—something which neither Graves nor Riding would willingly do. Richards also was somewhat skeptical about the role of ambiguity in poetry and said, for example, that once ambiguity is admitted as a factor differentiating two interpretations of a work of art, "Most discussion about works of art is a waste of time as communication for this reason."34 However, neither critic has surrendered to his skepticism, and Empson's approach in Seven Types of Ambiguity is underlined by an optimism about the possibilities of poetic language and about
his verbal-psychological method of explication. This optimism is dual in character: its reacts against the "pure sound" and "atmosphere" theories of poetry; and it affirms a linguistic positivism which is qualified by Empson's understanding of the psychology of language. Although Empson's optimism encourages his complex and occasionally questionable readings, it is none-theless responsible for the freshness and profundity of his best readings.

Concerning the inadequacy of the "pure sound" and "atmosphere" theories of poetry Empson says, in defending his method, that

I must consider two fundamental objections to my purpose, which many critics would raise; the objection that the meaning of poetry does not matter, because it is apprehended as Pure Sound, and the objection that what really matters about poetry is the Atmosphere....The main argument for Pure Sound is the extreme oddity of the way poetry acts; the way lines seem beautiful without reason; the way you can decide (or at any rate people in practice do decide) whether a poem deserves further attention by a mere glance at the way it uses words. This certainly is an important piece of evidence, and makes one feel that very strange things may be true about the mode of action of poetry, but it shows very little as to what these things may be. I shall myself try to bully my readers into a belief in the importance of ambiguity, for just this same reason.(11)

Empson recognizes the seemingly intuitive character of poetic meaning, but he, like Richards, sees the need to understand as thoroughly as possible, in rational terms, the verbal and psychological interactions which create that meaning. He is calling for an analytical approach, and he defends it against the "pure sound" theory:

It has been deduced from the belief in Pure Sound that the resultant meaning of the words need not be
known, that it is enough to know the meaning of the
words in isolation and enough of their syntax to
read them aloud rightly. In a degree this is often
ture, but it is better to regard this state of limited
knowledge as a complicated state of indecision which
involves much estimating of probabilities, and is
less ignorance than an ordered suspension of judg-
ment. Secondly, and more seriously, it has been
deduced from this belief that you are liable to de-
stroy the poem if its meaning is discovered, that it
is important to preserve one's innocence about the
meaning of verses, that one must use sensibility,
and as little intelligence as possible. This, also,
is often true, but I take a moral line here, and
say it is true only of bad poetry. People suspect
analysis, often rightly, as the refuse of the emo-
tionally sterile, but that is only to say that analysis
is often done badly. In so far as such a destruction
occurs because you have used your intelligence it
must be accepted, and you may reasonably expect to
become interested in another poem, so that the loss
is not permanent, because that is the normal process
of learning to appreciate poetry. (20-21)

Analysis, then, is not a process of destruction but of creation,
of allowing the poem to reveal its fullest possible meaning.

"Atmosphere" is, according to Empson, a term vaguely descriptive
of the consciousness of the implied meaning which is generated
by the poem's revealing itself:

As for the belief in Atmosphere,...it may be viewed
as a third deduction from the belief in Pure Sound.
Critics often say or imply casually that some poetic
effect conveys a direct 'physical' quality, some-
thing mysteriously intimate, something which it is
strange a poet could convey, something like a sensa-
tion which is not attached to any one of the senses
....I assume, therefore, that the 'atmosphere' is
the consciousness of what is implied by the meaning,
and I believe that this assumption is profitable in
many more cases than one would suppose. (21-22)

Thus, one of the primary purposes of Seven Types of Ambiguity is
to demonstrate a critical approach which avoids any notion of
the "purity" of poetry as a language form. For Empson, as for
Mallarmé, poetry is fundamentally a verbal construct, and its
meaning must be apprehended in terms of the action of its words; but it is not "purely" words, for its meaning must also be understood in terms of the psychological processes of which the words are symbolic.

Empson's distaste for the kind of "impressionistic" criticism which concerned itself only with the description of sound or atmosphere is derived partly from Graves and Riding,36 no doubt, but also from Richards, who said that "So far from language being a 'compromise for a language of intuition'--a thin, but better-than-nothing, substitute for real experience,--language, well used, is a completion and does what the intuitions of sensation by themselves cannot do. Words are the meeting points at which regions of experience which can never combine in sensation or intuition, come together."37 Empson, like Richards, writes from a belief in the possibility of language as a rich and complex instrument of human thought and communication, and that belief involves the second aspect of Empson's optimism, which might be termed his "positivistic" stance concerning the value of language. Empson would be the first to admit that poetic language is a very fluid medium and that its communicated meaning is never complete or perfect; that language, even in the sciences, is not a perfect means of communication. Nonetheless, he clearly believes in poetic language as an approximate but effective Gestalt of complex psychological states. One might suggest, with some qualification, that Ludwig Wittgenstein and the "logical positivist" school of philosophy were partial influences not only in Empson's poetry but in the criticism as well. This is not to
say that Empson wouldn't have come to such a belief without their influence; it is simply to suggest that such thought may have had an effect on his thinking about the verbal modes of consciousness.

In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922) Wittgenstein had argued that language is a picture of reality; that there is a correspondence between language and the facts of reality to which it refers, or, as Justus Hartnack explains it: "This means that everything that can be thought can be given linguistic expression. And the classical problem of finding the conditions and limits of thought, and so of knowledge, now turns into the problem of determining the conditions and limits of what can be said—and of what cannot be said. Thus the investigation of the logical structure of thought and knowledge becomes an investigation of the logical structure of language. Wittgenstein claims that the limits of language and of the world coincide."38 Language is, for Wittgenstein, a uniform metaphor of the reality to which it refers. Empson would probably agree that well-written poetic language could approach this logical ideal but would qualify the argument by saying that "thought" and "knowledge" would have to include "feeling" in its broadest possible sense, for poetic language, in his view, is never the disembodied medium of pure thought. Empson's arguments against the "pure sound" and "atmosphere" theories of poetry presuppose a positivistic approach to the psychology of language, and to that extent his criticism exists within the modern positivistic tradition. He does go beyond Wittgenstein, however, in his belief that the human mind is
capable of conceptualizations which are in essence non-verbal, but the expression of which language can approach through its metaphoric character. In "This Last Pain," for instance, he says

"What is conceivable can happen too,"
Said Wittgenstein, who had not dreamt of you;...

In his note to the poem, he explains its theme: "The idea of the poem is that human nature can conceive divine states which it cannot attain; Wittgenstein is relevant only because such feelings have produced philosophies different from his." What Empson is speaking of, in Wittgenstein's term, is the "mystical" which Wittgenstein, in the period of his Tractatus, said could not exist because it would be contradictory to the function of language as he defined it. Empson's concept of ambiguity is itself the first step beyond the strictures of Wittgenstein's thought, but his belief in the capability of psychological and verbal analysis to describe the action of ambiguity is grounded in a positivist conception of language. As he demonstrates by his analyses in Seven Types of Ambiguity, the essence of poetic language, particularly in religious poetry, is that it can, through the process of ambiguity (or plurisignative metaphor), express the "mystical," a reality which is implicit in the text but transcendent to it, existing in the mind of the reader as it existed in the mind of the poet. This "mystical" reality is comprised of the complexities of the emotional-intellectual experience which is the essence of the poem, but which words can never completely describe. Empson's concept of ambiguity defines
II

M. C. Bradbrook, F. R. Leavis and H. Marshall McLuhan, among others, have criticized Empson's approach in Seven Types of Ambiguity because it involves no method of evaluation, no judgment of a poem's value as a work of art. In such criticisms Empson is usually portrayed as an analytical critic, while his opponents are portrayed as evaluative critics. McLuhan designates this polarity by the terms "rhetorical" and "poetic" exegesis and claims that Empson's criticism falls into the first category and does not have a concern for the critical value-judgment. This same criticism could be directed at Kenneth Burke, Cleanth Brooks or any of the modern critics who are aligned with the rise of the New Criticism and its parallel schools. McLuhan's argument is that "a correlation of knowledge by an extension of the modes of grammar" cannot lead to an evaluation based on that correlation. The crux of his criticism of Richards and Empson is this:

Faced with a work full of rhetorical and, therefore, political and psychological complexity, the rhetorician-psychologist can perform prodigies of ingenious and helpful exegesis but cannot possibly, within the limits of his method, determine whether the work is a poem or not. He cannot even decide how much exegesis of technique or imagery is relevant to a particular passage of the work, as the reader of Empson is frequently aware. Mr. Richards and Mr. Empson are thus rhetoricians. Mr. Richards is a rhetorician with one foot in the camp of the speculative or dialectical grammarians and one foot in the camp of the psychologists. Mr. Empson ignores the grammarians and provides a forensic-psychological approach to letters which is naturally congenial to the Southern
intellectual. As rhetorician, Mr. Empson has brilliantly availed himself of the new insights of Freud and Jung into traditional speaker-audience relations. The *Seven Types of Ambiguity* is an ingenious and valid application of Freud's analysis of wit and of dreams to some of the material of poetry... But the utmost extension and refinement of the methods for observing speaker-audience relations brings no one nearer the problem of deciding whether a particular work is a poem, and if so, whether it is a significant or an insignificant one.\(^1\)

McLuhan raises an important questions concerning Empson's verbal-psychological or, as he calls it, "rhetorical," method of analysis: What is the relation between explication and evaluation; can they ever be one and the same act? This is one of the most serious problems of modern analytical criticism, and any discussion of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* must take it into account.

Two critics, Mark Schorer and W. K. Wimsatt, have stated arguments concerning the relation between explication and evaluation which are relevant to a defense of Empson's approach. Schorer, in his essay "Technique as Discovery," says of the writer's technique that it "is the means by which the writer's experience, which is his subject matter, compels him to attend to it; technique is the only means he has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning, and, finally, of evaluating it."\(^2\) "Technique" is understood as the formal method of creatively ordering experience, and it is through this method that the writer evaluates his experience as it is transformed into art. Empson's critical approach involves the discovery of technique through a retrogressive act of re-creating the psychological processes implicit in the verbal order of the work in hand; in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, the fundamental mode of this re-creation
is the delineation of verbal ambiguity or plurisignation as the key to the writer's experience, his psychological situation when he wrote the poem. Following Schorer's statement, one may see that this re-creation involves an encounter with the implicit evaluation of the experience as originally made by the writer as his technique revealed itself through the act of creation. Wimsatt, in his essay "Explication as Criticism," takes a quotation from Plotinus as his keynote in defining the role of evaluation in literary interpretation:

'In the single system of Intelligence are embraced as in an envelope other envelopes within, other systems and powers and intuitions: it may be analyzed not by a straight severance, but by progressive explication of the implicit.' That is to say, values are continuous with and embodied in experience, in the facts and the structure of the facts. You do not stick them in or add them on, as in a mere psychology of values. Furthermore, since value is an indefinitely flexible and analogical concept, coextensive with form and being, a something which is always different yet always the same—there is no excuse for intruding special terms of appreciation and evaluation into our elucidative criticism. Value is always implicit and indefinable. It looks after itself. 'Beauty Looks After Herself,' Criticism is the 'progressive explication of the implicit.'

The "progressive explication of the implicit" is a summary of Empson's approach, and it stresses the psychological aspect of his work; but Plotinus' phrase, through Wimsatt, is also important because it makes clear the fact that an explicative criticism, such as Empson's, involves the revelation of the writer's psychology in such a way that his discovery of the value of the literary work is re-created by the critic and is thus implicit in his analysis.

In this perspective, then, Empson does not deny the
importance of evaluation, but he does avoid many of the pit-falls of "intruding" an evaluation into his analysis of a given poem; that is, he is suspicious of criticism which imposes external criteria of value, because such an imposition necessarily involves what he calls "dogma." The dogmatic critic is one who imposes a valuation which defines the meaning of a poem before its language can reveal its implicit meaning. The "dogma" of traditional evaluative criticism is far more destructive than Empson's analytical approach, because it renders the poem as a cultural artifact which needs to be judged rather than as a work of art which must be allowed to reveal its own meaning. He says, for instance, that one should "hold the seventeenth century responsible for most of its ambiguities, because its taste seems to have been curiously free from such critical principles as interpose a judgment before the experience of accepting the poetry is completed" (272). Then, at the very end of Seven Types of Ambiguity, as a sort of apologia for his approach, he says:

...it is only recently that the public, as a whole, has come to admire a great variety of different styles of poetry, requiring a great variety of critical dogmas, simultaneously, so as to need not so much a single habit for the reading of poetry as a sort of understanding which enables one to jump neatly from one style to another. This produces a sort of anxious watchfulness over the feelings excited by poetry; it is important not to forget what sort of poetry this is and so allow oneself to have the wrong feelings.

For such reasons, then, it is necessary for us to protect our sensibility against critical dogma, but it is just because of this that the reassurance given by some machinery for analysis has become so necessary in its turn. (288)
Thus, he sees the necessity of his own method as a means of transcending the limitations of dogmatic critical approaches, those involving a set frame of standards for reading and evaluating poetic art. In his criticism, as in his poetry, Empson is concerned with the poem as a verbal development of a particular psychological-experiential situation, not as representative of a general kind of thought and feeling. His approach is radically evaluative in that it is specifically directed toward explicating the verbal action peculiar to a given poem; and, rather than judging that poem as a type, he judges it implicitly in terms of the degree to which its language manifests the psychological situation which existed in the mind of the poet.

Empson's concept of ambiguity itself involves a critical value-judgment, for he readily admits that a good poem is very likely an ambiguous poem: "What claim do I make for the sort of ambiguity I consider here, and is all good poetry supposed to be ambiguous? I think that it is; but I am ready to believe that the methods I was developing would often be irrelevant to the demonstration" (xvii). Given the breadth of his definition of ambiguity, this is a reasonable judgment to accept for several different kinds of poetry, although it will not apply with success to all kinds. This idea is clearly an extension of Richards' aesthetic concept that the best art fulfills the largest number of responses in the experiencing sensibility. Thus, Empson is following his own kind of dogmatism, but it is a very open-ended kind and far more liberal than many. The ideal critic, for Empson, is pre-eminently of a scientific frame of mind. The ideal
reader of poetry must comprehend the "fact" and the "judgment" or "the thought and the feeling" of a poem simultaneously, as one thing (299). Good readers of poetry must have the dualistic psychology of the sensitive scientist:

They must possess a fair amount of equilibrium or fairly strong defences; they must have the power first of reacting to a poem sensitively and definitely (one may call that feminine) and then, having fixed the reaction, properly stained, on a slide, they must be able to turn the microscope on to it with a certain indifference and without smudging it with their fingers; they must be able to prevent their new feelings of the same sort from interfering with the processes of understanding the original ones (one may call that 'masculine') and have enough detachment not to mind what their sources of satisfaction may turn out to be. (279)

Analysis is itself an act of judgment, and its primary criterion is ambiguity, the richness of implicit meaning, no matter what that meaning may be. The critic is not strictly a moralist for Empson: he is a judge of the effectiveness of a poem as a medium for communicating the complexity of a particular experience. It is his duty to explicate the complexity of poetic meaning, so that the experience of art might be as rich as possible. Empson's approach is above all one of fertilization, teaching not simply to read but to read creatively.

Empson's fundamental concern as a verbal-psychological critic is more with causes than with effects. This analytical direction leads him to consider the minutiae of the poetic construct rather than the organic whole, although his later work tends more toward a consideration of the effects of isolated verbal actions in determining the meaning of the whole work. It is this attention to causes which necessitates an aesthetic psychology or a
psychology of language in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Empson's psychology is fundamentally one of what John Crowe Ransom has called the "poet-expositor relation," and he says, there are in Empson's approach two situations with respect to this relation: "The first occurs when Mr. Empson tells us what the poem means to him, and judges that it meant all that to the poet. In most cases, it is certain that other critics will find the poet's meaning not so complex as he represents it....The second situation occurs when the poet has not been conscious of all the meanings discovered by the critic for the excellent reason that some of them came out of his unconscious mind; they would not necessarily be for that less willed than the others, nor less important." Ransom goes on to say that, as a psychological poet, "Empson's performance is by far the finest fruit this tree of psychology has yet borne us," but that "he wants the language of poetry to bear a heavier burden than other readers think it can bear. He almost makes of poetry a cryptogram." Of course, the same accusation can be made of his criticism. Empson does, of course, occasionally push his insight too far, and when he does his psychology outstretches the text at hand; but his importance as a critic inheres in the fact that he is willing to attempt a mediation between the mind of the author and the mind of the reader through the text. It is an attempt to make of poetry a living activity.

His tendency, both as a poet and as a critic, to transform a poem into a cryptogram is derived from the fact that he gives such close scrutiny to the details of the text. These details are
his primary concern, and he leaves it to the reader to complete
their relation to the poem as a whole. He is concerned with
what Philip Wheelwright calls the "atomic" and "molecular"
levels of poetic meaning. According to Wheelwright, these two
levels may be defined as follows: "the atomic ingredient of
literal language is the monosign...; the atomic ingredient of
poetic language tends to be the plurisign...the molecular con-
stituent of literal language is the proposition; the molecular
constituent of poetic language is the poetic statement" (Wheel-
wright's italics). Empson is thus concerned with the plurisign
and the poetic statement as they are contextually modified. His
interest is not in the literal, denotative aspects of language
but in those metaphoric, connotative aspects which are peculiar
to poetry. Wheelwright's categories as quoted above are actually
categories of what he calls "metalogical signification," the
process whereby poetic language can express meanings that tran-
scend logical analysis. It is this process which is central to
Empson's conception of ambiguity, and he is concerned with its
action as a reflection of the poet's psychology on the grammati-
cal and syntactical levels of poetic statement. Empson's concept of ambiguity, as it applies on the atomic
and molecular levels of poetic discourse, involves the possibility
of "alternative reactions to the same piece of language" (3).
This possibility exists because of the metaphorical character of
language, particularly of poetic language. Empson borrows from
Herbert Read the idea (in English Prose Style) that "metaphor
is the synthesis of several units of observation into one commanding
image" (4); thus, metaphor is a fundamental mode of ambiguity. Ambiguity has a psychological foundation: it "can mean an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings" (8). The ultimate origin of an ambiguity may be unconscious, preconscious or conscious, and it may inhere in interactions between those levels of the human psyche. 48 By extension from the psychological model of verbal ambiguity, poetry in which there are "ambiguities of idea" becomes a psychosociological document, because "it is whole civilizations rather than details of the moment" which are the elements of those ambiguities (41). In essence, Some Versions of Pastoral is an extension of the psychological modes of ambiguity into the realm of the historical and sociological macro-psychology of the pastoral convention as a mode of irony, as a documentation of the ambiguities of social attitudes in an historical perspective.

According to Empson, there are three possible dimensions in terms of which ambiguity may be apprehended: "the degree of logical or grammatical disorder, the degree to which the apprehension of the ambiguity may be conscious, and the degree of psychological complexity concerned" (57). His seven types are scaled along the dimension of "advancing logical disorder," but his explorations of the action of ambiguities within each type-category usually involve either one or both of the other dimensions as a means of psychologically correlating logical disorder. Logical disorder is Empson's term for what Wheelwright would call
metrical significance, so that Seven Types of Ambiguity is essentially a study of different kinds of metalogical signification and the psychology of the poet-expositor relation in each kind. The seven types are not always clearly separate, and a given poetic statement may be understood in terms of one or more types. (Consider, for example, the line of Janet Lewis, "Tangled with earth all ways we move," which could be interpreted in terms of the first, second, third, fourth or perhaps fifth type of ambiguity, depending on the way in which one stressed the language or understood the poet's mind. As Empson says in his discussion of Shakespeare's Sonnet XVI (which involves a second-type ambiguity), "Which class any particular poem belongs to depends in part on your own mental habits and critical opinions" (67). Thus, the types are not dogmatically defined, but that very lack of definition leaves a gap of subjectivity in Empson's approach. He is generally, as in the quotation here, very honest about this limitation, and the lack of rigor in his approach is part of its success, because the poetry which he is analyzing was not written in terms of his categories.

Empson is concerned with "primitive" or fundamental psychological processes in his study of ambiguity, and he recognizes the value of Freudian psychology:

...it is evident that the Freudian terminology, particularly the word 'condensation,' could be employed with profit for the understanding of poetry. Now a Freudian opposite at least marks dissatisfaction; the notion of what you want involves the idea that you have not got it, and this again involves the 'opposite defined by your context,' which is what you have and cannot avoid. In more serious cases, causing wider emotional reverberation, such as are likely to be reflected in language,
in poetry, or in dreams, it marks a center of conflict; the notion of what you want involves the notion that you must not take it, and this again involves the 'opposite defined by your context,' that you want something different in another part of your mind. (218)

In *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, however, Empson's use of Freud is rather unpolished, and his Freudian interpretations are more suggestive than conclusive. Theoretically, an ambiguity, whether Freudian in character or not, "must in each case arise from, and be justified by, the peculiar requirements of the situation" (266). In reality, however, his use of Freud in this book is rather heavy-handed, although that isn't the case in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, where his use of Freudian ideas is more polished and correlated with an historical perspective. Freudian ideas are also present more subtly in some cases, for they are frequently an implicit corroboration of many of Empson's analyses. His concept of ambiguity is basically a catch-all for several different kinds of metaphor, taking that word in a broad sense. According to Anthony Nemetz, metaphor "is founded on the simultaneous operation of at least two modes of verification" and must be interpreted in terms of those modes and their interaction. Once Empson admits the possibility that part of the meaning of an ambiguity is unconscious or preconscious, then he must accept some means of discussing the process of unconscious or preconscious thought processes, and when he does discuss such processes he tends to use Freudian ideas, although not always and not always so explicitly as in his analyses of Herbert and Crashaw. In any case he takes the poet's mind as the first level of reference implied by a poetic statement.
Empson's use of psychology (and of Freud in particular) is not systematically consistent; that is, as was said in the "Introduction," his psychology does not involve an objective methodology. Although his criticism is to a certain extent scientific in its approach, and although Empson adopts the pose of the sensitive scientist (much as he does in some of his poetry), the subjective aspects of his work have to be taken into account. The fundamental postulate of his psychology is that the reader-critic must "create" the poem in his own mind (281) and then proceed in his analysis "from intuitive to intellectual knowledge" (284). This works extremely well when his own mind has a clear sympathy with the poetry he is analyzing (consider his explication of Arthur's Waley's translation from The Book of Songs in terms of the ambiguities of time-perception, 29), but in some cases, when this sympathy is strained, his analysis of the poem as he creates it in his own mind reaches far beyond the text in order to justify a plenitude of implicit meanings (consider, for example, his interpretation of "Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang," from Shakespeare's Sonnet LXXIII, 5). The essential fault of this technique of re-creating the poem is that the meaning of Empson's re-created version is frequently more complex (for most of critics) than that of the original. He is not always aware of this fault, and only infrequently does he admit it as a problem. Indeed, in his criticism, as in his poetry, complexity is a positive value; as an aspect of ambiguity it is seen as such in terms of Empson's Ricardian aesthetic psychology, and he is always
prepared to discover it as a quality in what he considers good poetry. In 1950, for instance, he said that "Another trouble (In his own criticism) that seems to crop up is the idea that poetry is good in proportion as it is complicated, or simply hard to construe; it seems quite a common delusion, and always shocks me when expressed. And yet I suppose it is very near my own position; in any case it joins on to I. A. Richards' Theory of Value as the satisfaction of more impulses rather than less, and T. S. Eliot's struggle to find a poetic idiom adequate to the complexity of modern life."53 Such a statement accounts in part for the complexity of Empson's own "poetic idiom" and is an important gloss on his work in Seven Types of Ambiguity. It is also a commentary on the lack of historicism in his interpretations, for he tends to read the complexity of his own psychology and that of modern man into the poetry of the past. In some cases this is effective, because there are certain aspects of human psychology which are complex in an ahistorical sense; but it is also his greatest fault in the eyes of many critics, for it is not an idea which can be generalized without encountering difficulties. Again, this problem is grounded in his subjective approach, in his belief that his response to a poem can capitulate the poet's own psychological processes, and it has brought his work under rather severe criticism.54 Nonetheless, such an approach has the great value of bringing a poem to life in a way that no degree of objectivity can. In terms of the methodology of modern scholarship, Empson's approach is always subject to the judgment that it lacks objectivity, but he is not so much concerned with scholarship as he is with defining the
manner in which the unencumbered sensibility reacts to the poem as a creative act. His method, at its best, involves a unique communion between the mind of the poet and the mind of the critic through the medium of the poetic text.

Many of Empson's ideas concerning the complexity of poetic language are derived from his analyses of poetry written by the Elizabethans, particularly Shakespeare, and he looks back to their use of language as a model for his own time, hoping that a clear understanding of its verbal and psychological processes "may yet give back something of the Elizabethan energy to what is at present a rather exhausted language" (268). As a poet he attempts to write with the richness and vigor of their style and to encompass for his own age, as they did for theirs, the full complexity of the human psyche. As a critic he is concerned with the poetry of the past and present which he considers as best exemplifying a similar richness, vigor and encompassment. In spite of his limitations as a scholar in this early work, he emerges as one of the most important psychological critics of this century. He is concerned with the "rag and bone shop" of literary creation, with poetry, in Maud Bodkin's words, as "a dramatic achievement of the body, the inherited outcome of ages of discipline and refining of the art of passionate speech, whereby the felt significance of a wealth of overt action and gesture is condensed within slight changes in the governing of the breath, the inflecting of the voice." To blame Empson for not embalming poetry with a meticulous scholarship is to blame him for what Philip Hobsbaum calls his "chief distinction—that he reads
Herbert and other classics as we read the living, and so shows that they are still very much alive.\textsuperscript{56}
NOTES TO CHAPTER II


2. Jensen, 358.


5. Experiment, 2 (February 1929), pp. 33-35. The article was incorporated into Seven Types of Ambiguity as part of the study of second-type ambiguities.


7. Seven Types of Ambiguity (Cleveland and New York, 1963), pp. v-vi. All further citations from this work will be by the page numbers of this edition.


14. Ibid., p. 35.

15. Ambiguity, in the most general sense, would seem to be a feature of the poetry of almost any era, for human experience has always been rich and confusingly ironic. For instance, as W. B. Stanford states in his book Ambiguity in Greek Literature (Oxford, 1939), p. 1, Greek authors found ambiguity to be "a natural, subtle and effective instrument for poetry and dramatic
purposes." One needs only to peruse *Seven Types of Ambiguity* to see that Empson found ambiguity to exist in the literatures of many eras. Man's consciousness of the ambivalent nature of his experience has always been a keynote in the meaning of literature, and that consciousness is even more intense and immediate in the modern world.


17. Ibid., p. 192.

18. Ibid., p. 319.


23. See Richards' *Practical Criticism*, p. 176, where he speaks of "the speaker's intention, his aim, conscious or unconscious, the effect he is endeavoring to promote. Ordinarily he speaks for a purpose, and his purpose modifies his speech."


33. The Philosophy of Rhetoric, p. 93.

35. For a short note on this subject, see Sister Clarice de Sainte Marie Dion, *The Idea of 'Pure Poetry' in English Criticism, 1900–1945* (Washington, 1948), p. 82. She also cites numerous examples of the kinds of criticism against which Empson was reacting.

36. Graves and Riding wrote an interesting analysis of three lines from Valéry's "Ebauche d'un Serpent" (ll. 58-60) demonstrating the limitations of sound as an instrument of meaning. Empson surely read their analysis, but it is difficult to assess its influence on his work in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. They are, however, advocating much the same kind of analytical approach to poetry which he championed:

Modern French poetic theory lays a great deal of emphasis on the phonetic sense of words; and has done so increasingly since the French Symbolists. . . .
Three lines from Paul Valéry will illustrate this picture-making in poetry by the help of sounds:

Il se fit Celui qui dissipe  
En conséquences son Principe,  
En étoiles, son Unité.

Now, since we are able to recognise **dissipe**, **conséquences**, **Principe**, and **Unité** by their English parallels, we must rewrite these lines in some practical phonetic notation which will completely divorce them from any associated meaning, if we would test their direct phonetic value:

Ecl s' fee s' lwee kee deesseeep p'  
Ahng kohnsaykahng s' sohng Prangseeep p',  
Ahng aytwal l', sonn Eweetay.

This is the best rough phonetic approximation that we can make without the use of a formal phonetic system. We are immediately impressed by the recurrence of the strong *s* and the narrow *ee* sound, as we are supposed to be. This might denote a number of things: a man whetting a scythe, a child writing on a slate, or a serpent trying to talk. On the other hand, such sounds have nothing to do with the subject; as in the couplet:

As fleecy sheep we leap  
Across the grassy sweep;
the s and ss sounds are contrary to the sense. Suppose, however, we did actually choose the idea of a serpent's talking, as we were meant to. What, then, is our clue to what the serpent is talking about? Or are the lines merely meant to represent a serpent talking, without any collateral meaning? No. They represent, as a matter of fact, a serpent talking about God. But how are we to deduce God from the sound of the poem or know indeed when the alliteration is to indicate the subject or the elocutionist? We must admit that for the special purpose of representing a serpent sneering at God such sound-combinations may be very wittily employed. But as a general thing a poetic practice like this becomes as tiresome and puerile as, say, the incessant puns and jokes of Goldsmith, Hood, or Calverley. Wit in poetry should be devoted to the irony in ideas rather than in phonetics. (A Survey of Modernist Poetry, pp. 35-37.)


40. McLuhan, 267.

41. Ibid., 268-269.


43. In Explication as Criticism, Selected Papers from the English Institute 1941-1952, ed. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. (New York, 1963), p. 18. Consider also the following similar statement made by Empson himself: "There is room for a great deal of exposition, in which the business of the critic is simply to show how the machine is meant to work, and therefore to show all its working parts in turn. This is the kind of criticism I am specially interested in, and I think it is often really needed.
Anyone who objects to it because it does not try to give a final Valuation of the work, in relation to all other work, seems to me merely irrelevant. I do not mean to say, what would be a very foolish thing to say, that criticism has nothing to do with valuation. It has to do with it all the time, because you cannot even say just how some element works without suggesting how well it works. But to assess the value of the poem as a whole is not the primary purpose of this kind of criticism, or at any rate ought only to emerge from the analysis as a whole. ("The Verbal Analysis," Kenyon Review, XII (Autumn 1959), 597-598.)


45. Ibid., 324.


47. Wheelwright contends that Seven Types of Ambiguity is based on a "misconception of ambiguity, which differs from pluri-signation as 'either-or' differs from 'both-and.'" These, he says, are quite different things: "The one is a looseness and duplicity of reference in would-be literal language, the other is a controlled variation and plurality of reference in language that deliberately transends the literal." (Ibid., 266). This is untrue of most of Empson's readings in Seven Types of Ambiguity, as Wheelwright himself partly acknowledges in this same article when he speaks about Empson's analysis of one of the sestina pastoral dialogues from Sidney's Arcadia (267). Shakespeare does not use "would-be literal language," nor does Hopkins or Herbert, and Empson usually does not approach them as if they did. A similar criticism may be found in Kathleen Raine's article, "The Poetic Symbol," Southern Review, New Series, I (April 1965), 246, where she makes the comment (although both theological and aesthetic in its implications) that: "...all the complexities and ambiguities which he discerns are upon the same plane of the real. There is one type of complexity which he fails to consider, that resonance which may be present within an image of apparent simplicity, setting into vibration planes of reality and experience other than that of the sensible world; the power of the symbol and symbolic discourse which Blake calls 'the language of divine analogy.'" In a similar vein, Frank Kermode in Romantic Image (New York, 1964), p. 162, has spoken of the tendency of analytical criticism to "demythologise" Symbolism, "to reconcile its Image with more empirical and utilitarian theories of language (as Richards' flux of interpenetrating elements is the language itself, rather than the intuitive order of Bergson and Rulme)." These criticisms are both just to the extent that Empson is neither a Romantic nor a Symbolist critic, but analysis in terms of ambiguity might be very useful in connection with those kinds of literature, if sensitively
applied. Empson has dealt very little with the Romantics and not at all with the Symbolists.

48. For Empson's discussion of the "preconscious levels" of meaning, see "The Verbal Analysis," 600.

49. The line is found in Yvor Winters' Collected Poems (Denver, 1960), p. 122.

50. His analysis of Crashaw's "Dies Irae" involves a very suggestive use of Freudian ideas, but his interpretation of Herbert's "The Sacrifice" involves a rather loose use of Freud as a means of supporting his idea that Christ stole the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge and in his crucifixion climbed back up the tree to return it and save mankind. His interpretation has given rise to one of the most important controversies of modern criticism, and one may trace it through the following articles: Rosamund Tuve, "On Herbert's 'Sacrifice'," Kenyon Review, XII (Winter 1950), 51-75; William Empson, "George Herbert and Miss Tuve," Kenyon Review, XII (Autumn 1950), 735; T. S. Eliot, George Herbert (Writers and Their Work: No. 152; London, 1962), p. 23; William Empson, "Herbert's quaintness" (a review of Eliot's pamphlet), New Statesman, January 4, 1963, p. 18, which contains a number of significant reflections on the analysis from the perspective of his later critical thought. Other articles could be cited which are relevant to this controversy, but these demonstrate the main line of development. The basic criticism against Empson's analysis is that it is not historically justified, and the same criticism can be made of much of his work in Seven Types of Ambiguity. In Some Versions of Pastoral, however, he is much more conscious of the historical perspective of literature, and he continues to be so in the later work.


52. Empson's interpretation of this sonnet has also created a critical controversy, which may be traced mainly through the following articles: F. W. Bateson, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," Essays in Criticism, III (January 1953), 8-9; John Crowe Ransom, The New Criticism (Norfolk, Conn., 1941), pp. 123-129; William Empson, letters in "The Critical Forum," in Essays in Criticism, III (January 1953), 120, and in III (July 1953), 357-353.


54. See, for example, Edwin Burgum's article "The Cult of the Complex in Poetry," Science and Society, XV (Winter 1951), 34, where Burgum says that "His [Empson's] preference is for the poetry of the casuist, and he sets it neither against any objective audience of its reader's nor against the poet's sensitivity as disclosed in his own biography, but against his own
sensitivity as an audience of one. The poem for him is thus objective in only one sense, as a pattern of words." Burgum is a Marxist critic who was offended by Empson's lack of social concern in his criticism. Had he read Some Versions of Pastoral he would have realized that Empson soon became not only less subjective but also more socially concerned. A similar charge is made by Elder Olson in his article "William Empson, Contemporary Criticism, and Poetic Diction," Critics and Criticism, ed. R. S. Crane (Chicago, 1963), pp. 26-27; reprinted from Modern Philology, XLVII (May 1950), 222-252. Olson attacks Empson's interpretation of Macbeth's speech (58-60) from a neo-Aristotelian position, but he seems to have misunderstood Empson's approach. He is using Empson as a whipping boy for his own ideas, which involve something of a misunderstanding of Aristotle. A critique of Olson's ideas which partly clears Empson of his charges may be found in J. M. Gray's article "Aristotle's Poetics and Elder Olson," Comparative Literature, XV (Spring 1963), 164-175.


56. "Empson as Critical Practitioner," Review, Special Number: William Empson, 6 and 7 (June 1963), p. 16. Empson's criticism has inspired as many poets as it has critics, largely because he is so intimately concerned with the psychology of poetic creation, rather than with broader critical issues. Consider, for example, the comment by Sherry Mangan in her article "A Critic of Ambiguity," Poetry, XLIII (November 1933), 101, that "to read The Sacred Wood makes one reread old poems and put them in the mail; to read Seven Types of Ambiguity makes one write a new and better poem."
CHAPTER III

SOME VERSIONS OF PASTORAL

And all this earth King Varuna possesses,
His the remotest ends of yon broad
heaven;
And both the seas in Varuna lie hidden,
But yet the smallest water-drop contains
him.

from the *Atharva Veda*, IV:16

I

According to John Crowe Ransom, Empson's outline of the
seven types of ambiguity progresses from innocence to irony. Indeed, the seventh type ("that of full contradiction, marking
a division in the author's mind") exemplifies a fundamental kind
of irony. As may be seen in his analysis of Herbert's "The
Sacrifice," Empson's interest is the psychology of paradox and
irony was coming to dominate the book's direction. In *Some Ver-
sions of Pastoral* he carries this interest further into an his-
torical and psychosociological exploration of pastoral as the
typical ironic mode of literature. His concern with the atomic
and molecular levels of language in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* has
broadened in this book to include the organic level, and he is
concerned with the psychology of language as a means of defining
the historical development of a genre. He is no longer so ex-
clusively concerned with poetry, and his exploration of the
pastoral genre includes many forms of literature: drama, poetry,
the novel and the "fairy tale" as exemplified by Lewis Carroll.
The book is, furthermore, an answer to critics who contend that
Seven Types of Ambiguity is too narrow in its focus and does not concern itself with the larger implications of literature as a social phenomenon; indeed, Some Versions of Pastoral has an obvious Marxist bias. In this book, as in his poetry and as in The Structure of Complex Words, Empson is concerned with the mental and emotional attitudes implicit in the explicit dynamics of the verbal codifications of human action. Always, for him, the external forms of language reveal internal patterns of human psychology.

We have already seen from Empson's writing in the Granta that his interests were more broad than his work in Seven Types of Ambiguity reveal them to be. During the next few years after the publication of that book his interests in literature broadened even more. Inheriting a fascination with the East from Richards, he went to Japan in 1931, where he was Professor of English Literature at Bunrika Daigaku in Tokyo until 1934. His experience in teaching Japanese students, combined with the environment of political activism, spurred his interest in literature as propaganda, as a form of macro-psychological documentation of history. He wrote very little poetry during this time, and his attention was directed away from the minutiae of grammar to a consideration of literature not only as a form of documentation but as a force molding the psychological attitudes of the individual and, consequently, the political attitudes of historical eras. Besides the essays collected in Some Versions of Pastoral, Empson published articles on Virginia Woolf, T. E. Hulme, Harold Monro and Auden's Paid on Both Sides. In the last, in particular,
he reveals a growing concern with literature as a psychosociological medium of communication. His transplantation into an Eastern environment stimulated his interest in politics, and he also became interested in Buddhism and in Eastern philosophy and psychology in more varied ways. This shift in vision is apparent in his work in Some Versions of Pastoral, where, for instance, he has written a Buddhistic interpretation of Marvell's "The Garden." His use of Eastern ideas as a means of illuminating Western conceptions of language continues in the later work, and he returned to the East twice, in 1937 and 1947, in order to teach at the National University in Peking.

Although his approach to literature changes in a number of ways, there are also a number of ways in which it must be understood as a continuation of the earlier work. His concern with grammatical and syntactical forms has not disappeared by any means, and it is valuable in many of the essays in Some Versions of Pastoral; but in this book, as wasn't the case in Seven Types of Ambiguity, he is led to weigh the particular against the general, the statement against the context of the work and its historical milieu. His use of Freudian psychology has become much more refined, and it serves as a valuable aid to explication, especially in the essay on Lewis Carroll. In general, he is extrapolating his interests in the micro-psychology of language into the macro-psychology of literature; the idea of language as the implicit form of the writer's microcosm leads directly to the idea of literature as the implicit form of his social macrocosm. Along this scale of extrapolation he observes the role of what he considers
pastoral literature, and his observations comprise a study of irony on many levels. Since irony is an extended category of ambiguity, one can clearly see the second book as growing from the first.

Some Versions of Pastoral is a somewhat baggy work and is frequently digressive, but the first essay, "Proletarian Literature" (written later than most of the other essays), attempts to describe the generalized focus of the whole collection. According to Empson, "good proletarian art is usually Covert Pastoral," and he takes as his first example a quatrain from Gray's "Elegy: Written in a Country Churchyard":

Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear;
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

"What this means," he says, "as the context makes clear, is that eighteenth-century England had no scholarship system or carrière ouverte aux talents." Although Empson extends the implications of the stanza further than its context can justify, he reaches to the core of the political tone resident in the poet's attitude. He claims, in effect, that Gray is revealing a large social fact through a metaphorical portrayal of the fate of the individual. Empson goes on to say that, in general, as in Gray's poem, proletarian literature tends to be a criticism of the establishment. This is further exemplified by Céline's Voyage au Bout de la Nuit, in which Empson sees the plight of the proletarian individual focused in Bardamu's speaking (in Céline's voice) against the
death-wish morality "generated by the herds of a machine society" (11). This observation summarizes Empson's own concern in his poetry about the fate of the individual in his technological environment, and he interprets Céline as developing a similar theme by somewhat similar means: both focus their larger social meaning in terms of the psychology of the individual mind; and in either case, sociological meaning is ultimately derived from each observing his own attempt to come to terms with his world. A similar kind of proletarian literature, which exemplifies more fully the idea of irony in a pastoral mode, is that which uses a pastoral figure embodying the classical irony that "the fool sees true." Empson considers Hemingway as a writer of this kind of literature. He finds another variation on the same theme in the novels of Faulkner, who writes about "poor or low characters because their lives more than most are grudgingly and obviously ruled by Fate; this is supposed to make us feel that the same is true of everyone" (10).

Empson's pastoral figure might be generally defined, borrowing a phrase from Kenneth Burke, as a figure whose character is understood through a "perspective by incongruity." He is a character of one order whose existence comments on the nature of other orders; he is a character of one order whose existence implies or generates other orders; or he is, in a more specific framework, a simple character whose existence comments on, implies or generates a more complex kind of reality. He is a particularized and reduced figure who is ironically related to a more generalized and expanded reality. In another perspective,
he may be seen as defining the permanent nature of man underlying
the transience of a particular historical situation, in relation
to which he is necessarily ironically displaced. His existence
as a literary type is defined by the psychology of irony as it
developes in the interplay between the simple and the complex,
the particular and the general, and those two poles of reality
are always ambiguously related.

For Empson the pastoral figure must always be understood
within an historical context because the pastoral genre itself
has undergone an historical development. The idea that a simple
character could be made to embody more complex and universal
attitudes lends itself to historical malleability. A typical
pastoral character is necessarily psychologically inconsistent to
a certain extent, but at the same time he is a kind of portrait
of man revealing all his aspects at once. A pastoral figure is
a kind of "pretence," according to Empson: "Indeed the usual
process for putting further meanings into the pastoral situation
was to insist that the shepherds were rulers of sheep, and so
compare them to politicians or bishops or what not; this piled
the heroic convention onto the pastoral one, since the hero was
another symbol of his whole society. Such a pretence no doubt
makes the characters unreal, but not the feelings expressed or even
the situation described; the same pretence is often valuable
in real life. I should say that it was over this fence that
pastoral came down in England after the Restoration " (12). The
pastoral convention is extremely open to such a transposition of
situations. Theokritos, for instance, made great use of Homeric
clichés in framing pastoral as a vehicle of mock-heroic conventions, and his *Idylle* are a *potpourri* of ideas, opinions, parodies of romantic love and elegiac moods—all of which are developed through the pastoral figures themselves. The pastoral convention very rapidly became a kind of psychological form, so that the pastoral landscape in Longus, Apuleius and Virgil is a kind of psychological microcosm; it was at once a model of the mind of man, a *paysage moralisé*, and of the whole implied realm of human activity in the larger world of politics and national character. Such a convention is very capable of ironic situations. In the *Eclogae* of Virgil, for instance, one finds that the pastoral situation implies a Christian analog, wherein the hero is not exalted but humble, like the shepherds themselves, and the Church fathers were well aware of the apocalyptic overtones of such inversions of reality. While the epic was a large and restricted form including the historical data of nations, the pastoral was an extremely open form which allowed the author to mold it virtually as a pattern of his own consciousness. The great poets of the English and Italian Renaissance were well aware of the possibilities of the convention, so that by the time of Spenser and Milton the pastoral was the vehicle not only of political allegory but also of the archetypal dynamics of human psychology. *Some Versions of Pastoral*, then, is concerned with the development of the pastoral convention from this point until the present.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the English pastoral convention, as Empson understands it, is that it is capable of
historical modulation. He contends that the psychology of the author-audience relations is an extremely important factor in considering the development of the convention since the Renaissance, because it was so strongly modified by the dominance of the Puritan consciousness, in terms of which it was ridiculous for the pastoral writer to show a too sensitive or "feminine" sense of beauty. Consequently, according to Empson, his relation to his audience changed, and his work became much more self-conscious. He achieved an ironic distance both from his audience and from his subject by writing a mock-pastoral form. Once mock-pastoral became possible further developments were inevitable, so that a radical "child-cult" pastoral like Alice in Wonderland was possible by the end of the nineteenth century. This shift in the writer's relation to his audience was thus accompanied by a shift in the style of the genre. This shift may be seen in terms of Northrop Frye's idea of mythical "displacement," which also implies a mutation in the relation between the writer and his work and the writer and his audience. Frye explains this as follows: "Myth, then, is one extreme of literary design; naturalism is the other, and in between lies the whole area of romance, using that term to mean, not the historical mode..., but the tendency...to displace myth in a human direction and yet, in contrast to "realism," to conventionalize content in an idealized direction. The central principle of displacement is that what can be metaphorically identified in a myth can only be linked in romance by some form of simile: analogy, significant association, incidental accompanying imagery, and the like."
Considering the pastoral convention as involving a dialectic between the mythic and naturalistic poles of the scale, one may say that pastoral has shifted toward the naturalistic end; but in doing so it has not by any means dissolved the dialectic state of its existence. As the pastoral shifts toward the mock-pastoral, in terms of the change in authorial psychology, it moves closer to a naturalistic form; but the retention of mythic characteristics is what allows the author to retain his ironic perspective, because through them he may maintain his story at any distance from reality that he wishes and consequently measure historical man against archetypal norms. Thus, the writer of pastoral may write in terms of complex modes, combining aspects of the comic and the tragic, the particular and the universal and so forth. As his self-consciousness increases historically, the naturalistic and mythic poles are extremely sensitive to one another, so that their interaction may be very complex, as is the case, for instance, in Alice in Wonderland, where the psychological landscape is constantly oscillating from one pole to the other. One is never completely certain what kind of world Dodgson has created.

In Some Versions of Pastoral Empson is much more interested in the psychology of the literary character than he was in Seven Types of Ambiguity, and it is central to his discussion of the pastoral convention. He speaks, for instance, about the "simple man" as an archetypal figure of pastoral:

The simple man becomes a clumsy fool who yet has better 'sense' than his betters and can say things more fundamentally true; he is 'in contact with nature,' which the complex man needs to be, so that
Bottom is not afraid of the fairies; he is in contact with the mysterious forces of our own nature, so that the clown has the wit of the Unconscious; he can speak the truth because he has nothing to lose. Also the idea that he is in contact with nature, therefore 'one with the universe' like the Senecan man, brought in a suggestion of stoicism; this made the thing less unreal since the humorous poor man is obviously more stoical than profound. (14)

This conception of the pastoral "simple man" approaches the idea of the anti-hero--Bardamu, a Hemingway character or Nietzsche, the prototype of the condemned man with an essential wisdom. The humor of the "simple man" is the artistically realized counterpart of the author's ironic distance from his subject and audience; it is a kind of defense mechanism which Empson sees as epitomized, in a Freudian sense, in Holbein's Totentanz, where the skeleton figure of death is fundamentally comic. In this, as in other instances, the pastoral convention as realized in a given historical period is a speculum both of the author's psychology and of the macro-psychology of his milieu.

"Proletarian literature" is thus a "bogus concept" for Empson, because it is really a contemporary version of pastoral after centuries of literary evolution. It represents a version of pastoral which has shifted toward the realistic aspect of naturalism. It is a kind of mock-pastoral which is intimately involved with the relation between the individual and his society, and yet it preserves its mythic overtones:

The realistic sort of pastoral (the sort touched by mock-pastoral) also gives a natural expression for a sense of social injustice. So far as the person described is outside society because too poor for its benefits he is independent, as the artist claims to be, and can be a critic of society; so far as he is forced by this into crime he is
the judge of the society that judges him. This is a source of irony both against him and against the society, and if he is a sympathetic criminal he can be made to suggest both Christ as the scapegoat (so invoking Christian charity) and the sacrificial tragic hero, who was normally above society rather than below it, which is a further source of irony. (17)

With this statement one begins to realize how much literature could be included in the category of the pastoral convention as Empson somewhat tenuously defines it. For Empson, the pastoral convention is basically a convention of ironic knowledge, in terms of which "the refined thing must be judged by the fundamental thing,...strength must be learnt in weakness and sociability in isolation" (20). Pastoral is the genre of reconciliation and transvaluation; its fulcrum is "that subtle reversal of values whereby the last becomes the first."8 The humble lamb becomes the exalted Lamb of God, and Alice, the lamb, becomes the shepherdess; the one and the many, the complex and the simple are reconciled. In Empson's conception, the pastoral world is always close to becoming a Western version of the Taoistic universe, and yet, for him, it is always very pragmatic and concrete, grounded in the politics of human reality.

II

In his essay entitled "Double Plots" Empson develops the idea that the main plot and the sub-plot of a dramatic work stand in relation to one another in a manner analogous to that of the artist and the worker, the complex man and the simple man or the hero and the clown. Mythically, Christ includes both aspects and
is an implicit type of unification of the two kinds of figures, and, similarly, the individual includes both within the dynamics of his own psychology. According to Empson, the double plot is a model vehicle for the pastoral convention, because "the interaction of the two plots gives a particularly clear setting for, or machine for imposing, the social and metaphysical ideas on which pastoral depends. What is displayed on the tragi-comic stage is a sort of marriage of the myths of heroic and pastoral, a thing felt as fundamental to both and necessary to the health of society" (28-29). This is an archetypal vision and could be seen in Freudian terms to be analogous to the relation between the conscious and unconscious aspects of the mind, or between super-ego and id. The clown stands in relation to the hero as the initiate in a comic profanation ritual to the social hierarchy which he profanes; such a relation connotes a healthy harmony of the body-politic as well as a healthy harmony of the psychic body of the individual. The clown who jests with the king is an aspect of the king himself; the two are aspects of a unified humanity transcending both. The clown makes criticisms of the king which the people of the kingdom dare not make. The two are aspects of a total psychology of action and reflection, creation and criticism, and their relation capitulates that of the artist and his public. The double plot involves similar relationships.

The earliest form of the double plot, according to Empson, is the comic interlude, the purpose of which is to relieve the tension and sustained seriousness of the main plot. An illustration
of this kind of interlude is the Second Shepherd's Play, which is in its entirety a comic play, a form of ludus which is serious in meaning but light in tone and ultimately comic in that it involves a resolution in terms of human happiness. The comic figures of this play become general symbols of humanity and thus typify the pastoral paradox of the many contained in the one, as well as the serious and complex in the comic and simple. The sheep which Mac's wife, Gill, has hidden easily becomes a multi-fold symbol: her jest about eating the child is an obvious reference to the Sacrament; the lamb hidden in the cradle is the Agnus Dei hidden in the child of Mary; the Logos takes on the animal nature of man in the same way that the hidden child has the "nature" of a lamb about it; and, of course, the problem of the proper father is a deep piece of comedy indeed.

The fundamental conception is that the comic interlude makes comments which refer to the more serious and central concerns not only of the play but also of humanity in general. Thus, in King Lear, the clown "sets off" the king as Falstaff "sets off" Prince Hal. In the same respect, Falstaff is the clown of a profanation ritual who doubts the values of heroism and says what others cannot say. He is the pastoral figure who expresses doubt about the action which goes on around him and thus is a pastoral figure with the power to mold the attitude of the audience toward its own political environment. In a similar manner, Margaret and Friar Bacon in Greene's Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay are pastoral figures of low birth who have respect
and power which is essentially beyond the control of their social sphere but which can be exercised within the arena of social action. Her beauty, like his magic, is a potentially dangerous force derivative ultimately from elemental forces of the earth; thus, the simple pastoral figure becomes a figure of power—the inversion of the image of "the machine in the garden."

Another play which exemplifies the action of the double plot is Troilus and Cressida, where the two plots are not only structurally correlated but also psychologically correlated to such an extent that the political language of the main plot is almost interchangeable with the erotic language of the sub-plot, and each plot is a running ironic commentary on the other.

Howley's play, The Changeling, like Troilus and Cressida, also derives the force of its drama from the correlation of the main plot and the sub-plot, the heroic and pastoral modes of its action. In this play, however, the sub-plot is concerned with madness, and it makes a direct commentary on the main action both by way of contrast and ironic counterpoise and by way of analogy. The play is a nearly perfect tragi-comic unity. The two parts are very similar: the basic plot in both is that the heroine has been married to a man she does not love, so that she is somewhat justified if she cuckolds him. The basic theme of the changeling, a child stolen away into the world of the fairies, is iterated throughout the play in an unending series of echoes, always with the suggestion that the sane world may be thrown into the world of insanity, that the action of the main plot may be in fact the
chaos of the madmen whose world is its background and with which, through disguise, it is involved. This is all in resonance with the motif that love is itself a madness (for instance, Isabella's lovers are disguised as madmen). This idea is strongly emphasized at the wedding, where the lovers who left Beatrice's court disguised as madmen are brought back with other madmen to be part of the masque. According to Empson, this scene is "the chief source of the ideas of the play" (49). He interprets it as follows:

The antimasque at a great wedding, considered as subhuman, stood for the insanity of disorder to show marriage as necessary, considered as the mob, ritually mocked the couple (for being or not being faithful, innocent, etc), both to appease those who might otherwise mock and to show that the marriage was too strong to be hurt by mockery. We have been shown the chief thing the madmen of the play stand for, when Isabella seemed likely to take Antonio seriously.

(Cries of madmen are heard without, like those of birds and beasts.)

Lollo. Cuckoo, cuckoo.
Antonio. What are these?
Isabella. Of fear enough to part us.

Fear parted Beatrice from Alsemero, the husband won falsely; the madmen brought in to be mocked form, for her as for Isabella, an appalling chorus of mockers, and assimilate her to themselves. The richness of the thought here does not come from isolated thinking but from a still hearty custom; to an audience which took the feelings about a marriage masque and a changeling for granted the ideas would arise directly from the two plots. (49-50)

Thus, the chorus of madmen act as pastoral figures who bring an inversion or transvaluation of the larger action; they contain the larger action in themselves, and the main plot becomes a version of the sub-plot. The low figure through the pastoral transformation becomes the high figure.
If the double plot is a mode of pastoral, then, according to Empson, it may be not only a source of irony but also of dramatic ambiguity wherein the reader is asked to play his judgment from one situation to the other, both of which are usually thematic variations on a more fundamental situation. In heroic plays of the Restoration, particularly, Empson notes, "The reason why the plays are satisfying though so unreal is that they are so close to their own parodies" (55). The idea that the Restoration play tended to be defined by a parodical sub-plot leads him to a consideration of the modes of parody and of the way in which parodical forms are implicit in human psychology. (As an interesting example of extreme parody, he cites Housman as a pastoral poet who parodies the "pathetic fallacy" through a poetic consciousness which denies it (56); and, of course, Housman is well aware of the fact that the "pathetic fallacy" was originally the basis of pastoral sentiment--Bion's "Lament for Adonis" being the best classical example. 9)

This leads in turn to what is perhaps the ultimate province of Some Versions of Pastoral: a dualistic view of the human psyche as expressed through literature. The critical essays in this book have grown in many ways from his earlier interest in Seven Types of Ambiguity in the Freudian theories of "transference" and "condensation"--the way in which language is used to express complex psychological ambiguities. The generality of his concern might be best glossed by C. G. Jung's term enantiodromia, a conception of the human psyche as a continuity of polarities engaged in a dialectic. Jung explains this idea as follows:
The transition from morning to afternoon means a reevaluation of the earlier values. There comes the urgent need to appreciate the value of the opposite of our former ideals, to perceive the error in our former convictions....Everything human is relative, because everything rests on an inner polarity; for everything is a phenomenon of energy. Energy necessarily depends on a pre-existing polarity, without which there could be no energy. There must always be high and low, hot and cold, etc., so that the equilibrating process—which is energy—can take place....The point is not conversion into the opposite but conservation of previous values together with recognition of their opposites.10

Such a view of human psychology is inherent in Empson's thought about the pastoral; through it the sublime and the ridiculous, the work and its parody, are always seen as approaching one another. Sociologically speaking, such a view implies a Marxist interpretation of history, in terms of which the social hierarchy is dialectically leveled. More generally, and for Empson's purposes, it is a mode of knowledge which allows the literary critic to interpret literature in terms of a total picture of human psychology. It is a means of exploring the implicit meaning of a literary work, and Empson outlines his own conception of enantiodromia as an approach to literature which is psychologically complex, such as that of Swift:

It is the same machinery, in the fearful case of Swift, that betrays not consciousness of the audience but a doubt of which he himself may have been unconscious. 'Everything spiritual and valuable has a gross and revolting parody, very similar to it, with the same name. Only unrelenting judgment can distinguish between them'; he set out to simplify the work of judgment by giving a complete set of obscene puns for it. The conscious aim was the defence of the Established Church against the reformers' Inner Light; only the psycho-analyst can wholly applaud the result. Mixed with his statement, part of what he satirized by pretending (too)
convincingly) to believe, the source of his horror, was 'everything spiritual is really material; Hobbes and the scientists have proved this; all religion is really a perversion of sexuality.'

The language plays into his hands here, because the spiritual words are all derived from physical metaphors;...." (58)

Empson goes on to say that the author is repeating the audience in himself and that different parts of the audience are in some works of literature (particularly in the case of Swift) meant to have different reactions and interpretations. This kind of ambiguity on a social scale is derivative of an ambiguity on the psychological scale in terms of the individual's own enantiodromic syndrome. Ultimately, Empson's idea of parody is grounded in the fact that all language is ambiguous because it is metaphorical; because, in a paraphrase of Nemetz, it can be apprehended through a dual mode of verification; because the higher aspirations of the human mind are always related to the lowest or are a reaction from it which implies its existence.

The interplay of psychological opposites is an idea fundamental to Empson's conception of pastoral, and essentially the same process is involved in that aspect of the pastoral convention through which the complex is condensed within the simple. Human knowledge is always phenomenal in character, no matter what its pretensions are, and language itself is a phenomenal medium which may pretend to communicate non-phenomenal meaning. Thus, spiritual meaning is subject to the trammels of physical metaphor. According to Empson, a pastoral version of this fact, on another level, is the cult of the mistress in seventeenth-century poetry. He sees this glorification of woman as partly derivative from the
deification of Elizabeth and says that "to take the deity from her and give it to some one without public importance is like the use of heroic language about the pastoral swain" (67). As illustrations of this kind of transference he cites Raleigh's "Twelfth Book of the Ocean's Love to Cynthia" and Donne's Anniversaries, among others. He notes further that this conception of woman is usually colored by a kind of pantheism; thus, Cynthia is a source of natural order, and Elizabeth Drury is the Logos which is revealed through nature. The earthly woman is a simple figure which is made to bear the complex meaning, the symbolic weight, of the Celestial Venus, of Christ or of a kind of Western version of the Indian Earth-Mother, Kali. The idea is ultimately Platonic: the eternal is apprehended through the mortal. Empson then completes a circle back to Christ as the archetypal pastoral figure. The shift is from the idea of woman embodying the deity to man in general as a type of Christ. This in turn leads him to further pastoral versions of Christ; for instance, he sees Mary Magdalene in Crashaw's "weeper" as a type of Christ who (a la Frazer) plays the role of the sacrificial god. Piers Plowman also involves a simple figure who embodies Christ: Piers is the humble swain who is really the religious hero, the shepherd both as ruler of the sheep and as humble swain. The full reversal of pastoral psychology (another example of enantiromenia) is found in Empson's quotation from Crashaw's "Dies Irae," where Christ is the type of man, and man is the swain who justifies Christ, the hero:

Recordare, Jesu pie, 
Quod sum causa tuae viae, 
Ne me perdas illa die.
This is a pastoral archetype: the sheep imply the shepherd just as the shepherd implies the sheep; yin implies yang—it is an axiom of human thought, here used to define a literary convention.

Empson's analysis of Shakespeare's Sonnet XCIV in his essay "They That Have Power" leads to another analog of the pastoral situation: the idea that "discoveries of language and feeling made from a personal situation may develop themselves so that they can be applied to quite different dramatic situations" (98). He considers as a typical situation that of Falstaff, Prince Hal and Hotspur, where their interpersonal relations on a micro-social, or psychological, pastoral scale imply and comment on their relations on an heroic or macro-social scale; and, of course, one thinks of his earlier discussion of Troilus and Cressida as a similar example. Empson carries this idea through some of its implications as a means of interpreting literary works involving the interaction of the individual and his historical context. Thus, for example, the idea that personal psychology is a re-capitulation of political sociology and vice versa leads him to speculate that sex might be seen as the type of political liberty (as in D. H. Lawrence) and political liberty as the type of sex (as in Bernard Shaw's figure of Don Juan). This discussion leads in turn to his theorizing about the possibility that the pastoral convention is in some ultimate sense concerned with the most general relation between the pastoral figure and his context, with all of the pretensions existing between simple and complex or parodic and heroic modes of existence—"the grand notion of
the inadequacy of life": "The feeling that life is essentially inadequate to the human spirit, and yet that a good life must avoid saying so, is naturally at home with most versions of pastoral; in pastoral you take a limited life and pretend it is the full and normal one, and a suggestion that one must do this with all life, because the normal is itself limited, is easily put into the trick though not necessary to its power" (110-111). This idea is related to many of the concerns of Empson's poetry, as well as to its style. It is in essence his notion of the "style from a despair," and it involves the necessity of maintaining psychological fictions in order to survive and remain sane. In terms of this statement, pastoral may be seen as including aspects of a tragic sense of life, an existential consciousness of the fundamental enigmas of the human spirit, and these aspects are perhaps to be found native to the convention even in its earliest forms. Ultimately, to some extent, all pastoral figures share the fate of Hardy's tragic swains.

Empson's essay on Marvell's "The Garden" is the most complex in Some Versions of Pastoral, and its sub-title echoes not only other essays in the book but also the concerns of Seven Types of Ambiguity: "The Ideal Simplicity Approached by Resolving Contradictions." His interpretation of the poem is very much colored by Taoistic and Buddhistic psychology, and he says that he started working on an analysis of the poem after hearing one of Richards' discussions of Mencius. According to Empson, the poem is about the reconciliation of conscious and unconscious states of mind, of intuitive and intellectual modes of apprehension.
While Marvell never really makes that distinction, it is, Empson says, implied by his metaphors. He is particularly concerned with lines 47-48 of the poem, which are undoubtedly the pivotal point of its total meaning:

The Oxford edition notes bring out a crucial double meaning (so that this at least is not my own fancy) in the most analytical statement of the poem, about the Mind--

Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade.

"Either "reducing the whole material world to nothing material, i.e. to a green thought," or "considering the material world as of no value compared to a green thought"; either contemplating everything or shutting everything out. This combines the idea of the conscious mind, including everything because understanding it, and that of the unconscious animal nature, including everything because in harmony with it. Evidently the object of such a fundamental contradiction (seen in the etymology: turning all ad nihil, to nothing, and to a thought) is to deny its reality; the point is not that these two are essentially different but that they must cease to be different so far as either is to be known. So far as he has achieved his state of ecstasy he combines them, he is 'neither conscious nor not conscious,' like the seventh Buddhist state of enlightenment. This gives its point, I think, to the other ambiguity, clear from the context, as to whether the all considered was made in the mind of the author or the Creator; to so peculiarly 'creative' a knower there is little difference between the two. Here as usual with 'profound' remarks the strength of the thing is to combine unusually intellectual with unusually primitive ideas; thought about the conditions of knowledge with a magical idea that the adept controls the external world of thought. (113-114)

Thus, the poet of "The Garden" is a pastoral figure who not only includes everything in himself ("...he juggles with the whole cumbersome complexity of the world"--115) but also "knows" it. Insofar as he becomes one with nature, he becomes the embodiment
of a principle of permanence, a fundamental archetype of man in relation to nature. In a Freudian sense, the pastoral figure is regressing toward a state of ultimate psychic harmony. "Green" becomes the signal-word of this situation, and Empson connects it with various other works by Marvell, Wordsworth, Whitman and D. H. Lawrence. The green environment is the mirror of the green thought, and the state of the "green thought" is that of a childlike contact with nature and innocence. Grass is, then, very naturally, the symbol of pastoral humility; the fruitful attitude to Nature is one of passivity (again the Buddhist idea). There are no women in this garden, for the poet has found a greater beauty and solace in Nature. In Empson's view the "Gardner" (l. 65) is the poet himself: he tills the garden with his contemplative powers. While Empson touches on the poem's religious significance, he does not do so elaborately, nor does he relate the religious meaning to the poem as a whole. The poem, for him, is about the relation between the mind and nature and the harmony which exists between the two in a state of plenitudinous consciousness or enlightenment.

The interpretation is full of insights and is very helpful toward an understanding of a complex poem. Many interpretations of "The Garden" have been as seemingly far-fetched as Empson's, but there are several basic problems in his interpretation, the most important being that he has largely ignored the tradition of the poem. It is probably best described by Frank Kermode when he says that it is a poem "of the anti-genre of the naturalist paradise."¹³ Kermode's essay, "The Argument of Marvell's 'Garden,'"
is largely an attempt to define the genre of the poem, but his ideas are helpful in illuminating Empson's. According to Kermode, the poem grows out of a tradition of poetry involving the spiritualization of the erotic. Such a tradition, he argues, may be seen in the centuries of commentary on the *Canticum Canticorum*, in Bruno's efforts to make doctrinaire religious matter of Petrarch's erotic conceits and in Spenser, among others. The naturalist garden is the place of unfallen innocence and is identified with the glorification of sensuality. Marvell's garden, on the other hand, is one in which sense is controlled by reason; it is a garden in which the intellect contemplates heavenly beauty. For naturalist *jouissance* Marvell substitutes solitude and meditation. Kermode's interpretation takes into account the religious meaning of the poem, which Empson does not; the "Gardner," for instance, is surely God and not the poet, although Empson suggests an interesting possibility if one could dare read the line in terms of Coleridgean metaphysics. Furthermore, this garden is to be seen not as a trap (as in Milton) but as a place of perfect innocence which will remain unfallen so long as the meditative mind-set is held. The movement of the poem is toward heaven—the vertical push of the soul upwards, not horizontally outwards, as Empson would have it.

The lines "No white nor red was ever seen/ So am'rous as this lovely green" involve the symbolic negation of passion, which is central to the poem's meaning. For all his Freudian interest in the poem, Empson does not discuss the fact that it is about the religious sublimation of sexual energy. Woman as
the object of sexual cathexis has been metamorphosed into a part of the general green of nature:

The Gods, that mortal Beauty chase,
Still in a Tree did end their race.

(11. 27-28)

This sublimated state of consciousness is requisite to the attainment of the meditative frame of mind; it is the subsumption of earthly beauty into the emblematic green of thought reaching toward heaven. Empson's use of Buddhistic psychology as a means of elucidating this idea is very suggestive, and the poem involves an interesting Western parallel to the Taoistic reconciliation of mind and matter; but his analysis is more of a gloss than a definitive interpretation, because the final meaning of the poem must be understood in terms of the psychology of Christian mysticism.¹⁴

In "Milton and Bentley" Empson returns to his earlier interest in textual analysis as a means of defining authorial psychology. The essay is something of an apotheosis of Bentley's method, although it is well to bear in mind that Empson and Bentley are academically and religiously on different sides of the Miltonic fence, Empson being neither a classicist nor a clergyman. He uses Bentley primarily as a springboard to his own discussion of Milton's "schizophrenic" attitude toward paganism and Christianity. According to Empson, this duality of moral and aesthetic attitudes is dramatized through the implicit meaning of Milton's language. Thus, he reads Paradise Lost partly as a document of Milton's psychology, which he interprets as being
defined by a desire both to embrace Christianity and to return to a pagan simplicity, a prelapsarian state. Conversely, he takes Milton's psychology as the general framework for his interpretation of the poem, so that the ideology of the whole is to be seen as elaborated in terms of the Miltonic dual consciousness. This is the keynote of the irony which defines the pastoral character of Paradise Lost. As in the essay on "The Garden," Empson is concerned with the psychology of contradictions. Thus, for instance, Satan is a contradictory figure who is defined in terms of pastoral ironies:

...the more life Milton could put into our feelings about Satan the better, but his main business was to convey the whole range of feeling inherent in the myth, and the myth clearly involves contradictions. Satan is both a devil and a host who will receive man with honour, because the fall of man is terrible and yet just this shows that he is important (which makes the belief tolerable). Satan is both the punisher of sin and the supreme sinner (Milton did not invent this, and in neither capacity is Satan 'Milton'); these are combined because 'sin punishes itself and turns to hatred,' because 'it is hard to distinguish sin from independent judgment, courage, the force needed for a full life,' and I think because 'the sinner becomes the judge.' Then perhaps, thirdly, Satan is Milton as rebel and also the paganism Milton had renounced;....(161)

It is Satan's elasticity which makes him such an intriguing character, and here Empson understands that elasticity as his essence as a pastoral figure. Furthermore, that elasticity is a function of his being the product of two traditions, the pagan and the Christian, and Empson interprets his meaning, as well as that of the poem as a whole, in terms of the psychological analogs of the mythology of those traditions as they are dramatized in Milton's own mind. The conflicts of Paradise Lost, mythological and
otherwise, are seen by Empson as arising from Milton's own
doubt concerning the value of the Christian myth. It is
through this doubt that he focuses the ironic meanings of the
poem.

In essence, then, in Empson's view, Paradise Lost is a
kind of pastoral psychic landscape of Milton's mind, and a
closer analysis of the poem's language will disclose the impli-
cit meaning of that landscape. This is an immensely suggestive
idea, and it was certainly important in helping to define the
course of more recent "in depth" psychological studies of
Milton's poetry; but Empson's wrongheadedness about Christianity
leads him astray time and time again. His desire to prove that
Milton really thought Christianity mean-minded and inhumanly
sacrificial causes him to neglect more fruitful avenues of inter-
pretation. This subject will be discussed at greater length in
the chapter on Milton's God, which book is partly an extension
of "Milton and Bentley."¹⁵

Empson's essay "The Beggar's Opera" is concerned with
"Mock-Pastoral as the Cult of Independence." The play is very
appropriate for Empson's approach because it was written by Gay
as an evolved form of the pastoral, and following Swift's sug-
gestion, he called it a "Newgate pastoral." The play is, accord-
ing to Empson, both mock-pastoral and mock-heroic and thus full
of double-edged irony. He traces the sentiment that combines
heroic and pastoral modes of feeling to the theme of the prince
brought up in secret by the peasant. The fundamental inversion
is that "heroically high people are pastorally low" (187), and
mock-pastoral, mock-heroic literature is defined by the manner in which this inversion and its variations are elaborated in terms of the psychology of the whole work. The success of this convention depends on a complex manipulation of the sentiments of the audience. The hero is partly subject to the laws of his society and, in a traditional sense, partly beyond them; archetypally, according to Empson, "he must be half outside his tribe in order to mediate between it and God, or it and nature. (In the same way the swain of pastoral is half Man half 'natural.' The corresponding idea in religion is that Christ is the scapegoat.)" (189-190). Macheath, as the hero-rogue, typifies this kind of figure, and the subtle interrelationships of his roles in terms of audience sentiment allow him to assume aspects of the object of satire, the judge of society, the outcast with an objective view of society or a kind of Noble Savage whose existence is a commentary on societal conventions and mores.

In Empson's historical scheme of pastoral development, the figure of the hero-rogue very easily evolved into the Romantic conception of the poet and the pastoral child. The pastoral figure whose experience is at once beyond society and part of it becomes exemplified in the Byronic figure of the poet as a kind of "unacknowledged legislator" and tragic hero; that is, the Romantic poet assumed the role of scapegoat and mediator between the tribe and nature. The pastoral child, as in Wordsworth, shared in this special kind of existence, and this figure, like that of the Romantic poet, is defined in general by a special kind of consciousness, an extra-human vision or a trans-social knowledge,
which may be a commentary on human experience in a social context or under the aspect of eternity. This consciousness may be very complex, and in the pastoral it is typically ironic, especially in the case of Alice in Alice in Wonderland.

Empson introduces his conception of "comic primness" in order to define the nature of the pastoral character's consciousness. This idea involves the recognition that a character may act with a full awareness of the duality of his own psychology, which is another aspect of pastoral irony. Thus, for instance, a character may act and speak in such a way that the audience knows that he both accepts and rejects the convention which he adopts. Macheath's "Ironical Humility" Empson takes as exemplary: he classes himself among low men but at the same time demonstrates that his standards are much higher than theirs; and he may remove this perspective of contrast whenever he pleases. When a character is in such a role that this kind of irony is inherent in his situation in potentia, then his role is defined by a "device prior to irony." According to Empson, Polly Peachum characterizes this device, because her action may be measured against an aristocratic, bourgeois or low-class formulation of morality. Furthermore, through the convention of comic primness, a character may seem simply disinterested in the aspect of his role which is ironically problematic, and this situation poses a special problem in Alice in Wonderland. This is a complex idea, psychologically, because "The force of irony is its claim to innocence; the reason for its wide usefulness is that the claim may still be plausible when the man's consciousness of his irony
is frank—...." (221-222). The comic primness of the innocent young girl (as found in Thackeray, Dodgson, Sheridan or Wilde) is a special category of this problem which particularly interests Empson and is more fully explained in his essay on Alice in Wonderland, where he explores the Victorian culmination of the pastoral in the figure of the "child as swain."

His essay "Alice in Wonderland" has stimulated more thought about the possibilities of his conception of pastoral than any other in the book, particularly in reference to modern literature, which involves radically displaced versions of pastoral. The subtitle, "The Child as Swain," indicates that Alice is perhaps the figure for which he has been preparing throughout the rest of the book. Empson wrote the essay not only to show the dimensions of a Victorian pastoral figure but also to demonstrate the usefulness of Freudian criticism as a tool of artistic interpretation which need not reduce a work of art to a mere pattern of neuroses. Before Empson's essay there was no attempt at a definitive critical essay about Alice's adventures. It must be obvious to a reader with a sensitive intelligence that Dodgson wrote Alice in Wonderland with a complex and conscious purpose; that besides being a story for children, it is a matrix of political statements and mathematical enigmas. It is as well, Empson declares, a psychologically rich work of art which reveals, largely through its pastoral convention, the collective unconscious of the Victorian era. As partial evidence of Dodgson's consciousness of his task, Empson presents the fact that he told an actress playing the Queen of Hearts in the stage production that her role
symbolically represented "uncontrolled animal passion." Furthermore, since the book is about growing up, there is no surprise that it is explicable in Freudian terms, and there is no reason why the critic shouldn't try to understand it by means of Freudian psychoanalytical concepts. Whether this would have been a shock to the author or is considered in bad taste by many readers of Lewis Carroll is beside the point, which is to attempt a more thorough understanding of Dodgson's art.

The pastoral shift to the "child as swain" involves also another displacement, which Empson calls the "child-become-judge." This situation is analogous to primary pastoral in that the author in each instance is identified closely with the persona of the shepherd. (As Empson notes, the image of the "child as swain" is interestingly condensed in a photograph of Alice Liddell as a "ragged beggar-girl.") This situation of authorial identification involves the "device prior to irony," which allows the author to make judgments through the persona about any matter which attracts his attention. On the other hand, by means of the same ironic condition, he may withhold his judgment in such a way that the reader is hard-pressed to know whether or not the persona is simple or ironic. This mode of detachment characterizes not only Alice but also other figures (for example, the caterpillar or the Cheshire cat), so that the reader is constantly involved in an interplay of psychic distance between characters.

The problem of defining character is related to the problem of determining the weight of symbolic meaning conveyed by the pastoral figure of Alice. After citing a good deal of evidence
that Dodgson was well acquainted with the theories and implications of Darwinism, Empson says the following about a scene in "The Pool of Tears": "The only passage that I feel sure involves evolution comes at the beginning of Wonderland (the most spontaneous and 'subconscious' part of the books) when Alice gets out of the bath of tears that has magically released her from the underground chamber; it is made clear (for instance about watering-places) that the salt water is the sea from which life arose; as a bodily product it is also the amniotic fluid (there are other forces at work here); ontogeny then repeats phylogeny, and a whole Noah's Ark gets out of the sea with her" (243). The Caucus race which ensues is then an ironic commentary on democratic politics and the idea of natural selection. All the animals win, and Alice, as Man, is forced to reward all of them with comfits; and, of course, they recognize her superiority. Empson connects this scene symbolically with the situation of Christ as both the king and servant of His people--an archetype of the pastoral figure as shepherd and hero. The political feeling of the passage is that Alice would prefer a more aristocratic system, although, as Empson says, the fundamental note of the scene is the clash between "progress" as a process of natural selection and the leveling force of Alice as a figure of Christian charity. What is involved in this scene is (à la Huxley) the confrontation of human ethics and natural law, and Empson finds a similar situation in the railway scene in Through the Looking Glass, where the guard tells Alice she is "travelling the wrong way," that is, contrary to the nineteenth-century Darwinian concept of progress.
The fundamental idea involved in the railway scene (and in Alice's wish to return to "the woods") is the disparity between the child's vision of the world and that of the adult, and the complexity of Alice's psychology is that it includes aspects of both. Empson traces the origin of the modern sentiment about children to *Mother Goose's Melodies* (John Newbury, 1760), a book which involves the juxtaposition of a child-like tone with adult wisdom. He then shows that the rudiments of this idea are developed further in the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Taking the "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" and "We are Seven" as examples, he arrives at the conclusion that the fundamental idea involved in such poetry is that "The child has not yet been put wrong by civilization, and all grown-ups have been" (248). However, the fact that Dodgson envied children because of their sexlessness, much as Wordsworth did because of their natural vision, does not explain why the child-sentiment arose historically. Empson attempts to account for historical factors as follows:

It strengthened as the aristocracy became more puritan. It depends on a feeling, whatever may have caused that in its turn, that no way of building up character, no intellectual system, can bring out all that is inherent in the human spirit, and therefore that there is more in the child than any man has been able to keep. (The child is a microcosm like Donne's world, and Alice too is a stoic.) This runs through all Victorian and Romantic literature; the world of the adult made it hard to be an artist, and they kept a sort of tap-root going down to their experience as children....Their idea of the child, that it is in the right relation to Nature, not dividing what should be unified, that its intuitive judgment contains what poetry and philosophy must spend their time labouring to recover, was accepted by Dodgson and a main part of his feeling. (248-249)
Psychoanalytically speaking, there is much more that could be said concerning the relation between the psyche of the child and that of the artist, but Empson has gotten the main idea here. Such an understanding of the nineteenth-century Zeitgeist explains in large part why the child as a pastoral figure could carry a heavy load of symbolic meaning: Alice, like other pastoral figures, is a combination of the high, the low, and the universal as characterized by a particular historical period. However, such a portrait does not suffice, because she is also representative of the "free and independent mind." This idea of the child as a "rogue" clashes with the Wordsworthian sentiment about children, so that Alice's psychology is again more complex than one would expect from historical reasons.

Alice is a figure of isolation and to that extent has no power over an alien environment, and yet, at the same time, she is in a world of her own scale where her uniqueness is itself a source of power. In a sense she includes the whole reality of Wonderland in herself and controls it through the action of her imagination; the world in which she finds herself is the world of the child's fancy. To the extent that this is true, anything which happens in Wonderland represents some form of triumph of her independence over the adult world. This idea allows the narrative to make extremely searching comments about the real world beyond Wonderland. For instance, it is the very childishness of the White Knight that "lets him combine the virtues of the poet and the scientist, and one must expect a creature so finely suited to life to be absurd because life itself
is absurd" (253). However, the world of Wonderland becomes more complex than this once it is realized that there is a fundamental ambivalence in the figure of Alice as a child and in the kind of control which she has over her environment. Empson discusses this ambivalence and relates it to Dodgson's own psychology as follows:

So the talking animals here are a child-world; the rule about them is that they are always friendly though childish and frank to Alice while she is small, and when she is big (suggesting grown-up) always opposed to her, or by her, or both. But talking animals in children's books had been turned to didactic purposes ever since Aesop; the schoolmastering tone in which the animals talk nonsense to Alice is partly a parody of this—they are really childish but try not to look it. On the other hand, this tone is so supported by the way they can order her about, the firm and surprising way their minds work, the abstract topics they work on, the useless rules they accept with so much conviction, that we take them as real grown-ups contrasted with unsophisticated childhood. 'The grown-up world is as odd as the child-world, and both are a dream.' This ambivalence seems to correspond to Dodgson's own attitude to children; he, like Alice, wanted to get the advantages of being childish and grown-up at once. (254)

This child-adult ambivalence echoes throughout the books; Empson relates it to Jabberwocky, which is both the language of adults which children do not understand and the language of children which adults do not understand. Alice's world is the pastoral world of manifold ironies.

In more Freudian terms, the complexity of Alice's role is related to the idea of the development of sexual adulthood as the death of childhood (what Norman Brown would call the victory of "genital tyranny" over "polymorphous perversity"—an obviously Freudian idea17). Empson relates this idea to the scene with the
caterpillar, a creature who has to go through a sort of death in order to be reborn into maturity as a butterfly, but he denies that this is the main point of conflict about her growing up. He seems to be contending that the psychological associations are more general than this; but the sexual meaning is always present, and Empson's interpretation is dependent on it. One can see the process of her growing up as culminating in her awakening from her fancies and despising them, but the adventures leading to such a culmination are easily subjected to a Freudian reading. Her final birth into the vision of adult reality is but the last rebirth of a series of symbolic deaths and births taking place throughout the book. As Empson makes clear, there are numerous womb-situations for Alice, from her fall into the womb of Mother Earth at the beginning until her birth from the womb of her dream at the end (consider, for example, the "nightmare theme of the birth-trauma" when Alice grows too large for the room into which she has fallen—or consider the analogous situation at the house of the White Rabbit). In fact, according to Empson, Alice runs the gamut of sexual experiences in her symbolic fall into Mother Earth: "...she is a father in getting down the hole, a foetus at the bottom, and can only be born by becoming a mother and producing her own amniotic fluid" (260-261).

This then leads to an additional complexity of Alice's role: she is an essentially sexless creature whose action carries the symbolic meaning of all sexuality. Empson says that this fact derives from a distancing process in Dodgson himself, whereby
sexuality is thus contained in order that it be controllable (and one may, of course, take the next step of dealing with Dodgson's personal psychology, but that is not the concern here), but from an artistic point of view, it is well to remember that Alice's lack of sexual differentiation is the essence of her emotional flexibility as a symbolic figure. According to Empson, her sexual independence is one aspect of the self-centered emotional existence which is imposed on her by the detached intelligence through which she understands herself and her environment. Empson sees the Cheshire cat as the ideal of this kind of detachment: "It can disappear because it can abstract itself from its surroundings into a more interesting inner world" (261). Alice is very much at home with the cat because she is the same sort of creature. Another example of this freedom through intellectual (and hence, emotional) detachment is the fact that she can sweep aside feelings with which she can't adequately cope (consider Empson's example of the scene with the gnat, where Alice as a child of nature is unconcerned by the fact that she doesn't know what kind of insect it is and is utterly unbothered by its having "sighed itself away").

Rhetorically speaking, her detachment is a function of "comic primness," and it allows her to be at once a heartless child and a critic of behavior who is "the most reasonable and responsible person in the book." There is a suggestion here (rather Freudian), as Empson notes, that the mind of the child is the paradigm of sanity. There is, of course, a paradox involved: detachment ultimately involves evasion; a child-like
fullness of the senses, taken in the social context, involves
the danger of anarchy. Alice's transparency is ultimately the
sterility of the Victorian mind. Empson pushes the idea a step
further to include what he calls Alice's "complacency." She
is the snobbish aristocrat who is interested in conventions
and their preservations, and, indeed, many of the other char-
acters in Wonderland have the same temperament but in more
abstract ways. This is another aspect of pastoral irony, for
in such a perspective Alice is much more an adult than a child.
She is a type of the refined Victorian little girl, and Dodgson
created her with such an ideal in mind. In Empson's terms, she
is "delicate," refined to the point of illness and deprivation,
and desirable because she is "corpse-like" (268). She represents
a type of purity which is in the last analysis inhuman--and was
inhuman in fact so far as realized in Victorian society. In
such a view the most perfect form of detachment from the cor-
ruption of human emotion is death.

In another perspective the combined sentiments of the
child-cult and snobbery reveal a much lighter mood, which Empson
compares to the same kind of complex sentiment as it is found
in Oscar Wilde: "...the theme here is that it is proper for
the well-meaning and innocent girl to be worldly, because she,
like the world, should know the value of her condition" (269).
In this perspective satire is a convention through which contempt
may be expressed without Alice's having to acknowledge her re-
action to it (consider the Mock-Turtle's description of his
education), so that the satire becomes more subtle because the
reader is forced to reach his own conclusions (here one might compare Dodgson with Swift). Alice, however, is different from the characters of Oscar Wilde, who are constantly involved in the polemics of personal and social morality, in that, as Empson says, "she is almost too sure that she is good and right" (272). This attitude of moral complacence (which is contrary to the Byronic theme of the pastoral poet-figure who is unable to accept the ideals of his society) doubtless accounts to some extent for the appeal of the book to children, because through such an attitude one may experience any conceivable condition with comic primness.

Alice's is an extremely flexible role, for through her eyes Wonderland is at once a microcosm of the world's absurdity and an imaginative macrocosm of its horror. As Empson says, Alice in Wonderland "balances between the luscious nonsense-world of fantasy and the ironic nonsense-world of fact" (259), and once one has realized this, the book assumes the aspect of a nineteenth-century version of T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land. It is a mine of historical and political commentary which subtly transforms the reader's mind to see Wonderland as a reductive version of the real world. Wonderland is a pastoral model of the permanent truths of human existence as well as an expose of the particular historical folly which characterized the nineteenth century. Alice, at the end of Through the Looking Glass, like the king at the end of The Waste Land, must make some attempt at a restoration of sanity, for she almost surrenders to the adult world:
She is a grown queen and has acquired the conventional dignities of her insane world; suddenly she admits their insanity, refuses to be a grown queen, and destroys them.

'I can't stand this any longer!' she cried, as she seized the table-cloth in both hands: one good pull, and plates, dishes, guests, and candles came crashing down together in a heap on the floor.

The guests are inanimate and the crawling self-stultifying machinery of luxury has taken on a hideous life of its own. It is the High Table of Christ Church that we must think of here. The gentleman is not the slave of his conventions because at need he could destroy them; and yet, even if he did this, and all the more because he does not, he must adopt while despising it the attitude to them of the child. (282)

As it was said, long before Freud: "The child is the father of the man."

Empson's essay on Alice in Wonderland is the finest and most suggestive psychological critical analysis he has undertaken, although it is not, as some critics have declared, the final word on Dodgson's art. It is, nonetheless, a landmark in the development of Freudian literary criticism, as well as a stimulating contribution toward an understanding of the psychology and sociology of the pastoral convention. In this essay, and within the book as a whole, Empson is exploring the pastoral convention in terms of particular historical instances, and he is not forcing the works under consideration to fit a pre-conceived schema; rather, he is attending to the logic of the individual work and focusing it within a general perspective of development which is sociological and psychological in character. Some Versions of Pastoral, involving as it does both analytical and generic approaches, looks forward not only to the New Criticism
but also to Northrop Frye and mythic criticism, as well as to the development of Freudian and more general psychoanalytic approaches to literature.
NOTES TO CHAPTER III


2. The New Criticism, p. 119.

3. Empson's Marxist leaning in Some Versions of Pastoral is a subject beyond the ken of this essay, but its general relevance to his socio-psychological approach has been of interest to some critics. See, for example, George Watson, The Literary Critics (New York, 1964), p. 184; also the following by Kenneth Burke: The Philosophy of Literary Form (New York, 1957), pp. 321-322; Attitudes Toward History (New York, 1961), p. 49. Burke has also written two reviews of Empson's book which are concerned with his Marxism: "Exceptional Book," New Republic, May 25, 1938, p. 81; and "Exceptional Improvisation," Poetry, LXIX (March 1937), 347-350.


9. Richards was interested in this idea in Science and Poetry, where his argument was that in such an attitude (which I would call "enantiomeric") the poet is masking the fact that he actually does affirm a union with nature or pretends to. Empson also notes this possibility. It is obvious that Richards is still very much an influence on Empson's thinking in this book. Indeed, Stanley Edgar Hyman, in his book The Armed Vision (New York, 1955), p. 262, has stated that Empson's idea of pastoral is implicit in The Meaning of Meaning.

10. Two Essays on Analytical Psychology, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Cleveland and New York, 1967), pp. 85-86. I have cited this passage because it is parallel to the one from Empson which follows. It is important, however, that I quote also a more fundamental definition from Jung in order that his idea be clearly understood. In Psychological Types he defines the terms as follows: "I use the term enantiomoria to describe the emergence of the unconscious opposite, with particular relation to its chronological sequence. This characteristic phenomenon occurs
almost universally wherever an extreme one-sided tendency domi-
nates the conscious life; for this involves the gradual develop-
ment of an equally strong, unconscious counterposition, which
first becomes manifest in an inhibition of conscious activities,
and subsequently leads to an interruption of conscious direction." 
(The Basic Writings (New York, 1952), p. 247.) of C. G. Jung,
ed. V. S. de Lasslo.

Another work which is relevant to this aspect of Empson's
thought, as well as to much of his theorizing concerning ver-
bal ambiguity, is Freud's essay "The Antithetical Sense of
Primal Words," found in On Creativity and the Unconscious, ed.
number of interesting passages from Karl Abel's pamphlet en-
titled Über den Gegensinn der Urworte which illuminate the sub-
ject of oppositional or contradictory meanings in the use of
language. Among those relevant to Jung's enantiodromia in the
present discussion one might cite the following: "Since every
conception is thus the twin of its opposite, how could it be
thought of first, how could it be communicated to others who
tried to think it, except by being measured against its opposite?
... Man has not been able to acquire even his oldest and simplest
conceptions otherwise than in contrast with their opposite"  
(p. 58). Abel notes further, in his discussion of antithetical
meanings in archaic languages, that "The essential relativity
of all knowledge, thought, or consciousness cannot but show
itself in language. If everything that we can know is viewed as
a transition from something else, every experience must have
two sides; and either every name must have a double meaning, or
else for every meaning there must be two names"  
(p. 60).

11. It is worth noting, beyond Empson's ideas here, that
there is doubtless some link between the pastoral lament, the
complaint of the shepherd in love, the more elegiac forms of
pastoral and the rich tradition of woman as sophia, sapientia,
order, or love itself. Dante and Petrarch, for example, did
much the same thing in the Vita Nuova and Rime that Donne and
Ralegh did in their poems. Empson seems to be at the very heart
of a rich nexus in terms of literary history, although he doesn't
push his discussion in that direction.

12. Richards' book Mencius on the Mind was published in
1932 and influenced Empson's later work in The Structure of
Complex Words.

13. "The Argument of Marvell's 'Garden,'" Seventeenth

14. While Kermode makes little mention of Empson's argu-
ment, except to toss it aside, Ransoman offers an alternative
explication (which seems far too simple) and rather severely
criticizes him as "a solipsistic critic," saying that "The idea
of the garden as an epitome of everything in the world is trans-
lated, as it were, into the idea of a poem as the epitome of
everything in Mr. Empson's mind" (Mr. Empson's Muddles," 333).

16. See, for example, Charles R. Metzger's essay on Steinbeck's Sweet Thursday entitled "Steinbeck's Version of the Pastoral," Modern Fiction Studies, VI (Summer 1960), 115-124.


CHAPTER IV

THE LATER POETRY

It is this deep blankness is the real thing strange.
The more things happen to you the more you can't
Tell or remember even what they were.

from "Let it go"

In 1935 Empson's Poems was published. He had published very little poetry during the time he was in Japan writing the essays which comprise Some Versions of Pastoral, so that volume was made up almost entirely of the poetry which he wrote during his years at Cambridge. However, after he returned to England in 1934 he began publishing more poetry and continued to do so at a slower pace during his appointment as Professor of English Literature at Peking National University from 1937 to 1939, until his return to England via the United States in 1940. The poetry which he wrote over those six years is collected in The Gathering Storm, published in 1940. The Gathering Storm reflects a change in style from and a thematic development of the early poetry in much the same way that Some Versions of Pastoral reflects a change from and development of his critical approach in Seven Types of Ambiguity.

As was the case in the development of his criticism, so also in that of the poetry: the later work involves a broadening and change of emphasis in relation to the earlier. In the early poetry he had attempted to reduce a tremendous mass of intellectual
phenomena to a highly condensed form of perception; to elaborate
the metaphoric extensions of a particular experience or state
of consciousness in terms of a central synthetic focus. He
had used poetic ambiguity as a means of demonstrating the essen-
tial identity of all forms of human understanding, and, in doing
so, he wrote a kind of poetry which was involved with an explora-
tion of the psychological limits of verbal forms. He was con-
cerned fundamentally with poetry as a means of defining the
relation between external reality and internal awareness, and his
metaphysical style was part of an attempt to create a synthesis
of perceptions which would make the poem as complete a paradigm
as possible of the complexity of a given state of consciousness.
Poetry for him was above all a fiction of verbal psychology
which allowed the maintenance of complex attitudes at the same
time that it explored the kind of despair which arises at the
discovery of their limitations. The poetry was a psychological
exploration of the human condition and an attempt to demonstrate
through verbal intricacies the kind of synthesis which might be
effected in order to include all the ramifications of the general
in the particular, while ironically admitting the impossibility
of doing so.

The later poetry continues in these same directions to a
great extent, but it involves less complex metaphor and is much
more personal in tone. The "style from a despair" is still domi-
nant, but it has become lighter and more subtle in some cases.
It is also more prosaic. The quest for synthesis is still an
underlying idea, but the synthesis achieved is more fragmentary,
grounded more deeply in Empson's personal experience and less in intellectual abstractions. In general the later poetry is something of an inversion of the earlier, psychologically speaking, because Empson is more concerned with his personal experience as a model for general ideas concerning the nature of human reality than he is with theoretical constructs. If, for instance, in the early poetry, the Theory of Relativity is used as means of explaining the nature of human perception, then in the later poetry the poet's own experience is taken as the means of explanation. He still maintains some of the pose of the savant and the objectivist, but his conclusions are grounded in an understanding of his own intellectual and emotional reactions rather than in an externalized and elaborately metaphorical conceptualization of human experience. The compressed ironic and syllogistic patterns of the early poetry and the early style itself were rather tentative in character, while the later poetry reflects a search for less strained, more free forms for artistically exploring the data of experience.

Although Empson sacrifices some of the intricate elegance of the earlier poetry, he does move away from some of its introverting and repetitive tendencies toward a more open kind of communication, toward a clearer if less complex kind of psychological creation. His own consciousness of experience is more social in character, and he is more interested in the organic whole of poetic experience and less in the delicate psychology of the word and line. Certainly in these respects The Gathering Storm mirrors a growth of sensibility similar to that observed in Some
Versions of Pastoral. This broadening of his literary and psychological concerns is doubtless due in part to his having been transplanted into Japanese and Chinese culture, but it is also due to a sense of the immediacy of the world at large, "the gathering storm" of World War II.¹ There is a central engagement with concrete aspects of human experience and with the psychology of moral situations. Empson is just as concerned with words as in the earlier work, but he recognizes the importance of using them to get to the heart of human existence rather than to comprise an elaborate gloss on its enigmas. His consciousness of political and social upheaval was too immediate to allow him the luxury of indulging exclusively in abstractions.

"This Last Pain," although written before "Bacchus" and not included in The Gathering Storm, is something of an epitaph for the early poetry, and it also codifies the idea of the "style from a despair," the art of the Ricardian pseudo-statement as a means of maintaining an intellectual equilibrium in the world of relativity:

Feign then what’s by a decent tact believed
And act that state is only so conceived,
    And build an edifice of form
For house where phantoms may keep warm.

Imagine, then, by miracle, with me,
(Ambiguous gifts, as what gods give must be)
What could not possibly be there,
And learn a style from a despair.

The poem is a kind of parable of consciousness which is defined by fantasies "projected into the inferno of experience"²:
All those large dreams by which men long live well
Are magic-lanterned on the smoke of hell;
This then is real, I have implied,
A painted, small, transparent slide.

Consciousness is defined by the projection of synthetic order onto the chaos of experience (Empson says in the note on the poem that "hell" is Sheol, chaos). The poem itself is a mode of verbal order in which the poet invests his belief, so that language is the medium of a limited but necessary religious experience. Through the poem he expresses a kind of faith in the fiction of language, although it is illusory—Credo quia absurdum est. This poem summarizes many of the psychological interests of the early poetry, but its "unclotted" style looks forward to the later work. It is an analysis of the motive of poetic creation and makes clear the fact that Empson's early work is defined by a metaphysical and psychological tension. The lessening of this tension gives way to the later poetry and eventually to a cessation of poetic creativity. G. S. Fraser says of "This Last Pain" that "The poise in these lines between scientific objectivity and imaginative creativeness, and in a deeper sense between rational denial and poetic assent, must have been very difficult to sustain, and perhaps partly accounts for the paucity of Empson's poetic output after The Gathering Storm (in which, for that matter, the style is more relaxed than in Poems, and in which the themes are moral or political rather than metaphysical)."³ "This Last Pain" involves an open admission of the problematic nature of the early poetry and, through its own style, forecasts a change of direction.
Empson wrote the four parts of "Bacchus" over a period of several years. The first part was written in 1933 while he was in Japan, and the others while he was writing the later poems from 1935 to 1940. He placed the poem first in The Gathering Storm as a culmination of the earlier poetry, but the fact that he was working on it as late as 1940 indicates that he never thoroughly surrendered his belief in the validity of the early poetry and its intricate psychological style. Perhaps he felt the need to demonstrate that his earlier poetic mode was capable of a longer poem, but it is, even more than "This Last Pain," an epitaph which he wrought at the expense of much time and energy. In his note (which is the best available interpretation of the poem) Empson defines the theme of "Bacchus" as the idea that "life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can't be solved by analysis; e.g. those of philosophy, which apply to all creatures, and the religious one about man being both animal and divine." This theme is elaborated in terms of a complex structure of puns and intertwined metaphors, which are themselves part of the structure of contradictions which is human consciousness. The foundation concept of a "mythological chemical operation to distil drink" is expanded to include a progressive change of human consciousness in terms of different stages of inebriation, so that the poem as a whole is an exploration of the ambiguous flux of perception which relates the world to the thought of the perceiving mind. This in turn leads to the development of the theme of self-consciousness through the metaphorical treatment of Mercury (as the metal applied to the back of
a mirror so that one may have a state of self-reflection) and to the idea of neurotic self-consciousness as an analog of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, which in turn implies the whole problem of objective knowledge on any basis. The final image of "the vaults and the dark arches" is one of the grave, an ultimate resolution of the problem of consciousness and of despair.

"Bacchus," like "This Last Pain," involves a recognition of the problem of equilibrium for the penetrating intelligence, and both poems are testimony to the fact that an increasing complexity of language leads only to greater illusions and to a fuller awareness of the limitations of those illusions. Both poems are dependent for their existence upon a sustained mood of introspection and abstraction, and both indicate that Empson's mode of psychological inwardness was leading only to greater degrees of infinite metaphorical regression. The contradictions which couldn't be solved by analysis but only described were breeding like the "Repeated incest," the "philosopher's disease" of "Dissatisfaction with Metaphysics." As Empson realized, the implications of language could be multiplied without end, like "Two mirrors with Infinity to dine," and the poems which follow "Bacchus" show a fuller concern with experience as revealed rather than with the verbal modes of its digestion.

"Your Teeth are Ivory Towers" is the first poem in Empson's more prosaic style, and it is concerned with the nature of the artist's experience in relation to society. In a rather Freudian vein, which reminds one of the essay on Alice in Wonderland,
Empson speaks of the artist's vision as being akin to that of the child, as being necessarily and significantly different from that of the other members of society:

The safety valve alone
Knows the worst truth about the engine; only the child Has not yet been misled. You say you hate Your valve or child? You may be wise or mild.

The claim is that no final judge can state The truth between you; there is no such man. This leads to anarchy; we must deliberate.

There is no absolute modality of truth; and language itself is something of an evasion of that fact, although the artist can maintain a kind of control through the exercise of his art:
"the spry arts/ Can keep a steady hold on the controls/ By seeming to evade." The poet's language may be limited and subjective, like that of "Piaget's babies," but it may also be important in so far as it does attempt to establish some form of truth, some viable if relative psychology of understanding. The poet may retire to the ivory tower of a private language, but his vision gives him a kind of tap-root to the societal unconscious so that he may serve as a "safety valve" by seeing its tensions more clearly than others. Although the world is a collectivity of subjective viewpoints, the poet can approximate the truth by pointing out the contradictions fundamental to all human experience; and this involves admitting the subjective relativity of his own experience. The central truth which emerges is the isolation of the individual consciousness in a world where communication is always imperfect yet can be attempted—as in the poem.
itself. In "Your Teeth are Ivory Towers" this idea is explored in terms of the fragmentary psychology of a kind of aphoristic, conversational mood, rather than through the metaphoric dramatization of the earlier poetry. The universe of the poem is not so pressurized, although it is still full of an existential darkness.

"Aubade" is a poem with a heavy sense of personal involvement which is unlike most of Empson's poetry in that respect. The sexual and political meanings are also made to carry a weight of feeling which is unusual in his work, and the whole is governed by a sense of desperation about the human condition:

But as to risings, I can tell you why.
It is on contradictions that they grow.
It seemed the best thing to be up and go.
Up was the heartening and the strong reply.
The heart of standing is we cannot fly.

The villanelle-like patterning of the refrain lines builds the meaning of the poem toward a central perception, which is a contradiction: going and staying are the same thing; contradictions are the mode of survival in the modern world, and love itself involves a kind of stoicism. The earthquake is a preview of World War II to come. In the "gathering storm" the poet is driven by the contradiction of desire and knowledge, and he wants both a regressive sleep and a permanent flight from a painful reality; in the last analysis they are the same, and the situation calls for a different kind of attitude. The poem is about the consciousness of necessity: "...the poet's very attempts to escape, his experience in the earthquake of the individual helplessness before the forces of nature (and before also, it is
implied, the equally ruthless and impersonal forces that are shaping history), has taught him a sardonic and paradoxical courage, the courage and the sense of freedom based on the knowledge of necessity: "The heart of standing is you cannot fly."  

In "Aubade," as in many of the later poems, there is a more intense concern with the role of the intellect in comprehending the meaning of experience. According to Colin Falck, 

What has come to the front here, it seems to me, is a deep awareness of the inadequacy of intellectual modes of comprehension for wresting order from the personal chaos. It is as though Empson had now seen the bankruptcy of the metaphysical technique, but instead of allowing the intellect to collapse decided to shore it up, as another way of saying the same thing. We need beliefs to live, but in affirming this need the new style at the same time suggests a sharp fear of their emptiness. These bare propositions, shorn of metaphor, we feel, cannot really be meant to convince on the deepest level: like proverbs they fit everything, and their opposites are always available. And yet they remain somehow illuminating. It is this, I think, which gives some of these later poems their pathos with the sense they convey of the whole rationalist intellect falling apart.  

For the most part this generalization does not apply to the later criticism, which, perhaps partly by way of reaction, tends to become more rationalistic, especially after Empson stopped writing poetry to any extent in the 1940's; but it does apply to the thematic concerns of the later poetry, where he is expressing the blankness at the foundation of human experience with less and less mediation through the intellect, because the intellectual approach to poetic creation always yields a fruit of contradictions and paradoxes. The contradictory situation of "Aubade" arises through an intellectual response, but its total
meaning is more emotional than intellectual; the poem is involved with the psychology of concrete experience rather than with that of abstraction. Yet, as Falck notes, the intellect is still present in an attempt to expand personal experience into general propositions about the consciousness of necessity; but it has lost most of its metaphysical trappings and, as Falck suggests, repudiates its own rational capability, much as Wittgenstein did at the end of the *Tractatus* when he stated that the reader "muss diese Sätze überwinden, dann sieht er die Welt richtig." In the later poetry Empson's language has a greater transparency which allows one to see the mind beyond the words.

The play of mythological ambiguity and latent Freudianism in "Four Legs, Two Legs, Three Legs" is something of a reversion to the style and concerns of the early poetry, but the poem is more of an experiment with a new kind of riddle than an exploration of a real experience, abstract or concrete. Empson's attempt to create a complex implicit meaning leads to a parabolic structure which is far too open-ended to allow one to fix his own mental processes, and an interpretation of the poem leaves one with a mass of vaguely interrelated data with no common psychological focus. "Reflection from Rochester" also reverts to an earlier concern, that with the fate of the human psyche in a technological world, but it is a more serious poem than "Four Legs, Two Legs, Three Legs" because it is concerned as well with the "gathering storm" of war and its effect on man. The poem is a study of the effects of fear, for this is a world of
massive armament and disruption, reminding one of that of Auden’s war poetry:

The mind, as well in mining as in gas
War’s parallel, now less easily decides
On a good root-confusion to amass
Much safety from irrelevant despair.

The emotion of fear involves a dissolution of the intellect and makes war itself seem an inevitable means of restoring sanity. In a state of fear the unconscious rules man’s action, and Empson relates this idea to his own style, because here "The mind uses unconscious processes (mining underground) and an outpouring of loose words, sometimes poisonous (gas);...." As his note makes clear, the metaphor of "mind" and "mine" is in the poem, but it is self-explanatory; the poem is revealing Empson’s own psychology, not simply its own structure.

The concern with fear is continued in "Courage Means Running," another poem with a contradictory title which echoes the theme of "Bacchus" and the refrain of "Aubade," as well as the idea of psychological equilibrium. Here he explores the "ballast of fear" by using a morass of abstract language in an attempt to hint at a more general and immediate problem, the syllogistic chaos of the argument being itself a key to the state of his mind in experiencing fear:

Yet
To escape emotion (a common hope) and attain
Cold truth is essentially to get
Out by a rival emotion fear. We gain
Truth, to put it sanely, by gift of pleasure
And courage, but, since pleasure knits with pain,
Both presume fear. To take fear as the measure
May be a measure of self-respect. Indeed
As the operative clue in seeking treasure

Is normally trivial and the urgent creed
To balance enough possibles; as both bard
And hack must blur or peg lest you misread;...

As he says in the note, the meaning of the poem is more general, because "the point is to join up the crisis-feeling to what can be felt all the time in normal life." "Fear" is a dominant emotion in Empson's poetry, both in the early work and in the later, because it is the basic motivation for the maintenance of equilibria and the creative despair which characterize his poetic credo. Fear is a kind of psychological ballast which insures the possibility of action or makes necessary the creation of fictions which give life meaning. There is a Buddhistic fear of emotion in "Courage Means Running," and that fear makes possible the courage to flee the excesses of emotion in order to discover "Cold truth." The act of balancing "enough possibles" directs one back to Empson's criticism, which is partly predicated on that idea, for that is the means through which the critic reveals the creative mind implicit in the poem; but it also leads to the heart of the poem here: the balancing, the "blurring" and "pegging," are acts of annihilating the possibilities of language so that, in Wittgensteinian (or, perhaps, Buddhistic) fashion, a truth is revealed beyond the language. The poet's experience of fear is expanded into a more generalized idea of blankness or ineffability which cannot be expressed by language, and, at the same time, fear is a concretely real emotion which may serve as a means of survival.
"Ignorance of Death" is also a fear poem and, though using abstract language, is concerned with the psychology of death from an ironically personal viewpoint. It is a basically tragic study of attitudes toward death; the "Freudians," for instance, "regard the death-wish as fundamental,/ Though 'the clamour of life' proceeds from its rival 'Eros.'" Although "we are happy to equate it to any conceived calm," in the last analysis there is no way of comprehending it:

Otherwise I feel very blank upon this topic,  
And think that though important, and proper for anyone to bring up,  
It is one that most people should be prepared to be blank upon.

Death itself is the deep central blankness of existence; and language cannot describe it nor a feeling about it, so Empson again echoes Wittgenstein at the end of the Tractatus: "Woven man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen." Although "Buddhists and Christians contrive to agree about death/ Making death their ideal basis for different ideals," there is a sense in which Empson himself takes the Buddhist position that language is inadequate to describe the kind of thing or nothing that death is. His position is rather like that of the existentialist psychologist: death is only important in so far as it is a motive for life. Death and the fear of death mark limiting points for the activity of the intellect, but this recognition is a kind of affirmation of the value of feeling and intelligence, of life. The poem "creates, broadly, a conflict between the habits of the sophisticated intelligence and the fears that it cannot dispel: the more confidence placed in the intellect, the more tragically
moving is the discovery of its limitations felt to be, and yet, paradoxically, it is precisely these habits that can promise endurance of the discovery." This is again the ascendancy of the "style from a despair," a tragic recognition and stoic acceptance of the limitations of the mind. The poem unfolds its meaning through an exhaustion of the possibilities of a particular psychological state and ends with an exalted, pretensively casual but tragically real sense of fear and isolation.

"Missing Dates" is another poem defined by a kind of fear; it is concerned with problems of memory and embodiment, desire and death. It is a physiological reduction of the human condition, but its mood is defined by a mode of perception which is both scientifically objective and personally internal. Thus, its physiological significance is a metaphor for the poet's own psychology. Its aphoristic, propositional progression involves no exploration of ambiguities, and its "tightness" of emotion is very directly communicated, reminding one of the controlled self-exploratory death poetry of Yvor Winters:

Not to have fire is to be a skin that shrills.
The complete fire is death. From partial fires
The waste remains, the waste remains and kills.

It is the poems you have lost, the ills
From missing dates, at which the heart expires.
Slowly the poison the whole blood stream fills.
The waste remains, the waste remains and kills.

Just as the old dog cannot be made immortal by means of blood transfusions from the younger, so the poet in his growing older cannot be made young through retaining the past: in either case
there are complications which prevent success--life is not so simple a matter. An attachment to the past, particularly through regret, is poisonous to the "emotional bloodstream" of the present. The scientific-emotional analogy may be related to the Buddhistic psychology of desire and to the Buddha's "Fire Sermon" which Empson used as a preface to the Collected Poems. Elizabeth Drew's interpretation of the poem points toward this possibility: "...the poem is about the slow death of the heart from our own inertia....No transfusions from outside can revive dwindling emotional vitality. Life gets cumbered with useless regrets for our dead past, waste products, when it could still be productive....The 'fire' is the emotional parallel to the process of combustion in the body." Even though Empson himself explains that the "Fire Sermon" is only remotely related to the poetry which it prefaces, and even though he insists that the fire imagery in "Missing Dates" and many of his other poems is supposed to carry traditional Western associations, the "Fire Sermon" is doubtless intended to give the reader an interpretative direction.

"Fire" in the "Fire Sermon" is a metaphor for all the modes of phenomenal perception, and the Buddha speaks of the necessity of an indifference to these perceptual modes, an indifference toward pleasure and pain, "the failures of energy and desire." Life is a process of burning, and its fire is choked and extinguished by waste. There is a central contradiction in being human: "The complete fire" is death, literally (or, perhaps, also a sort of "karmic" death); "Not to have fire" is death because
there is no primal ontological energy. Man is again "King spider" and must live in the middle ground of being, avoiding excessive actions or attitudes. The buddhistic indifference to the perceived world is an analog of Empson's own idea of psychological equilibrium, of maintaining a balance in the circus of paradoxes and ambiguities which is life. An excessive attachment to the past, to one's own life as a function of the past is death, but even an equilibrated existence is death, for it is the "partial fires" which generate the slowly accumulating waste which leads to death. The process of living is always a process of dying, and all attempted resolutions of that process are necessarily tentative, grounded in attitudes, not in ontology. "Missing Dates" is a direct confrontation with the fact of death, and what Alvarez has called its "static quality" ¹⁷ (which characterizes much of the later verse) arises from the fact that there is no intricate psychological evasion of the confrontation, as was the case in the earlier poetry. There is no Buddhistic push toward Nirvana, but a tentative transcendence is effected through a cognitive act of the poetic intelligence, a controlled act of stoic affirmation.

Many of the themes of "Missing Dates" recur in the lesser poems which follow. In "Success" (originally "Poem") a kind of melancholy emerges: "I have mislaid the torment and the fear.... Verse likes despair....All losses haunt us," and in the parodic "Just a Smack at Auden" Empson seems to satirize his own obsession with the horror at the core of existence. In "Reflection from Anita Loos" fear is seen again as a psychological mode of survival,
and its presence in the modern world indicates the unconscious perversity by which men act. Ironically, Christianity, the religion of love, is the prime mover of the fear ethos, and Empson is venting more of his bitterness against it: "Christ stinks of torture who was caught in lime." The impending war is testimony to the fact that the psychology of man is dominantly unconscious and controls even the most external of his conventions; he is still a kind of savage, and, as Empson says in his note: "The way earlier societies seem obviously absurd and cruel gives a kind of horror at the forces that must be at work in our own, but suggests that any society must have dramatically satisfying and dangerous conventions;..." The poem is something of a demonstration of the problems which arise when men are not able to achieve an intellectual and emotional equilibrium, but the problems are archetypal: man is the neurotic animal—"It is not human to feel safely placed."

"The Teasers" (originally "Poem") is the most ambiguous of the later poems, so much so that Empson himself claims that "it doesn't make sense, you can't find out what it's about," and he says that it is a fragmentary distillation from a much longer attempt at writing a poem about the condition of the modern world. It is an open invitation for the reader to reconstruct the poet's psychology and discover a kind of uncertainty that can be read also in the larger reality of the world. In spite of its vagueness, the poem does have a meaning beyond mere verbal juxtaposition. According to John Wain, "the teasers and the dreams" are "our inward afflictions and aspirations--in Bacon's noble phrase,
the 'desires of the mind.' These desires, though they die and are merged with the undiscriminating stream of existence ('the careful flood'—possibly with an underlying reference to Styx) are still so much more important than the 'colder lunacies'—the disciplined and regulated actions—that it is useless to try to evade them.19 "The teasers and the dreams," these personal and internal modes of awareness are more real and significant than the clumsiness and insanity of human actions, but the scale of human action may ignore and destroy them. At the same time they must not be ignored because they comprise the small realities of individuals, and, although ambiguous, the final stanza seems to indicate the need for their being affirmed in the dying modern world; the subjective consciousness is the ultimate bastion of sanity:

Our claims to act appear so small to these
Our claims to act colder lunacies
That cheat the love, the moment, the small fact.

Make no escape because they flash and die,
Make no escape
 build up your love,
Leave what you die for and be safe to die.

In a sense, this is a quasi-Buddhistic exhortation to abandon the large world of automatic action and embrace the small world of an illuminated dream; to prepare for death by realizing that the "colder lunacies" of the world involve the death of the individual mind, by becoming indifferent to all things save the immediacy of one's own experience. It is a kind of secular memento mori meditative poem.
The remaining poems of *The Gathering Storm* are in a much lighter vein, and Empson has left behind most of the introspective, psychological themes, focusing less still on complexities of verbal meaning. Of the five poems added to *Collected Poems* which were written after *The Gathering Storm*, "Sonnet" is exemplary of the later style, but the most significant is certainly "Let it go." Empson wrote the poem after he had left Peking National University and during World War II while he was Chinese Editor for the Far Eastern Section of the BBC. Its tone is defined by a tired recognition that the storm of war has in fact come and that human consciousness is too chaotic to ever be restored to a true rationality:

It is this deep blankness is the real thing strange.  
The more things happen to you the more you can't  
Tell or remember even what they were.

The contradictions cover such a range.  
The talk would talk and go so far aslant.  
You don't want madhouse and the whole thing there.

The poem is about the potentiality of madness in an age when madness is in vogue, but it is also a personal affirmation of sanity. It involves a recognition of the need for reason in an irrational world. The poet recognizes the possibility of imbalance in his own mind, but the controlled form of the statement, together with the decisive final line, affirm the necessity of a psychological equilibrium. G. S. Fraser, in his review of *Collected Poems*, gives an interesting analysis of the poem's psychological meaning: "The phrase 'deep blankness' points to the state which psychologists call protective emotional fatigue; but
points to it unexpectedly, with gratitude. And the phrase 'madhouse and the whole thing there' is similarly an eloquently reticent paraphrase for what psychologists call 'total recall.' The poem is about deciding not to go mad, or about being grateful to Nature for her odd, her sometimes rather flat and depressing ways of stopping us from going mad." The central idea, in this perspective, is that man has a natural system of psychological checks and balances which he must learn to exercise, lest the horror and complexity of his existence overwhelm him.

Fraser's idea of the poem as exemplifying the problem of "total recall" suggests its affinities with "Missing Dates," where an attachment to the totality of one's experience was a condition of death, and it brings to the foreground the more general problem of how Empson uses poetry as a means of comprehending human experience. According to Colin Falck,

The poem... is really about the whole business of using general propositions to understand one's experience. And in being about this it is at the same time about not submitting to experience in its totality, with all the possibilities of derangement that might be involved. Like psychology, this is the intellect turned inwards, the self looking at the self. "Let it go"... states the central problem and illuminates all the other poems in a terrifying way.... It is not so much that the contradictions cover such a range as that the whole problem is to know what terms to use; and the intellect here can only take us to the starting-line.... A line like "The contradictions cover such a range" comes to seem an almost unbearably painful insight, because it sums up the choice between the intellect and poetry. By rationalist thinking, propositions which conflict cannot both be true, and if we try to handle our experience with them we shall live in permanent contradiction: this is the price of all reaching after fact and reason. But by the kind of logic on which romanticism and any poetry depends the contradictions may be reconcilable on some other
level through taking in the outside world with the imagination and bodily the emotions forth in poetry. 21

Empson's poetry is very consciously a mode of the Ricardian pseudo-statement, a function of the fictionalizing power of the imagination; but it is also an attempt to apply the rationalist intellect as far as possible within this fictional realm. Its richness as psychology resides largely in the fact that it is an exploration of the kinds of interaction which occur between the intellect and the imagination, and it is defined by Empson's insistence upon analyzing experience until the intellect can no longer answer for the result. Beyond a certain point of exploration there arise contradictions and paradoxes, ambiguities and ironies, that are not a function of the movement of matter but of the constructs of the human psyche. Empson does not create a Romantic resolution of these complications so much as he insists upon a recognition of the fact that the human mind does have complex limitations and that man must learn to live with them; his poetry is itself one attempt to do so. Poetry as a verbal form is not a means of explaining experience but of clarifying its extensions, of "formulating" its character and thus maintaining a balanced psychology of perception and response. Empson's poetry embodies a tough-minded kind of sanity; it is that of the sensitive scientist in a world growing increasingly more inhuman and irrational. In Falck's words, "what Empson has done is in its own way heroic; it is a kind of Götterdämmerung of the rationalist intellect, and it is unrepeatable." 22
NOTES TO CHAPTER IV

1. Empson says in the Preface to The Gathering Storm (London, 1940) that he put "Bacchus" at the beginning of the volume because "it is in a style I felt I ought to get out of, and I end the book with a somewhat prattling long poem written under refugee conditions in Hunan; the idea is that there is a change in the style of the poems, whether good or bad, connected with the steady approach of war which we were conscious of during those years."


4. In discussing the later poetry I will follow the order of the poems as they are printed in Collected Poems, beginning with "Bacchus." The poems from "Bacchus" through "Autumn on Nan-yueh" are the same poems in the same order as they are found in The Gathering Storm, and the poems after those were added when Collected Poems was published. The order is roughly chronological with respect to individual poems, although many of the poems in The Gathering Storm were not published previous to that volume, so that the chronology of all the poems is difficult to establish.


6. Fraser, p. 317.


8. Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, p. 150.

9. The title is given here as it appeared in The Gathering Storm. In Collected Poems it is "Four Legs, Three Legs, Two Legs," which lacks the impact of the Oedipal-riddle association. I do not know why the title was changed.


11. Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, p. 150.


15. In a letter in "The Critical Forum" in Essays in Criticism, VI (October 1956), 481-482, Empson elaborates on many of his ideas concerning Buddhism: "Like many others about thirty years ago, I looked up the Fire Sermon...because of Mr. Eliot's Waste Land....Afterwards, while in the East, I came to admire Buddhism a good deal more; I have written a book about the statues, which has been lost, after a lot of travel in pursuit of them.... I think Buddhism much better than Christianity, because it managed to get away from the neolithic craving to gloat over human sacrifice /An idea which returns in Milton's God/....The Fire Sermon itself is unlike most Buddhism, and leaves Christianity far behind, in maintaining that all existence as such, even in the highest heaven, is inherently evil...when I mention fire in my verse I mean it to have the usual confused background of ideas, not...the specific and raging dogma of the Fire Sermon. I can be sure of this because, though I probably never thought about the Fire Sermon when writing or revising, I had already decided that I thought its doctrine wrong, though fascinating and in a way intelligible. You might say that it is present as one extreme of human thought, because the poetry often tries to take the position 'what I am saying is admitted to be true, though people look at it in so many different ways'; but even so it is pretty remote, and not appealed to."

16. I have borrowed this phrase from Fraser, p. 317.


22. Ibid., p. 61.
CHAPTER V

THE STRUCTURE OF COMPLEX WORDS

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean--neither more nor less."
"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."
"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, which is to be master--that's all."

I

The Structure of Complex Words, though little read by most modern critics, is the culminating work of Empson's study of the psychology of language. The opinions of its reviewers have been widely varied. Cleanth Brooks, for instance, termed it "the most mixed-up book Empson has written to date," while Richard Sleight has hailed it as "unquestionably the most important contribution to critical theory since The Sacred Wood." In spite of its formal limitations, the book involves a significant expansion and systematization of Empson's earlier criticism. It combines the historical and psychosociological perspective of Some Versions of Pastoral and the intricate verbal-psychological analysis of Seven Types of Ambiguity into a rationalist systematization for the purpose of investigating the relationship between the interacting meanings of a word and its historical context. The book is an attempt to demonstrate the usefulness of linguistics as a tool of literary criticism, and for Empson this usefulness is best discovered through a psychological perspective whereby
Verbal meaning may be studied historically; that is, in terms of verbal meaning as a function of the literary and social mindset of given historical periods. In The Structure of Complex Words the historical span involved is essentially the same as that in Some Versions of Pastoral.

The book is dedicated to Richards, who, according to the dedication, "is the source of all the ideas in this book, even the minor ones arrived at by disagreeing with him." The Ricardian impulse partly originated and partly helped shape Seven Types of Ambiguity, and it continues to dominate much of Empson's work here, although in more complicated ways. Empson is attempting to define a common ground of linguistics and criticism, and he admits that Richards has already established in large part the pattern of the approach that would have to be taken. However, he takes exception to one of Richards' fundamental premises: that poetic language is an emotive, non-symbolic (meaning "non-referential") form of verbal communication. According to Richards, there are basically two modes of language as far as meaning is concerned: symbolic and emotive—the first is in essence scientific, objective and referentially descriptive, the second emotional, subjective and non-referentially formative of mental attitudes. Empson's contention is that, insofar as poetry is concerned, this dichotomy is false.

It is difficult to know how literally Richards took his idea when he originally formulated it, and by the time Empson wrote The Structure of Complex Words he had ignored or denied many of its implications. The Philosophy of Rhetoric, for instance,
is implicitly a denial because it finally involves the idea that all language is metaphoric in character and therefore referential as far as one can succeed in defining the reference of metaphor. Both Empson and Richards would deny (for their purposes) that expletives are referential, but Empson is emphatic in his insistence that poetic language must be considered as referential if one is to understand a poem through its context and in terms of the concretion of experience which it brings about. For Empson, the nature of poetic language is more complex:

The question here looks like a verbal one, and yet it clearly brings in much larger issues. Apart from the doctrine that the Emotions of the words in poetry are independent of the Sense, Professor Richards maintains, and I take it is more interested in maintaining, that the function of poetry is to call out an Attitude which is not dependent on any belief open to disproof by facts. The two doctrines seem intimately connected, though I am not sure that they need be; and in both I think it needs a rather subtle analysis to get at the truth. Certainly I think it would be a worse heresy to maintain that poems are not concerned with Emotion, because they are Pure Art; but I hope it is clear...that one needs more elaborate machinery to disentangle the Emotive from the Cognitive part of poetical language.²

The crucial idea here, in Richards' words, is that "...awareness of the nature of the world and the development of attitudes which will enable us to live in it finely are almost independent."³ (The above quotation from Empson is from the chapter "Feelings in Words," which was written in 1936 as a separate article, and at that time it would have been difficult to say definitively that Richards did not believe in such an idea as the disparity of perception and understanding.) The important word is "almost," for they are never separated or independent; it is Empson's claim
that they are more intimately connected than Richards would have one believe and, therefore, that their relationship is more complex than Richards' dichotomizing reveals.

Empson contends that a more subtle psychology is needed. To Richards' idea that poetry involves pseudo-statements and false beliefs Empson answers that such a conclusion is a matter of improper perspective. When Richards argues, for instance, that a Christian audience must suspend their own beliefs and assume other "false" beliefs in order to experience the meaning of tragedy, Empson counters that one should consider tragedy in more fundamental aspects—as an archetype of human experience which is valid within a general Western religious world-view. In such a perspective, then, there is nothing false about the experience: it is grounded in a real vision of existence. Moving outwards from this example, one can begin to see that Empson is not only denying Richards' assertion that the emotive aspect of language is more dominant in poetry than the cognitive element but also reversing it:

The main theme of Science and Poetry, a moving and impressive pamphlet, is that the arts, especially poetry, can save the world from the disasters which will otherwise follow the general loss of religious and semi-religious belief; they can do this by making us experience what the higher kinds of attitude feel like, so that we adopt them of our own accord without needing to believe that we are repaid for them in Heaven or that they bring good luck on earth....all this has almost nothing to do with the analysis of poetical language; when you come down to detail, and find a case where there are alternative ways of interpreting a word's action, of which one can plausibly be called Cognitive and the other Emotive, it is the Cognitive one which is likely to have important effects on sentiment or character, and in general it does not depend on accepting false beliefs. But in general it does involve a belief of
some kind, if only the belief that one kind of life is better than another, so that it is no use trying to chase belief-feelings out of the poetry altogether. (10)

Thus, Empson argues, it was "plaintive" of Richards to berate Lawrence and Yeats because they did not look to a poetic form which involved no beliefs at all. While he admits that The Meaning of Meaning frequently confesses to the difficulty of separating the cognitive and emotive aspects of language, Empson is clearly opposed to Richards and, in the final analysis, is saying that Richards' theory and practice are not subtle enough. In terms of the cognitive-emotive dualism, Empson's own poetry would be dominantly cognitive in meaning, depending as it does much more on cerebral than on emotional understanding. Belief is an almost intangible aspect of poetry and is as much a function of the poet's psychology as it is of the expression of traditional formulae or pseudo-statements. Belief is a matter of the psychological attitudes implicit in language, and its character is determined by the manner in which the cognitive and emotive aspects of language interact. It is this interaction which Empson wants to analyze, which Richards did not sufficiently explore.

Empson is again interested in the idea of synthesis and is saying in effect that the complexity of relationship between the cognitive and emotive aspects of language arises from the fact that they really are aspects and not realities, that the function of language is complexly unified and not easily subjected to division. As a rationalist with a bent for mathematics, he believes
that the character of poetic language is ultimately logical and thus opposes Richards' dictum in *Science and Poetry* that it is non-logical and fundamentally emotive. In Empson's view, no matter how fragmentary and illogical poetic language may seem, its final reference of meaning is logical; thus, its meaning may be analyzed in terms of a rationalist psychology.

Richards, in practice and in his later theoretical work, would finally be in accord with this possibility, though he would perhaps have more reservations about its comprehensiveness than would Empson. Both are in agreement that language can be studied through a systematic and logical approach, regardless of the academics involved, and Richards, as Empson acknowledges in the dedication, was the impulse behind the writing of *The Structure of Complex Words*. Empson's idea of a "complex word" is, of course, partly derivative from his earlier concept of ambiguity, that process whereby a word may have several meanings within the same context, where the context involves not only the explicit text but also the psychology implicit in that text and the milieu external to it. However, his more systematic linguistic and psychological approach to the study of complex words is derived largely from work which Richards did after the publication of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. In *Practical Criticism* Richards had said that an examination of the large and basic words of the English language would have to be undertaken before criticism could ever hope to be an exacting enterprise. He referred there particularly to abstract words, such as love, beauty, meaning, and so forth, and he answered his own call to arms when he wrote
How to Read a Page, which is an exploration of the usage and meanings of "100 Great Words." This work developed partly from his earlier book Mencius on the Mind (1932), where he had attempted a systematic approach to the study of multiple meanings in complex words in terms of the meanings which evolved in given contexts. There is no doubt that Empson's own "equational approach" to language as developed in The Structure of Complex Words evolved in large part from Richards' work in Mencius on the Mind. (It is also important to keep in mind that Empson's experience in teaching English to Oriental students was one of the main impulses behind this book). From 1932 until the publication of How to Read a Page in 1942 there seems to have been a great deal of intellectual cross-pollination between the two men, for the approaches to multiple meaning which they developed are remarkably similar, although Empson's is the more elaborate and individualized of the two.

The primary practical concern of Mencius on the Mind is the problem of translating the texts of Mencius into English. To take an example of the kind of difficulty which Richards is attempting to explicate, consider the following lines from Mencius:

孟子曰 天下之言 性也
mêng tzǔ yüeh t'ien hsia chih yen hsing yeh

Meng Tzu said, "Heaven below 's talk (of) Hsing (is)

則 故 而已矣
tê ên êr êh êi

about causes only."
To be sure, there are other ways in which one might attempt a simple literalization of the Chinese, but the main point is that the words in this line react upon one another through the context and in terms of their historically possible meanings in such a way that the statement is very complex. Richards schematically outlines the possible meanings as follows:

A. All who talk about *Hsing* (Nature) think of it as
   \[
   \text{fact, the given, phenomena,}
   \]
B. Common (popular) talk about *Hsing* treats it as
   \[
   \text{the causes (of conduct),}
   \]
C. Talk about *Hsing* is really talk about
   \[
   \text{the reasons of conduct...}
   \]
D. All talk (or popular talk) about *Hsing* is only in a fashion which sticks to it and cannot get beyond it.
E. The only way of speaking of *Hsing* is to seek for its reason.
F. All who talk about *Hsing* are only speaking conventionally (accepting old-fashioned views).

As he says, such an agglomeration of meanings is possible because the ancient Chinese had no categorical distinctions between psychology and physics or epistemology and ethics; philosophy and science were the same thing. The structure of meanings in the above line hinges on the word *Hsing*, which, like its English rough-equivalent, *Nature*, has a multiplicity of possible meanings and implications depending on the context of its usage and the way in which that context might be modified through intonation or emphasis, if the passage were being read aloud. Richards goes on to consider other such words in Mencius, such as *ch'ing* ("feelings"), *hsin* ("mind"), *jén* ("love") and *chih* ("wisdom").

The translation of such words involves an extreme openness to the possibilities of plurisignification, but at the same time it involves also the necessity of systematically ordering the multiple
character of a word's definition. Richards explores these problems in their most difficult instance: the translation of complex words in one language into complex words in another. His investigation leads him to propose a systematic psychological approach to defining the possible meanings carried by the "pivotal terms" of language (words such as Truth, Nature and Reason) and its "syntactic instruments" (words such as is and of).\(^8\)

Like Empson, Richards is concerned with delineating, as far as is practicable, the constituent elements in a complex or ambiguous word. Such a delineation, if thorough enough, would not only discredit much of translational and critical dogmatism but also would be valuable as a tool of analytical philosophy, which, like all philosophy (as Richards notes) or like Empson's poetry, is dependent on a "combative habit of mind" involving in its very essence problems of verbal definition. He is not concerned with multiple definition as a mode of illogicality (which, formally speaking, it finally is) so much as he is with interpretation as a method founded on a dynamic principle of logic.\(^9\) In order to exemplify what he considers a workable approach, Richards outlines in a sequential and elaborate form the senses of the word beautiful, the gestures (complex emotional moods) of beautiful, the senses of knowledge, the senses of truth and the gestures of truth. He then applies this schema to the explication of Keats' line "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." He is not concerned with the line in its context but "as philosophers and critics have mostly taken it."\(^10\) His analysis is thus not a
formal criticism of the line as part of the poem; rather, it is an abstract example of the way in which his system might be applied. In terms of his outlines, he expresses the superfluity of meanings resident in the line in the following equations: $B_5 = T_2b$ (the intuition of beauty is truth as sincerity); $B_8 = T_5$ (the beauty of the urn reveals truth, which is the apprehension of reality, the real nature of things behind appearances); $B_9 = T_4b$ (the beauty of the urn meets deep needs of our being, and this corresponds to the teleology of our thought). According to Richards, it is this rich profusion of meanings which causes a profound but rather vague emotion of acceptance in the reader's mind.

In *The Structure of Complex Words* Empson develops his own system for symbolizing verbal meaning. The set of symbols which he develops is defined through a broad range of psycho-linguistic categories:

- $A \cdot B$: the Senses $A$ and $B$ used together
- $A + B$: the Senses confused and regarded as one
- $A \cdot (B)$: the Sense $B$ "at the back of the mind" when $A$ is foremost
- $-A$: deliberate exclusion of Sense $A$ from a use of the word
- $A / I$: the first Implication (or connotation) of the Sense $A$
- $A^+$: an appreciative pregnant sense of $A$, making it warmer and fuller
- $A^-$: a deprecative pregnant sense
- $A / l I$: the first Mood of Sense $A$, a sentence giving the speaker's relation to someone else among these "A" "What I call A but they don't" or "What they do but I don't" and $A^?$ "I am not like him"
- $A / I$: the first Emotion associated with Sense $A$
the Existence Assertion, "A is really there and worthwhile" /Empson takes the symbol from Bertrand Russell./

A=B  the various Equations "A is B" (452)

This outline, like that in Seven Types of Ambiguity, is not completely rigorous, although the various symbols do generally define categories which do not overlap; and, again as was the case in Seven Types of Ambiguity, the definitions of the symbols are much more psychological than linguistic or syntactical. As Empson himself admits, the basis of his symbology is partly derived from Richards' categories of poetic meaning, and one can, with Hugh Kenner, see analogies: "A/I, (A), and -A are senses advanced, reserved, and suppressed. A+ and A- are Richardsonian feelings (speaker's attitude to topic). A, I, 'A,' A?, and A'I are Richardsonian tones (speaker's attitude to audience)."¹²

One could go further and say that the equations which Empson constructs from these symbols are also in part attempts to reveal what Richards would call "intention," the speaker's aim, "the effect he is endeavoring to promote."

The equations which Empson develops to employ these symbols as a means of defining the meaning of a complex word are more problematic, and all of their theoretical complications cannot be taken into account. In the most basic perspective, the equations are a means of concretizing the relation between a word and its context, so that its meanings may be accurately charted. Thus, they are not only a tool of definition but of critical interpretation as well, since they comprise a means of determining the manner in which "pivotal terms" define the meaning of the literary work of which they are a part. They are a
means of discovering the implicit psychological meaning of a literary work through an analysis of key words whose meanings subtly govern the meaning of the whole. At its worst, such an approach to literature would be, in Hugh Kenner's words, "like discussing an automobile solely in terms of the weight borne by its ball-bearings." At its best, it is a valuable critical approach, as may be seen in Empson's essay on King Lear or in Kenneth Burke's interpretations through "terms for order."

The equations are also a means of defining a standard set of implications carried by a word which interact with its historical and psychological context. A word may thus become what Empson calls "compacted doctrine," of which Pope's wit is a good example, and the significance of that doctrine is contextually governed, at least in part. The "Existence Assertion" is the prototype of the equations: it "says that what the word names is really there and worth naming" (39). It is a form which does not involve careful uses of meaning, although its meaning may be very complex. It is itself not really an equation because it is not consciously articulated to a sufficient degree, so that the speaker may deceive himself in using it, since he is not fully aware of its implications. However, in an equational assertion at least two senses of a word are used at once, and there is a psychological implication that "they naturally belong together" (40). Basically, an equation symbolizes the process of predication through which the mind comprehends the several meanings or the complex total meaning of a given word. Empson explains this symbolization as follows:
After numbering the senses as if for a dictionary I write this "A=B" in figures and expect it to make sense when read as "A is B" in words. The English verb "to be", I take it, is a witness to the same mental process as that which forms the equation, so that "is" here has the same range as in ordinary English, except that some of the uses for more complex grammar would clearly be out of place. I do not think that we interpret "A" clearly as a noun and "B" as an adjective, because they are too much on the same footing...; and a relational "is" like "A is (in the relation) B to C", which might conceivably connect three senses of one word, would also be likely to put one of them on too separate a footing from the others. I do not want to limit the possible interpretations, only to get clear the usual ones so that the work can go ahead. The most frequent are "A is part of B", "A entails B", and "A is like B", and the more peculiar one "A is typical of B" will have to be introduced. By definition an equation always generalises, because if it only said "This A is B" the effect would only be a double use of the word (which I symbolise "A.B"), imputing both "A" and "B" to "this", and there would be no compacted doctrine. However it may presume a limited view of "A", probably one with vague limits, and one could describe this process as saying "A's of this sort are B". When the sort is clear at the time of speaking the analyst ought to write instead of "A" the narrower definition, but the speaker may be so vague that this would misrepresent him; for example the sort required may be recognised only as what suits the Emotion or Mood. In particular, you can get equations of the form "a normal A is B", or "a good A is B", and I do not know that this last has any important difference from "A ought to be B". Here we get a case where "A=B" could apparently be the same as "B=A", using different interpretations for them; because "a normal A is B" is the same sort of thing as "B is typical of A"....In any case, an "A is B" assertion, for example, "A is part of B", treats "A" and "B" as two classes, not one as a thing the other as its property; they are both on the same footing; though the practical effect may be much the same as making "B" an adjective. (40-41)

An Empsonian equation is a symbolization of a process which is psychologically similar to that of metaphor: it is a mode of identification whereby, as in his earlier idea of ambiguity, a word carries a load of meaning which gives it the character of two
or more words with associated meanings and yet with the same spelling.

This mode of identification is an archetypal function of the human mind, and Empson is well aware of the fact that it is, like poetry, a fictional (but nonetheless real) construct. The use of equations as a means of analyzing this identification is necessarily more a psychoanalytic than a linguistic approach:

I take it that the relation of false identity is one which we are always first imputing and then interpreting; it is a fundamental tool in the process by which we classify things. There is a good deal of evidence from psychologists and anthropologists that this process is a fundamental one.... The Freudian complex is mainly a process of "identifying" one situation or person with another; and it is important to notice that the order of the terms is fixed; a case who feels during Transference "my psychoanalyst is my father" does not go on to deduce "my father is my psycho-analyst." Lévy-Bruhl was writing too early to be influenced by psycho-analysis, but he treated the imputing of identity between two things known to be different as the distinctive feature of the primitive mind. Piaget's children are doing it all the time. The only definite theory I could find in Pareto is that the mind treats as identical those things which excite the same feelings. (42)

Again, Empson is not taking Freud or Lévy-Bruhl as a formal context for his own theorizing, but he is interested in demonstrating the psychological basis of the process which he is attempting to explain. As in Seven Types of Ambiguity, Freudian theory is a background to his own thought and practice, and the kind of identification with which he is concerned is frequently enacted through the pre-conscious or unconscious levels of the mind; but he does not rely on Freudian terminology as a means of explaining it. The process of verbal identification with which he is concerned is actually one that is too pervasive to be treated
strictly in the Freudian framework, and, on the other hand, Empson's linguistic orientation causes him to ignore much of the non-verbal character of the mind as Freud understood it. Nonetheless, as evidenced in the quotation above, it was doubtless through reading Freud and others, as well as through his own experience, that he realized the necessity of using a system of equations as a means of symbolizing the peculiar intricacies of verbal identification.

Empson divides the equations into five types, which tend from Type I to Type IV toward greater unification of the constituent elements of meaning, Type V comprising a "nonce-equation" which carries no doctrine. Thus, Type I is the furthest removed from the "Existence Assertion," in which the word is fully unified, and Type IV is most like it. In a Type I equation "Two meanings are to appear together though distinct, and the simplest way will be to make one the head meaning of the word, since that is likely to be called out irrelevantly, and the other the meaning required by the immediate context....what the context requires will be the subject of the equation, because it is 'what you are really talking about,' and the head meaning will act as predicate, since it is a sort of extra idea which happens to be added" (46-47). (The idea of the "head" meaning Empson adopts from Leonard Bloomfield, and it involves the fact that the mind responds to certain words without the apprehension of their context.) Kenner summarizes a Type I equation by the formulation "Context-meaning implies dictionary meaning."}

In a Type II equation the subject is a major sense of the
word, and the predicate is one or more of its implications; that is, "part of the word's Connotation is called out" (49). Empson makes it clear that an implication is not necessarily a sense of a word, although it may become one through historical development and usage. If a word carries an implication which is strong enough to define a sense, then that sense may in turn define other implications as predicates. However, a Type II equation does not require a minor sense at all, and as such it may be an equation without a predicate, strictly speaking, since an implication which is not a sense cannot be a predicate. Empson symbolizes the general Type II equation as "A=A/I" or "A=A/x,y," depending on the complexity of implications involved. In Kenner's summary, an equation of Type II is of the form "Major sense implies connotation." 17

In an equation of Type III "the different meanings are felt to be independent but the word is so integrated that the head meaning acts as subject," and this type is similar to Type I "in that a major meaning intrudes, but it has the opposite order of terms" (50). In a Type III equation, as in a Type I equation, the context has to demand a secondary or predicate meaning; otherwise the head meaning would stand alone; but in a Type III equation the head meaning "appears as the 'essential' meaning of the word, or the 'only real' meaning, or something like that, so that the word can only be applied to the referent in view by a kind of metaphor" (50). Empson admits that the rather vague Type III category seldom occurs. The effect of an equation of this type seems to involve a complex metaphoric reduction. As
an example of this situation he takes Shakespeare's use of the word *fool*: "...he takes the symbolism of the clown so far (as I find myself reading him) that in effect he treats the word as meaning 'clown' and nothing else; when he uses the word about ordinary people they are not called foolish but described metaphorically as clowns. And the equations of the word have only accidental connections with the person so called; they are simply the standard doctrine about the Shakespearean clown—that he is foolish, mysteriously wise and so forth" (50). Thus, Type III "gives a feeling of metaphor" and involves making very subtle assertions which would not really be considered as deriving from a double meaning of the word in question. The most serious problem with this category is that the user of the word must be conscious of its possible meanings, but he must at the same time not reveal his consciousness through a more simple usage, which would probably involve a Type I equation. This category echoes Empson's concept of pastoral: "The trick is that one part of the range of the word is treated as the 'key' or typical part of it, in terms of which the others are to be viewed. The rest of the meaning indeed seems to be remembered rather by treating it as a Connotation of the selected part, and to that extent Type III is analogous to Type II rather than Type I....the chief one [of the examples] is the use of sense for pro-sense-ist or plain-man philosophies, in which good judgment of a narrow kind is made the key example of all mental processes, so that others must be viewed in terms of it" (51). Thus, a word whose operation can be expressed in terms of a Type
III equation is one which uses the head meaning as a simple statement of a number of condensed complex possibilities; it works by a process of typifying the universal in the particular. Kenner simplifies this category by saying that Type III equations are of the form "Head meaning implies context meaning."^18

In a Type IV equation the order of subject and predicate can be reversed without altering the manner in which the equation describes a word's action. According to Empson, such a use of words is to be found in individual stylists rather than in the work of artists using a more common idiom. As he says, "This type clearly implies a very high degree of integration of the meanings of the word, so that we have nearly worked our way back to the Existence Assertion" (52). He explains the operation of the Type IV equation as follows:

I do not think you get examples of it unless the "A" and "B" are in a similar relation to a third meaning of the word, which may be only vaguely conceived. This at any rate makes them symmetrical, so that the two orders do not conflict. To take a logical and clear-cut example, Hooker (as I learn from the N.E.D.) maintained that there is a sense of law meaning "both human and divine law", and undertook to give the conditions which such a law must satisfy. Here he is merely establishing a new sense of the word, which might seem to outface any claim that there is a confusion between the old ones. But in ordinary discourse it will appear that one is discussing either a human or a divine law; if while discussing a human law Hooker implies that it is also a divine law he can put an equation into the word law "human laws of this sort are also divine laws", and precisely the same the other way around, and the effect will merely be to say that this law falls into the narrower class which satisfies the conditions for both. (52)

Like Type III equations, those of Type IV tend to have a "feeling
of metaphor," and Empson considers Type IV equations as frequently exemplifying a kind of "Mutual Metaphor," although they need not be metaphorical. A Type III equation may involve a third meaning, which could be symbolized as "C," or it may involve a confusion of two senses, which would be symbolized "A+B." Empson gives as an example of this situation the religious paradox involved in the idea of salvation, which carries the balanced and unified meaning of "loss." Such an idea is verbalized as "He that seweth his life shall lose it," and equationally expressed as "A=-A." Another example which he gives is the Taoist use of the word tao or "way," wherein the word signifies that all men are inherently on the "way" and should therefore strive to achieve the "way." The fundamental notion of a Type IV equation is that, as Kenner says, "Neither meaning can be regarded as dominant,"19 but there is also frequently involved in this equation a paradox which hints at "some reconciliation otherwise ineffable" (53), an implicit third meaning.

The fifth type of equation works only for a word which carries no doctrine and is therefore what Empson calls a "nonce-equation." He includes this type simply to show that it is a possible category of the equational types, but he is not interested in its usage because it is beyond his purpose of examining words which carry doctrine. He does, however, explain its nature through an example:

...I can give an illustration, from Pope, of the fifth type which is to be rejected:

Where Bentley late tempestuous went to sport
In troubled waters, but now sleeps in port.
The drink and the harbour are perhaps simply two words, but if we accept the suggestion of the poet that they are one there seems no doubt that the harbour is the major sense, the drink the minor, and that the only plausible equation is something like "This placid afterdinner drink is like having reached harbour". Here the minor sense acts as the subject, but the context clearly demands the major sense, so that port here has an equation of the aberrant type. (54)

Such a word can thus be a clever pun but involves no doctrinal weight, although one could differ with Empson by saying that such a usage might be able to bear doctrinal weight given a different context. In such a case, however, the word would have to revert to another equational category. 20

This classification of psycho-linguistic functions involves in part an attempt to account for the complex interactions of the cognitive and emotive aspects of verbal meaning, and in this respect, at least, Empson goes far beyond Richards' tentative classification in Mencius on the Mind. The usefulness and significance of Empson's approach is, however, realized much more in his practice than in the theory, although many of the essays in The Structure of Complex Words were written before the equational system was fully worked out; and even those written later do not rely so much on its categorical rigor as on the general scientific approach to verbal psychology and linguistics which is its basis. The essay which most fully demonstrates the possibilities of applying the equations is "Wit in the Essay on Criticism," although it is not the best essay of the collection. It was written to illustrate Empson's thesis that "the main literary use of an adequate equation theory would be to clear up the feeling of a period style" (73). According to Empson, the
complex meaning of Pope's **wit** may be analyzed in terms of an elaborate Type I equation. Such an analysis is valuable not only because **wit** is a thematic word and thus a key to the total meaning of the poem but also because Pope's use of the word illustrates his own creative psychology, so that his own usage of its meanings manifests a kind of collective verbal psychology of his age. Empson is careful to qualify his interpretation by the observation that the Augustans were not prone to use profound complexities of language; their tendency was to simplify large concepts into general words like **Nature** and **Reason**, but they were not averse to complex puns and double meanings. Furthermore, one might add, such simplifications frequently involved a kind of condensation of meanings, so that a word like **Nature** became extremely complex in meaning, even if the Augustans did not always use it as such. **Wit**, however, as Empson says, was obviously used by Pope in a very complex way, and that fact accounts in part for the difficulty experienced by the modern reader in understanding the *Essay on Criticism*.

The analysis as a whole is too long to treat in detail, but it is rather easy to summarize the manner in which Empson formulates the equations of **wit**. After researching the N.E.D. for the historical development of the word, he outlines its definitions as follows:

A **wit**, then, or man who displays **wit**, may be a
1. bright social talker
2. critic of the arts or of society
3. poet or artist,
and in each class he may be divided into similar heads:
a. mocking,
b. acting as judge,
c. giving aesthetic pleasure or expressing new truths. (86)
He also introduces a sign "4" to account for the grammatical (or conceptual) form of wit as distinguished from "a wit."

This sign may symbolize in two ways: 4+ ("conceptual force, range of imaginative power"); and 4- ("power to make neat jokes or ornament an accepted structure") (87). Wit as a "joke" is then taken as the head meaning, because one could expect any reader to take it in that aspect in any context, regardless of what other meanings might be present. Given these categories, the Augustan critical position as it figures in its various forms throughout the Essay on Criticism is outlined by Empson as follows:

3=1, 2=1. Both poet and critic are social entertainers and must keep to the tone of polite society, since that is the final judge of the arts.

3=2. The poet is a critic; he should judge his work coolly not rely on enthusiasm.

3c=3a. The normal mode of poetry, in itself merely a cultivated pleasure, is satire.

a=b. The satirist is a judge; he tells the truth about life and upholds wisdom and virtue.

4+=4-. The field of imaginative writing is limited and simple; one can go ahead and give the correct rules.

3b+=la-.lf]. Even in authoritative writers one must expect a certain puppyishness. (88)

Empson's summary of the final equation requires some elucidation. The poet or artist (3), acting in his capacity as judge (b), and accepted thus in an appreciative or admiring mood (+), is the subject which implies the predicate, which is the "bright social talker" (1) who is mocking (a) and thus creating satire as an amusement (-), and he is to be valued as a "bright social talker." 21

This summary does not by any means account for all the problems of such an analysis, but it does demonstrate the usefulness of the equations as a means of formulating the pattern of
a word's meaning as it is present to the consciousness of the poet and of the trained reader. In "All in Paradise Lost" Empson attempts an analysis of the meaning of all as Milton used it, but, although the word is to a certain extent thematic, like wit, it cannot be charted as a complex word because it is a word "for which an emotive theory seems about all you can hold" (101). The word is functional more through mood than through intellectually apprehendable meaning, although the metaphysics of Paradise Lost supports its significance, as the poem is about all time, all space, and so forth. Its effect is that of a kind of pre-conscious Wagnerian leitmotif, and Empson suggests that its action might be better understood in terms of a system of pseudo-Freudian equations of verbal meaning, rather than in terms of his own rationalist set of categories, but he does not pursue this interesting possibility. As in the case of the analysis of the Essay on Criticism, he relates the word's meaning, in this case its emotive obscurity, to the author's psychology. He relates it to what he defines as Milton's desire to justify an unjust act of God, thus adding more fire to the arguments which will come to a head in Milton's God.

In "The Praise of Folly" and "Fool in Lear" Empson is concerned with fool as a complex word, taking Erasmus' Praise of Folly as a starting point for the word's development since the Middle Ages. This direction involves a return to his earlier idea of the pastoral convention and of the multiple psychology of the pastoral figure: the child as fool; the simple man who sees life more fully than the serious man; the fool as soothsayer; the mania
of the poet; the folly of Christ and so forth. In the first essay he compiles a chart of the word's meanings, largely from the N.E.D.; establishes a set of equations which characterize the Elizabethan understanding of the word; and then, in the second, applies these equations to the use of the word and its concepts in *King Lear*. He is primarily concerned with the word as a reference point from which to analyze the complex folly which defines Lear's thinking and action. Lear's existence as a fool is a key to the larger meanings of the whole play, so that Erasmus is seen as a kind of cornerstone to its structure: the play, seen from Empson's point of view, is about the different aspects of folly as a norm of human experience; and the word *fool* and its implications codify this norm. Lear's experience of the chaotic and the irrational, brought about through his own folly, is representative of that of all men, so that he becomes like Frazer's sacrificial hero who experiences the abyss and, according to Empson, actively lives the extreme kind of folly which other men live only through him in a kind of passive communion. Thus, he is a type of Christ who died that other men might live—Christ as a divine fool. In this analysis, as in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, Empson is concerned with the polarities of human experience as a central theme of literature, and, as in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, he is particularly interested in the way in which these polarities are developed in terms of verbal meaning. He does not offer his interpretation as final and complete but as an approach to a fuller understanding.²²

"The English Dog" and "Timon's Dog," like the essays on *fool*,
form a pair, the first dealing with the historical development of the word *dog*, and the second with its thematic function in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*. "Timon's Dog" is a complicated attempt to demonstrate the manner in which the play is structured in terms of images concerning dogs, and Empson elaborates a theory of the "double symbol" in order to interpret the way in which Shakespeare's use of *dog* implies a conflict of judgment about the word's meaning (176). The word is so barbed with ironies, however, that this theory does not offer a very comprehensive approach; the psychological response to the word is somewhat like that to Milton's *all* and is too emotive to be neatly analyzed.

"The English Dog" is the more important of the two essays, particularly because it is concerned with the "unofficial" doctrine carried by a word's meaning. Empson explains this idea as follows: "From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries a number of English words, *arch*, *rogue*, *fool*, *honest*, *dog* and so forth, went through a cycle of curious slang or 'emotive' uses that invoke patronage, irony and sympathy, and though we still give them slang uses we keep on the whole to the last stage of the cycle. It seems to me important, as a matter of history, to understand how the cycle went, because a man tends finally to make up his mind, in a practical question of human relations, much more in terms of these vague rich intimate words than in the clear words of his official language" (158). It is his purpose in *The Structure of Complex Words* to clarify the psychological processes by which "these vague rich intimate words" call up
attitudes, whether through poetry or through more public literary forms. *Dog* lends itself quite easily to this purpose, although there is no possibility of a final clarification concerning how its meaning is apprehended. Empson suggests that the fact that words like *dog* carry such complex "underground" meanings may be related to the idea that certain psychological attitudes are repressed in order to distance certain feelings. Thus, the attitudes associated with a word like *dog* are only incompletely conscious, and one must search deeply in order to discover their origin. Empson speculates that *dog* may be complexly related to *rogue*, which he construes as clashing the sounds of *roam* and *dog* and bearing something of the meaning of both. He is not attempting an accurate etymological description of the word; rather he is attempting to discover the psychological basis of its meaning. He relates the ambiguous meaning of *dog* to the fact that, when spoken, it is formed as "a sound at the back of the throat which suggests either outcasting and contempt or a pointing at one's inner man" (160). This observation leads him into the most hypothetical ground of psycholinguistics, that concerned with the origin of language as a complex function of the symbolizing brain and the speaking body:

Compare the opposite sound *God*, which begins at the back of your throat, a profound sound, with which you are intimately connected ("ich"), and then stretches right across to a point above the teeth, from back to front, from low to high, with a maximum of extension and exultation. "D" does not stop the movement as "b" would by closing your lips, so that the idea can shoot upwards straight out of you. The suggestion of retching in the "g" ("gob") is absorbed by this, and an effect of disgust appears only in swearing, for which the word is well suited. In "dog" you do not simply do this backwards; both consonants have to
be pronounced forwards though the vowel goes back, and the effect can hint at a change of mind. The "do" sound is all in the front, connected with an external object; it moves the tongue out and down with an effect of giving (as in the Aryan root) or of ejecting something from the front of the mouth. Then (with a sudden movement of affection, or a discovery of the truth, or a final anathema) the word reaches across to something deep, personal to you, and despised. (163-164)

Thus, according to Empson, there is an original ambiguity inherent in the word's sound which has allowed it to develop complexly in an historical perspective, e.g. to carry an evil sentiment until the Restoration, and then during and after the Restoration to become a metaphor of praise and sympathy. The word's "underground" meaning may be historically modified, and those aspects of its meaning brought to the surface in a given historical period are a function of that period's mind-set. Conversely, the way in which a word is used in a given period partly determines its mind-set, although, as Empson says, it does so "unofficially," through psychological modes that are not easily made conscious.

Empson's trilogy of essays on honest as a complex word, "Honest Man," "Honest Numbers," "Honest in Othello," follows essentially the same format as those on wit, fool and dog: the meanings of honest are charted in terms of the equations; and then the equational processes are used as a means of interpreting the word's psychological and symbolic action in Othello. Similarly, "Sense and Sensibility" is an exploration of the meanings of those two words, and the three essays which follow, "Sense in Measure for Measure," "Sense in The Prelude" and "Sensible and Candid," are literary applications of the knowledge thus gained. Although the essay on Measure for Measure is the best critical work of
this group, that on Wordsworth is the most important for the present discussion, because Empson is attempting to apply his analytical approach to a Romantic poem, a realm in which he is somewhat uncomfortable and in which his kind of critical approach has been little exercised.

He ignores the traditional Wordsworthian words such as Nature and Imagination and devotes himself to defining the no less crucial role played by sense. As he notes, the word figures in practically all the passages in Tintern Abbey and The Prelude which are concerned with the relation between the human mind and nature. Furthermore, Wordsworth generally uses the word at the end of the line, so that it continually carries a heavy load of meaning through positional stress. He takes as his starting point its use in Tintern Abbey in the well-known lines:

A sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,...

(11. 95-96)

This use corresponds to the N.E.D. definition "...not by direct perception but more or less vaguely or instinctively," as Empson quotes it (289). He cites as well a number of more trivial and diluted uses of the word in The Prelude and notes that, besides the primary use of the word as defining a mode of intuition, there are also instances in which it carries the meaning of "good judgment" (III,368; VI,113; VII,507). There are two passages in which Empson discerns a near equation of "good judgment" and creative imagination through the use of sense (IX,401; XIV,368). He observes that Wordsworth uses sensibility only
twice (II,270; II,360) and then only in reference to babies. This may be accounted for by the fact that Wordsworth's reaction against the poetic diction of the eighteenth century involved as well a reaction against the idea of sensibility which flourished up to his time, and he did not want any suggestion of "The Man of Feeling" about his work.

Empson's general tendency not to insist on ambiguities in Wordsworth's language leads him into the trap of listing a great number of examples about which he says very little. He does, nonetheless, have some interesting interpretations of multiple meaning. He argues that Wordsworth's use of sense and its associated forms in the 1805 version of The Prelude involved some rather ambiguous uses of the word, which became more strongly paradoxical in the 1850 version. The essential paradox is that the ecstasy of Wordsworthian vision both destroys normal sense and fulfills it, so that "the world thus shown is both the same as and wholly different from the common one" (295). Empson interprets this idea as follows:

The most fundamental statement of this theory of the senses is made about the famous baby at the breast:

For him, in one dear Presence, there exists A virtue which irradiates and exalts Objects through widest intercourse of sense. No outcast he, bewildered and depressed... For, feeling has to him imparted power That through the growing faculties of sense Doth like an agent of the one great Mind Create, creator and receiver both, Working but in alliance with the works Which it beholds. (11.238-60)

The 1805 version brings in sensations and sentiment but does not have sense twice:
In one beloved presence, nay and more
In that most apprehensive habitude
And those sensations which have been derived
From this beloved Presence, there exists
"a virtue" and so on, and
For feeling has to him imparted strength
And powerful in all sentiments of grief
Of exultation, fear, and joy, his mind
Even as an agent of the one great mind,
"creates" and so on. The earlier version is thus
rather more pantheist, emphasizes emotion more, and
is perhaps less dependent on key words; the notion
that feeling "returns as power" had come to seem a
settled epigram to Wordsworth when he shortened the
second part of this quotation, and in the same way
it seemed an adequate theoretical coverage to say
"faculties of sense" rather than list the child's
emotions, which might suggest that he admired it
(as the Chinese sage Lao-tse did) because it yelled
so loudly. . . . Sensations here are not sensedata, and
thereby free from the ambiguity of sense, but a more
highly developed compound of emotion and knowledge
even than sense, and therefore convenient for for-
ing us to understand it. Indeed, the 1805 version
has no unambiguous term for sensedata, and I suppose
would have denied the reality of the concept; in the
1850 version Wordsworth sometimes inserts "bodily"
before sense to make a passage clearer (e.g. xlv.88)
but the earlier version hardly ever descends to this
(once in 1805 xi.272). (295-296)

In this example the meaning "good judgment" is an ignored or
denied "middling part of the range," and Wordsworth is interested
in the two extremes of the range of meaning, so that "The whole
poetical and philosophical effect comes from a violent junction
of sensedata to the divine imagination given by love, and the
middle term is cut out" (296).

Empson claims that Wordsworth invented a new form of the
word which involves a combination of sense as it was analyzed
above with sense meaning "the senses" in general. This new
word is the form with an article, the sense, which Wordsworth
uses in a line such as "Those hallowed and pure emotions of the
sense" (I,551). In such a line, Empson argues, Wordsworth is
implicitly denying "sensuality" as one of the meanings of the
word, for the function of "pure" is to suppress it. This process adds a curious blankness to the word, an obscurity which causes it to take on a double meaning. When the line just quoted is taken in the context of the passage from which it was taken (where Wordsworth is remembering his childhood), it is obvious that the word means both the senses through which he perceives the scenery about him and some "inner sense," which Empson reads as the supreme "sense" of the Imagination: "The effect is that, though Sensation and Imagination appear as the two extreme ends of the scale in view, so that one might expect them to be opposites, the word is so placed that it might equally well apply to either" (298). Thus, both "good judgment" and "sensuality" are excluded from the total meaning of the word, but, Empson claims that, in terms of the Wordsworthian philosophy of vision, one can make a valid argument that the whole range of the word is included in this one conceptual use. While admitting that Wordsworth's use of the word is vague (which it is in terms of any systematic semantics), he conceives "sense" as exemplifying a Type IV equation (of which an earlier example was Hooker's law meaning both "human" and "divine" law). The process through which this integration takes place, he says, is rather "obscure," and one can never be sure which term of the equation is to come first. Empson's expression of the "A is B" form is "Sensation and Imagination interlock" (299). He then goes on to accuse Wordsworth, on these grounds, of being "much better at adumbrating his doctrine through rhetorical devices than at writing it out in full" (300). This seems an unnecessary and largely irrelevant
accusation, for Wordsworth was after all a poet and not an analytical philosopher. He wrote a language which was to be apprehended emotionally as well as intellectually; the fact that his use of sense cannot be neatly analyzed in terms of Empsonian psycholinguistics does not necessarily make him a bad poet or a sloppy thinker. He, like many of his fellow poets, was attempting to express in verbal language feelings which were essentially mystic and non-verbal in character, so that his language is seldom simply discursive but, rather, associative and sometimes vague. Wordsworth is not so much concerned with maintaining an even and distanced relation between his thought and his language as he is with developing a mode of vision through which the distance between subject and object, mind and word, is annihilated. This does not mean that Empson's analytical-rationalist method is useless as a critical approach to Wordsworth or any of the Romantics; but it does mean that other kinds of word-usage may be involved, and that the critic should be prepared to take that into account.

Empson's assertion that Wordsworth's important uses of sense involve the double meanings of "Sensation" and "Imagination" is a valuable insight, for it demonstrates very clearly on one level the manner in which metaphysics and language are unified in the larger meaning of his poetry. One of the problems with Empson's argument is that it has to account for the fact that "good judgment" is ignored by the two extreme meanings of "sense," whereas in fact there seems to be little need to take into account a meaning which isn't necessary to the poetry. Empson, in a real
sense, wants Wordsworth's use of the word to include all of its historical meanings, and he is disappointed when it doesn't. His closing sentences are partly an apology for his more severe criticisms, but they also summarize what he considers to be the problem with sense:

Besides, Wordsworth seems to have followed Coleridge in going to the opposite philosophical extreme, from Associationism to Idealism, without feeling that the change needed to be made obvious in these poetical expressions of his theory. It does not seem unfair to say that he induced people to believe he had expounded a consistent philosophy through the firmness and assurance with which he used equations of Type IV; equations whose claim was false, because they did not really erect a third concept as they pretended to; and in saying this I do not mean to deny that the result makes very good poetry, and probably suggests important truths. (305)

A paraphrase of this statement yields the following: if Wordsworth is writing as an idealist and hinging his primary philosophical position on the word sense as meaning both "Sensation" and "Imagination", then one should expect that such a usage, exemplifying a Type IV equation, would involve a "third concept" which is the result of the equational interaction of the two meanings--and that concept would be a poetic analog of the idealist absolute. That seems to be Empson's meaning, and, if it is, it is an interesting psychological idea; but it does not so much demonstrate a failure of Wordsworth's language (which, to a degree, it does) as it asks Wordsworth to be a different kind of poet than he was. What one learns from Empson's work here is something about the kind of logical incoherency which characterizes the Romantic mind as revealed through Wordsworth's language, but one also learns that Empson's positivistic psychological approach
to the study of language may not always be as fruitful as it is with Pope or Shakespeare.

The remaining essays in *The Structure of Complex Words* are more theoretical and directed toward defining the general importance of Empson's approach. In "Mesopotamia" he is concerned with the way in which a word imposes its pre-established equational structure on its context, and this leads him to a consideration of the psychology of deception involved in false arguments which depend on non-contextual responses to verbal meaning. In "Pregnancy" he explores the "typifying process" whereby the meaning of a word may be shifted through a pattern of emphases or "pregnancies," where a "pregnancy" "implies concentration on characteristics of the referent that are, or are considered to be, essential and typical, mostly from a moral or intellectual point of view, and it often involves a valuation of the referent" (322). His key example is the use of *man* in Hamlet's speech to Horatio (*Hamlet*, I, ii, 187-188: "He was a man, take him for all in all, I shall not look upon his like again.") in which the word calls up as referents both the class of "men" and the ideal "man," and in either case there is an act of valuation in the mind of the speaker. Furthermore, the stress of the pregnancies involved depends a great deal on the manner in which the line is spoken, because pregnancy is a function of audience psychology.

In "Metaphor" Empson returns to many of the problems in the earlier theoretical essays. He is dissatisfied with Richards' definition of metaphor in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* and argues that many of the cases of double meaning which he discusses are
not really metaphoric. Thus, he claims, his own equations are a more comprehensive means of describing the psychological and linguistic processes not only of metaphor but of non-metaphoric meaning as well. Thus, the metaphoric use of a word will generally correspond to one of the equational categories, although Empson is careful to qualify his claim by saying that non-assertive or descriptive metaphors do not generally have an equational structure. "True" metaphor, in his view, does have an equational structure and involves a "pregnant" usage of the term serving as the vehicle. He relates this idea to Gustaf Stern's conception of the "psychic resistance" which accompanies metaphor as a mental process and which he equates with his own notion of the "resistance to false identity" that characterizes the formation of a word's equational structure (334). The underlying conception of both is that metaphor involves the identification of two or more meanings in one word against the logical tensions of language and, consequently, against the process of sequential verbal consciousness. Thus, according to Empson, a simple metaphoric relation could be expressed by a Type I equation in which (in Richards' terminology) the tenor acts as the subject and the vehicle as the predicate. More complex metaphors, those subject to the action of different kinds of pregnancy, could be expressed by other equational categories. Such a systematization of metaphor, he suggests, would also be helpful in distinguishing between "transference" and "true" metaphor or in analyzing the components of mutual metaphor, which involves a Type IV equation.
In "A is B" and "The Primitive Mind" Empson turns his attention to a fuller discussion of the equational process as a typical mode of the human mind. In the first he is concerned with the subject-predicate equation as a general form of philosophical statement, particularly in the truth-beauty equation in Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," but the second is the more significant work from a psychological point of view. He rejects Owen Barfield's thesis that the richest words in the human vocabulary are the most ancient and that human rationalism is slowly destroying them. The example used by Barfield which particularly interests Empson is the Greek word πνευμα. Barfield's argument may be quoted as follows:

Now it is an indisputable fact that, the further we look back into the history of the meanings of common words, the more closely we find them approximating to this latter, concrete type. Thus, even as recently as the date of the composition of the Fourth Gospel (John, ch. 3, v and viii) we can hear in the Greek πνευμα an echo of just such an old, concrete, undivided meaning....We must, therefore, imagine a time when 'spiritus' or πνευμα, or older words from which these had descended, meant neither breath, nor wind, nor spirit, nor yet all three of these things, but when they simply had their own peculiar meaning, which has since, in the course of the evolution of consciousness, crystallized into the three meanings specified--and no doubt into others also, for which separate words had already been found by Greek and Roman times....Both 'root' hypothesis and 'metaphor' hypothesis fall to the ground together. Mueller's so-called radical metaphor, instead of being primitive, is seen to be one of the latest achievements of conscious linguistic development. A better name for it would by synthetic metaphor; and a better example, say, gramophone. 'Roots', far from being the germs of speech, are the products of ages of intellectual abstraction carried on, first, instinctively by ordinary speakers, and afterwards deliberately by the grammarians and philologists.24

Empson contends that he finds in Greek literature a number of
instances in which the Greeks were in fact adding metaphoric meanings to a "root" meaning of πνεύμα, and he says further more that, even if the Greek feeling for metaphor were different from that of the English, the difference is not radical enough to keep one from seeing how they thought metaphorically. According to Empson, by the time the word has taken on the character of a triple meaning, it will exemplify equations of various types, rather than simply existing as an "undivided" meaning. As partial evidence for his position, he cites Piaget's observation in The Child's Conception of Causality that children (as an analog of the primitives) quite clearly understand the difference between "wind" and "breath," although they do use the words metaphorically, as in "Bill, punch him in the wind" (377). Children see a causative connection between two such meanings and thus tend to identify them metaphorically. Empson concludes that "if there is any primitive process at work in building the metaphor it must surely be the one we have evidence for; the quasi-identifying of wind and breath from a vague magi cal belief that they have connections of cause" (377).

As further evidence for his argument that primitive word forms were metaphoric in structure and dependent on the psychological process of "false identity" he cites Levy-Bruhl's How Natives Think. He agrees with Lévy-Bruhl's hypothesis that primitive thought is defined by its process of identity and synthesis; but he does not agree that this is what distinguishes it from that of modern man, for, he says, modern man is still dependent on this process—man's verbal psychology is still partly
pre-logical. The equational process which is the basis of metaphoric identification was, according to Empson, central to the mysticism of primitives:

It seems enough to say that in such thought they think by equations, usually those inherent in their traditional symbols; they feel, therefore, that they are sinking into the accepted symbols, bringing out the wisdom buried in the symbols, a thing that belongs to the tribe not to one speaker; whereas in ordinary life you take one end (meaning, context) of the symbol and put it to an independent practical use. This may in turn lead to a feeling that when they use such equations they are mysteriously one with some greater being, or what not, a feeling that would ordinarily be called mysticism.... Thus the use of "mystic" goes back to the terms "representation collective" and "conscience commune". (385)

Empson considers the process of "false identity" as a feature of the collective social mind of man, and he relates the "A is B" form of equation to totemism, the universality of which he takes as evidence that the human mind is "inherently metaphysical" (387). Thus (and here one thinks of Empson's own poetry), poetic identity is itself traditionally totemic in nature, and totemism is fundamentally metaphoric. The psychological process by which Donne equates Elizabeth Drury as a person with the Logos is essentially the same as that by which the tribal totem is both the tribe and the mysterious forces beyond the tribe. This kind of identification typifies a Type IV equation, according to Empson, the type which in its close unity of subject and predicate moves closest to (but does not include) Barfield's idea of the undifferentiated cognitive process.

The final essay, "Dictionaries," is an examination of the possibility of using a prosaic formulation of the equations as a
means of improving the accuracy and fullness of dictionary
definitions, particularly in terms of the psychological mood
communicated through various kinds of usage. Empson's proposals
comprise a realistic program for making more useful the mechan-
ical and thesaurus-like definitions of dictionaries presently
in use. This essay, like The Structure of Complex Words as a
whole, illustrates the critical pragmatism of Empson's work and
demonstrates, furthermore, his general concern with the founda-
tion of what Gustaf Stern terms a Grenzwissenschaft, a com-
posite, "boundary" science of psychology and linguistics as a
tool of literary criticism. The Structure of Complex Words is
the product of a scholarly "no man's land," but it triumphs over
the limitations of its eclecticism and is a valuable work indeed,
not only for the literary critic but also for the linguist,
psychologist, sociologist and anthropologist. As in his early
poetry and criticism, Empson is still very much concerned with
the idea of synthesis and the necessity for the literary critic
to be intellectually flexible, to be both scientist and poet in
his reading of literature and in his study of language.
NOTES TO CHAPTER V


2. The Structure of Complex Words (London, 1964), p. 7. Further citations from this work will be by page number from this edition.


4. It is interesting to note that Empson has added some remarks to his original essay. He says, for instance, that by the time Richards wrote The Philosophy of Rhetoric (1936) and Interpretation in Teaching (1938) he seems to have abandoned the idea that the poet was not supposed to worry about the sense of his language, so that "the only tolerable way to read poetry is to give the full Sense a very sharp control over the Emotion" (14). He then apologizes for Richards' earlier doctrine by saying that it was an attempt to stress the importance of emotion in poetry, but, he says, Richards' influence has nonetheless involved an intellectualistic rather than an emotional stress.

From another point of view, W. H. N. Hotopf in his book Language, Thought and Comprehension (Bloomington, 1965), which is a study of the work of Richards, contends that Empson misinterpreted Richards when he wrote The Structure of Complex Words. According to Hotopf, Empson "showed much overindividualizing of Richards' meaning, a taking of Richards' meaning as more specific than it actually was" (p. 170). Hotopf argues that Empson was not interested in carefully establishing his own theoretical position in relation to Richards, that he "browsed over" Richards theories without realizing that their unity was much more general. Such an argument explains in part why Empson vacillates so much in the judgments he makes about Richards, for he alternately attacks and apologizes for Richards' theories, finally making admissions to the effect that Richards is generally very sound. Hotopf explains that what Richards' meant by "pseudo-statements" was much more general than Empson thought:

Although Richards sometimes wrote as though they were to be limited to statements expressing the "Magical View of the Universe", his definition of them in Sol. & Poetry as "a form of words which is justified entirely by its effect in releasing or organizing our impulses and attitudes" suggests a much wider class of statements, and the wording is the same as he used in his previous books in describing the part played by reference in poetry. Richards, in fact, was totally opposed to the use of lies in poetry. Statements expressing the Magical View of the Universe were not lies when used in the past, because then they were
believed to be true. They were, in other words, the product of sincerity. Today we had to respond to these statements in the poetry of the past differently. The attitudes that gave rise to them could be re-aroused in ourselves, provided we did not have faulty ideas about the function of reference in poetry. But modern poets should not use these kinds of statements, except dramatically. To do so otherwise would indeed be to lie. This is what Richards criticized in Yeats and Lawrence. (p. 173)

Hotopf, of course, is concerned with defending Richards against abuse, but his argument here seems to clarify some potential misunderstandings. Empson's ideas about pseudo-statements do seem biased for the sake of establishing a point of view for his own theoretical concerns, but he has not misunderstood Richards as greatly as Hotopf would have one believe. In the last analysis Empson comprehends Richards in much the same way that Hotopf does, although he stands him on his head before he comes to that point. One of the disparities between Empson and Hotopf is that the former tends to read Richards' early works without reference to his later development, while the latter tends to justify the early works in terms of the later. Both are in essential agreement about the validity of the later Ricardian ideas, but Empson is not so willing to see a continuity between them and the earlier ones—and rightly so, for Richards undeniably changed his attitude toward the function of poetic language. The degree to which Empson and Richards differ in stressing the role played by emotion and cognition in poetry is finally rather academic; the mature works of both reveal that they agree on the fact of a complexity which is inherent in the relation between the two, and both are concerned with defining that complexity. For further statements by Empson concerning Richards' work, one is referred to "Theories of Value," which comprises the appendix of The Structure of Complex Words.

5. Empson also has been concerned with "translation," particular in so far as it is a process involving the clarification of complex meaning. In writing about Leonard Bloomfield's Language, in an article entitled "The Need for 'Translation' Theory in Linguistics," Psycho, XV (1935), 197 (the article is incorporated in The Structure of Complex Words, pp. 434-443), he said that he "read it while trying to find some way of separating out the emotions, implications, personal suggestions and suchlike in our complex words, seeing how they are related, how a learner might pick them up more easily; a region in which Dr. Richards has already done a great deal." At this time, Empson must have been referring particularly to Mencius on the Mind.


8. Ibid., pp. 92-93.
9. See Glicksberg, 524.


11. Ibid., p. 117. I have adopted the phrases from Richards' outlines in order to explicate his equations.


13. Ibid., p. 255.


16. Empson's example of this process is the word native, which was originally a patriotic epithet, which came to mean its historical implication, "not English," "inferior," etc. (49). He later quotes Gustaf Stern's Meaning and Change of Meaning on the ways in which sense-change occurs through a word's historical development and admits that, although there are many kinds of sense-changes which do not rely on implication, those which do produce the most interesting equations (80).


20. As a reference point for the discussion which follows, one may refer to Empson's convenient chart of the five equational types:

The major sense of the word is the... Subject Predicate

The sense demanded by the most immediate context is the...Subject II

......Predicate III

The order of the two senses is indifferent: IV (54)


22. For some of the reverberations from the essay on King Lear, one is referred to Empson's letter in Critical Quarterly, III (Spring 1961), 67-68, where he defends himself against Barbara Everett's charge (in "The New King Lear," Critical Quarterly, II (Winter 1960/1, 329) that he is "among recent critics who have accepted the pietistic views of A. C. Bradley"; and to his review of Maynard Mack's King Lear in Our Time, Essays in Criticism, XVII
(January 1967), 95-102, where Empson refutes Mack's "Morbidity-Play" reading of Shakespeare.

23. This definition is a mis-quotiation from Gustaf Stern's Meaning and Change of Meaning (Bloomington, 1965), p. 408.


26. One might compare Empson's ideas here with those of Claude Lévi-Strauss in his book Totemism, trans. Rodney Needham (Boston, 1963), pp. 15-32, where he discusses the "totemic illusion" as involving a "mistaken division of reality."

CHAPTER VI

MILTON'S GOD AND SOME UNCOLLECTED WORKS

Let us offer our pinch of dust all to this God,
And grant his reign over the entire building.

from "Homage to the British Museum"

I

Milton's God was present in Empson's mind in potentia at least as early as Some Versions of Pastoral, when he wrote his essay on "Milton and Bentley." Milton's work has attracted his attention for a number of reasons: its richness of language; its intricate theology; but most of all, its curiously ambiguous psychological structure, not only in terms of language but also in terms of ethics, politics (in the broad sense), philosophy and, in the final analysis, Milton's own mind. Empson's interpretation of Milton is motivated partly by a desire to clarify some of the critical problems surrounding his work and partly by a desire to strike a blow for humanism and rationalism against what he considers the inhumanity and insanity of the Christian world-picture. In short, he wants to demonstrate that the problems of Miltonic criticism, like the problems of Christianity itself, arise from the fact that the Christian God as Milton portrayed Him is the prime mover of evil; that He is in fact the Devil. This Blakean view of Milton's God, he contends, can be revealed only if one is willing to examine carefully the processes
of Milton's own mind implicit in his work. Thus, in the ten years since The Structure of Complex Words, Empson's critical approach has shifted somewhat radically from a linguistic to a biographical psychology.

Predicating many of his arguments with an analysis of Milton's psychology, Empson engages in some old-fashioned appreciative criticism and talks at length about the texture of his work; but, because of the complexity and unorthodoxy of Milton and because of Empson's own impatience with Christian ideology, this approach leads him to a very wrong-headed, however stimulating, interpretation. More seriously perhaps, his determination to prove his case causes him to abandon the disavowal of dogmatism which was one of the keynotes of Seven Types of Ambiguity. His attempt to vindicate humanism and rationalism and to denounce Christianity causes him to limit or deny both the scientific objectivity and the poetic sensitivity of his earlier criticism. He is far more interested in validating his own thesis than in allowing Milton's language to reveal its own. However, in spite of these important problems, Milton's God is a stimulating work of psychological criticism, for even though the conclusions are generally mistaken, the means are often enlightening. The book suggests through practice some of the possibilities of biographical criticism and brings to light some fundamental problems in the reading of Milton's poetry.

In a short essay published in 1953, entitled "The Loss of Paradise" (which is incorporated into the chapter "Critics" in Milton's God), Empson explained his own position in the modern
Miltonic critical controversy and summarized the principal arguments that were expanded in Milton's God:

The intelligence of these literary critics [A. J. A. Waldock, T. S. Eliot, E. M. W. Tillyard, F. R. Leavis, etc.], does not allow them, even when they wish, to make a final distinction between the style and the logic, or even the theology, of Paradise Lost. I think that everything said by Waldock in "Paradise Lost" and its Critics about the startling irreducible confusions in the story of Paradise Lost, at every important point of it,... is clearly true, could be added to considerably, and ought to be admitted by an opponent. But I think that these arguments, so far from proving that the poem is bad, explain why it is so good. Milton set out to dramatise (as part of making an epic form) a legend accepted by everyone around him and till long after; he did it so well that he blew up the balloon till the cracks in it, like everything else about it, became enormous; and yet they were not felt by his audience to have become unendurable.... The Poem expressed a major part of the public mind of Europe, not in spite of but especially because of its confusions, and this ought to be prominent in our own minds when we are feeling its power. I think it is horrible and wonderful; I regard it as I do the novels of Kafka, or for that matter Aztec or Benin sculpture; in short, I read it as Blake and Shelley did; and I am rather suspicious of any modern critic who claims not to feel anything so obvious.... An enlightened Christian... needs to feel that Milton's picture of God is fundamentally and fascinatingly wrong all the time. I am intrigued by a possibility that some part of Milton's unconscious mind (since Milton must have known enough theology to realise that his epic was making God entirely un-transcendental) intentionally left open through most of the poem a plausible case for the argument of Satan, which is that God is only a usurping angel and tells lies whenever he claims to be metaphysically unique.... To worship the God of Milton, not only nagging and teasing even the good angels, from what we can gather, not only jeering with the meanness of a delinquent child whenever he gets the chance, but boasting of laying traps to make his helpless creatures incur further torments and then floating when he has got them there, really is very close to what seemed so comical when Blake first said it, very close to worshipping the Devil.... there had to be a sort of fierce innocence about the mind of Milton himself to make him drive his God into such a corner.... The root of the startling power of Milton is that he
could accept and express this downright horrible conception of God and yet keep somehow alive, underneath it, all the breadth and generosity, the welcome to all noble pleasures, which had been prominent just before it in the development of European history. No wonder his epic began to look a bit less dull when the critics began to ask what it meant.¹

Empson's neo-Blakean approach to Milton involves both literary criticism and an attempt to evaluate Milton's work as an image of the historical Christian mind, and, as G. S. Fraser has noted, this evaluation is immediately hampered by Milton's "untypicalness."² One of Empson's fundamental errors is that he interprets Milton's psychology in terms of what he considers the norms of Christian thought without taking into account fully enough the kinds of artistic transformation of that thought which Milton effected. This error leads not only to historical inaccuracies but also to a misinterpretation of Milton's intentions both as an artist and as a Puritan Christian. Empson's idea that "a critic should have an insight into the mind of his author"³ is a potentially fruitful one, provided the author's intentions are seen clearly and documented fully; but the most basic problem of Milton's God is that Empson is unwilling to see Milton's clearly because his own are determining his conclusions, and his documentation is dependent on a distortion of the text.

Although most of the specific difficulties of Milton's God are more relevant to Milton scholarship than to the present study, a brief summary of Empson's essays will demonstrate his critical direction both in this book and in the criticism written since it was published. In "Critics" he argues that Paradise Lost is a metaphysical puzzle which the critics have failed to solve and
proposes that it can be solved once one accepts the fact that its puzzlement arises from the complexity of Milton's own mind: his Christian poem is really about the nature's of God's evil. Empson takes as his slogan "Back to Shelley," and Blake's dictum in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that Milton was "of the Devil's party without knowing it" becomes a matter of psychological interpretation. He affirms Shelley's portrait of God as a malicious tormentor in *A Defense of Poetry* not only as historically sound but also as true to Milton's own thinking, conscious or unconscious. Empson's idea in "The Loss of Paradise" of keeping separate "the style and the logic, or even the theology, of *Paradise Lost*" comes to mean, in general, that Empson reads his own conception of Milton's theology in terms of the poem's style. In "Satan" he discusses Milton's treatment of the metaphysical problems of God's omnipotence and benevolence and of His role in the fall of the rebel angels, and he concludes that God maliciously deluded Satan into a false belief in victory and that Milton must have understood the moral ambiguity of God's role. He completely ignores the complications of the felix culpa and the broader Christian significance of Satan's action. Furthermore, he wants to humanize Milton's characters in a way that avoids the metaphysical problems of *Paradise Lost*, and he generally ignores Milton's hierarchal world-picture. He continues this same fallacious psychologizing in "Heaven" where he considers God as a person on trial for his crimes, while at the same time avoiding the eschatological significance of those "crimes." Likewise in "Eve" he accuses God of causing the fall of man without realizing
that he is approaching the ultimate meaning of the poem, if he would only view it in a different perspective. Again, in "Adam" he makes the same accusation in terms of the fact that Adam (in Empson's view) fell from grace with Eve because he was confused by God's Stalin-like moral ambivalence; and in "Delilah" he defends Delilah as a "deeply wronged wife" (211) against Samson, who is a fin de siècle nihilist thrown into insanity and confusion by his devotion to a malignant God.

In the final essay, "Christianity," Empson is able to launch his attack against Christianity without mediating through Milton's poetry. The essay is of little value as a work of criticism, but it does allow one to discern many problems relevant to the critical essays because it is such a clear statement of Empson's view of Christianity. For example, his contention that George Orwell's 1984 is as applicable to an understanding of Christianity as it is to Communism emphasizes what is perhaps his most basic error in Milton's God: the idea that Christianity is a political ethos and therefore is to be understood in terms of political psychology. Certainly it has a political character, particularly as realized in the history of the Western world, but Empson refuses to see beyond this aspect to its ideological and mystical character; and what he sees of it historically is always the worst. He misunderstands Milton because he wants to comprehend his psychology as that of the Caroline politician, not as that of the Christian poet. His lack of sympathy with the religious impulse of Milton's mind and poetry leads him into something of a critical cul de sac.
Historical prejudice and an over-loading of what Empson considers to be Milton's intention are combined in Milton's God to create an unfortunately distorted critical work. Empson's pretensions to objectivity have always been hampered to some extent by his subjectivity, his belief in the rightness of his own perceptions as opposed to those of a larger critical community, but only in Milton's God has this tendency proved really detrimental to the value of his critical opinions. Furthermore, his sophomoric attitude toward the Christian religion has caused him to expend his intellectual energies on problems unworthy of his ability as a psychological critic. However, his reading of Milton's mind and work as an Empsonian moral drama is offset to some extent by the fact that Milton's God is a brilliant attempt to defend the dead cause of Blake and Shelley, an attempt which illuminates basic moral problems in Milton's poetry. It is as well an interesting casebook on the problem of re-creating Milton's thought for the modern and somewhat religiously disillusioned audience.  

II

Empson's critical effort during the 1950's and since the publication of Milton's God in 1961 has retained a psychological bias, but the focus of his psychology has become increasingly biographical. In general his criticism has become more historical, appreciative and "old school," and it is supported by an increasingly stringent rationalism and conservatism. He still retains some of the pose of the scientist, but his work has become pro-
gressively more literary and academic, more "scholarly" in the traditional sense of the word. He has published no new poetry since 1952, and after teaching at Peking National University from 1947 to 1952, he was appointed Professor of English Literature at Sheffield University in 1953, where he still resides, so that his Eastern experience has ceased to be a direct stimulus for the researching of new critical perspectives. Although his literary experimentation has become more limited, his work is still dominated by the kind of tough-minded intellectualism which characterized his earlier books, and the most important of the later uncollected essays are as significant a contribution to the development of modern psychological criticism as any written earlier.

In 1953 Empson published a two-part essay entitled "Hamlet When New." As the title suggests, the essay is an attempt to re-create the original historical and psychological situation of the play, thus, in Empson's view, avoiding the pitfalls of modern Freudian and structural criticism. He contends that the most basic difficulty in interpreting Hamlet is that of the Elizabethan audience, and he devotes himself to reconstructing what he considers would have been their psychological attitudes. However, Shakespeare's moral universality does not cause this approach to become dogmatic, as was the case with his attempt to reconstruct Milton's psychology. Empson's concern with the audience leads him to a consideration of concrete problems of production and of Hamlet, like all drama, as a public and thus psychologically collective literary form rather than as a symbolic
narrative. He is thus interested in dramatic character, much as he was in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, as a determinant of audience response. For instance, he discusses the manner in which Shakespeare adapted the play from Kyd in terms of Hamlet's psychology and argues that one may understand that the audience was controlled by a duality of consciousness: on the one hand wanting the play hurried in its pace, so that Hamlet might be finished with his revenge; and on the other sympathizing with his every delay. Thus, Empson concludes, through the technique of postponement, the audience experienced *Hamlet* as a kind of mystery story.

"The *Spanish Tragedy*," published in 1956, is, like the essays on *Hamlet*, defined by Empson's ability to sense the dramatic situation of the play; it exemplifies what has been called his "feeling" for the fundamental movements of a literary work, a quality as essential to good psychological criticism as to any other critical approach. As in the previous essays, he is concerned with problems of production and dramatic consistency. He wants especially to substantiate the dramatic unity of the play as a work of art in its own right—not simply as the source for *Hamlet*. For example, Empson refutes the idea that Andrea's ghost is a clumsy device. He argues that it is an effective dramatic instrument because it allows the audience a double perspective on the play's development, for the ghost, which is actually part of the audience, in the process of learning the truth about Andrea's death, serves as a psychological reference point against which the audience can measure their own recognitions as they
occur. The essay as a whole is dependent on Empson's concept of the audience's psychology, but he carefully supports his assertions in terms of the text. His interpretation of the play is one of the best available to the student of Elizabethan drama.

"The Theme of Ulysses," published in 1956, includes a B.B.C. talk which Empson gave on Bloomsday, 1954, as well as a reflection on that talk. Employing a strong biographical emphasis, he begins with the equation that Stephen Dedalus is James Joyce on June 16, 1904, and then considers Ulysses as a psychological analog of Joyce's own experience. This is Empson's first important work on the novel. Here he abandons linguistics in favor of biography, perhaps partly because the latter gives him a means of ordering his interpretation of a form (particularly in the case of Joyce) which does not readily lend itself to his earlier verbal-analytical approach. This shift in his critical approach is not a complete tour de force, but it does indicate an increasing change of emphasis. Empson is attempting to broaden his critical perspective, and this broadening allows him a greater freedom of subject matter and critical technique than one finds in his previous work. This freedom is apparent not only in his discussion of Ulysses but in the later essays on Tom Jones and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," among others. Even allowing for the fact that his interpretation of Joyce is a radio talk, it is still clear that he is turning toward the kind of criticism which one finds in Milton's God; and as is the case with that book, here also he rejects most of the contemporary methods of
exegesis and affirms his own feeling about the meaning of *Ulysses*. His method is fundamentally appreciative, rationalistic and biographical, and he defends himself against the charge that he is committing the "Fallacy of Intentionalism" and the "Fallacy of Biography."³ In the first case, he argues that Joyce intended for the reader to be curious about his intention: his doctrine of artistic silence necessarily involves the idea that the reader must attempt to discern his real purpose. This circularity is problematic, but it cannot be easily dispelled. In the second case, Empson argues that biography is a valuable aid in determining the teleology of a work of art and that this is particularly true of *Ulysses* since Joyce has succeeded in writing himself so thoroughly into the book. However, his speculations concerning the fate of Stephen after his departure from Bloom's house are of more relevance to Joyce's biography than to literary criticism.

Empson also employs a biographical approach in "Donne the Space Man,"⁴ published in 1957. He combines a linguistic and historical analysis of Donne's poetry with biographical information in an attempt to prove that Donne believed in a plurality of worlds and hence in the non-uniqueness of Christ. The essay is a more realistic attempt at the reconstruction of the authorial mind than is *Milton's God*, but Empson's "astronautical" bias forces him into some untenable interpretations. It is nonetheless an important example of the way in which historical and scientific knowledge can be used as an interpretative instrument in literary criticism. It demonstrates, furthermore, that in
spite of the general shift in Empson's critical focus, he is still concerned with criticism as an eclectic endeavor, with the need for an intellectual synthesis as a means of reading literature. As was the case in his poetry, he sees no reason why the litterateur should avoid the mind-set of the scientist.

In "Tom Jones," published in 1958, Empson again undertakes an analysis of the novel. He combines an old-fashioned kind of narrative treatment with a psychological theory of irony and, as in the essay on Hamlet, attempts to recover a sense of the work's original situation. With a tongue-in-cheek apology for his regression to analytical procedures, he outlines his theory as follows:

To leap to ambiguity for a solution may seem Empson's routine paradox, particularly absurd in the case of Fielding; but in a way, which means for a special kind of ambiguity, it has always been recognized about him. His readers have always felt sure that he is somehow recommending the behavior of Tom Jones, whether they call the result healthy or immoral; whereas the book makes plenty of firm assertions that Tom is doing wrong. The reason why this situation can arise is that the style of Fielding is a habitual double irony; or rather, he moves the gears of his car up to that as soon as the road lets it use its strength....Single irony presumes a censor; the ironist (A) is fooling a tyrant (B) while appealing to the judgment of a person addressed (C). For double irony A shows both B and C that he understands their positions; B can no longer forbid direct utterance, but I think can always be picked out as holding the more official or straight-faced belief....I do not want to make large claims for "double irony," but rather to narrow it down enough to show why it is peculiarly fitted for Tom Jones.

Thus, Fielding's novel was written to express a theory of ethics, and its ironic development is parallel to and governed by an ethical ideology. This, Empson says, is what makes it so much
better a work than Amelia or Joseph Andrews. The structure is fundamentally Euclidean. The novel's seemingly ambiguous moral development (like Tom's) arises from the fact that Fielding is the judge-author who is willing to consider the whole action of the work not in terms of a single rigorous morality but in terms of the variety of moralities which actually existed in Tom's society. Thus, in order for him to write with an imaginative sympathy for both an official, central Christian morality and a more peripheral but real natural morality, he had to conceptualize his characters in terms of the perspective of double irony; otherwise he would have had to oppose one to the other, whereas, in fact, they come together in Tom. Reversing the egotism of Hobbesian ethics, Fielding's doctrine is, in Empson's words, the following: "If good by nature, you can imagine other people's feelings so directly that you have an impulse to act on them as if they were your own; and this is the source of your greatest pleasures as well as of your only genuinely unselfish actions."12 Tom Jones is the Noble Savage who is also a model of Christian charity: the doctrine is at once hedonistic and altruistic. Thus, according to Empson, Tom is the happy medium between the two extremes of degradation and ecstasy which the Old Man of the Hill represents, and Fielding has the breadth of moral feeling to see all actions clearly within their context and the imaginative power to reconcile the best of each in Tom, while double irony is the foundation of his style in doing so.
Although Empson has published no poetry since *Collected Poems*, his critical interest since the publication of *Milton's God* has been largely involved with a rationalist defense of his poetic theory. In "Rhythm and Imagery in English Poetry," published in 1962, he states clearly his opposition to most modern poetry. His policy of conservatism extends even to an impatience with Darwin, Marx, Frazer and Freud which one would never find in his earlier work. According to Empson, modern aesthetic theory is too alienated from the raw material of art and needs to be "pruned," just as modern art needs to be brought back within the province of reason. He considers modern creative modes in poetry as involving a psychology of chaos and strongly defends the necessity of meter and rhyme, drawing evidence for his conclusions not only from English poetry but also from Latin, Greek and Chinese poetic theory. He thinks *vers libre* to have been a very debilitating influence on modern poetry and claims that American poets, particularly William Carlos Williams, have been the main victims of its vogue, although he admits that some poetry (he cites Auden's "Spain 1937") works "without rhyme or metre."^15^

His discussion of imagery is even more astringent, and he turns to psychological theory in order to support his thesis that the stress on visual imagery in modern poetry is grounded in a very limited psychology of perception. He argues that the poets who make the greatest use of images don't use them for
thinking but for avoiding thinking, although he admits that imagery, when rationally ordered, is a valuable instrument of poetic discourse. His principal contention against Imagist poets is that their use of imagery is naively visual and not controlled by a rational logic. In his view, human thought cannot be simply a function of visual imagery, and because an image is a complex act of the human sensorium (not merely visual), it must be subservient to the intellect. In order to illustrate the fallacy of considering imagery as a vehicle of thought, he considers the manner in which he thinks an Imagist would read Marvell's "The Garden" and then takes a dogmatic stance against the Imagist conception of human psychology:

...an Imagist reader is not allowed to understand anything. If the poet says the mind is like the sea, then the Imagist reader must have a picture of the sea, in his head, and he must make a unique kind of muscular effort so as never to think of what is being talked about, the other half of the comparison, at all. The belief that poetry positively ought not to mean anything is still very strong, though mainly held by foreigners I think. I have to meet people in the course of my profession who actually hold these delusions; and are prepared to show me that my poetry too, like all other poetry, is merely a collage of logically unrelated images. I think just the opposite; arguing in verse has always seemed to me a wonderfully poetical thing to do, so I cannot understand the idea that it is prosy to speak up for the human reason. If the modern movement is the revolt against reason I have never been in it at all, so I have not left it merely because I am an old buffer.\textsuperscript{16}

Empson, with his bent for mathematics, has always been a champion of logic and reason, and his use of imagery in his own poetry is certainly governed by logical relationships, although they are occasionally difficult to discern. Likewise, his criticism, "modern" as it may be, is grounded in a logical conception of
language. He has a Renaissance belief in the power of human reason, and his poetry is closer to that of Donne or Marvell than to that of T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound. However, as was similarly the case with Milton's God, his dogmatic frame of mind has limited the openness of his vision, and the Imagists deserve a better hearing than he has allowed.

In 1963, in two articles, "Early Auden" and "Argufying in Poetry," Empson continues his arguments concerning modern poetics. In the first he declares that W. H. Auden and Dylan Thomas, "of the poets my age and younger, are the only ones you could call poets of genius." What he most admires in Auden's poetry is his versatility with traditional forms and his intellectual use of imaginative analogy, his ability to transcend the limitations of Imagist and Symbolist aesthetic psychology and write a profoundly cerebral poetry. Thomas' poetry embodies the song and rhythm which Empson regards as indispensable for the true poet of genius, and his earlier analysis (1947) of "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" reveals that he also admires Thomas' ability to exploit the possibilities of poetic ambiguity. Clearly Empson regards as admirable those qualities in the poetry of Auden and Thomas which are operative in his own, and neither Auden's politics nor Thomas' Romanticism stays him from the conclusion that they are both fundamentally poets of the rationalist imagination. Likewise, in the second article, he again condemns Imagism and Symbolism for what he considers to be their arbitrary and irrational use of language and enshrines poetry which makes use of rational and intellectual argumentation, a quality which can be found in both Thomas and Auden, as well as
in Empson's own poetry. He believes that most modern poetry is already dated, both aesthetically and psychologically, and that the argumentative poetry of cerebral control and abstraction will endure.

Empson's shift from his earlier psychological-linguistic approach to biography and more general critical problems (often related to psychology) has allowed him more freedom of direction in many ways, but the advantage gained through this freedom is offset by the fact that his criticism has become increasingly dogmatic and frequently narrow-minded or predicated almost entirely on his own subjective interpretation of literature and its context. Milton's God is the best example of this problem, but it is also exemplified in "The Ancient Mariner," published in 1964, where Empson brings his rationalist psychology and anti-Christian biographical approach to focus on Coleridge. He is concerned with proving that the poem is a naturalistic document of Coleridge's "neurotic guilt" which is Romantically colored with superstition, and he argues that traditional interpretations are mistaken in not viewing it in this way. The basis of his interpretation is his idea that the mariner, in terms of the poem's action, could not possibly have deserved the torment which he suffered, so that Coleridge must have projected his own neurotic suffering into the meaning of the story. This perspective allows Empson not only to explore Coleridge's psychological biography but also to state again his own case against Christianity. It allows him as well to discuss some interesting aspects of the relation between the poem and the author's mind, but his general reading is very much mistaken in emphasis and direction. He says,
for instance, that "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is "a kind
of parody of the traditional struggle for atonement."21 This
kind of interpretation is somewhat like the one he developed
for Paradise Lost, and it is wrong largely for the same reason:
his unwillingness to accept either poet's religious views causes
him to negate or reverse their meaning or interpret them ironi-
cally on a rational and secular level of comprehension. Coleridge's
poem is fundamentally religious in meaning and must be read not
literally but allegorically; it is not a "parody" but a parable
of atonement and, like all parables, must be read more by the
spirit than by the letter. Empson's understanding of the poem's
implicit psychological meaning accords more with his own mind
than with that of Coleridge. The logic of the Romantic imagina-
tion is perhaps too numinous for his phenomenal sense of reality.22

The continuing shift in Empson's critical perspective since
1964 can be best exemplified by his short article "The Phoenix
and the Turtle,"23 published in 1966. He is not at all concerned
with the language or psychology of Shakespeare's poem but with
its historical situation, and he traces both its textual sources
and analogs and its biographical background. Thus, he is in-
terested in a poem which easily commands the attention of the
psychologist not as a psychological critic but as a textual-
biographical scholar. By now he has left behind even the specu-
latve pseudo-Freudian criticism which he used as the basis of
his interpretation of Coleridge, and he has turned increasingly
toward an older approach with an historical-biographical emphasis.
For a critic who discovered the essence of poetic psychology in
Shakespeare's poetry in 1930, this is indeed a change of direction; but this change has been in process for the last fifteen years, and its fruit is perhaps more in the future than in the present.
NOTES TO CHAPTER VI


4. Nothing has been written on Milton's God besides reviews and portions of larger essays. A summary of some of the critical reactions to the book is perhaps worthwhile. Roger Sale, for instance, although finding Empson's arguments faulted because they take too little account of Milton's rhetoric, praises him as an historian who is attempting to give life to the poetry of the past: "...no other historian of literature has seen so thoroughly how history, because it can only be, must certainly only be a way of knowing ourselves by making poems be alive for us" ("The Achievement of William Empson," 289). Alvarez grants some credence to a number of Empson's arguments, but sees him as "quite simply airing his quarrel with God" and considers the book a work of obsession ("Empson's God," *New Statesman*, September 29, 1961, pp. 442-443). John Broadbent says that Empson's obsession with the case against God leads to a dulling of his perspectives on both Christianity and Paradise Lost and, recognizing that such an approach to Milton has been historically proven to be rather fruitless, suggests that he might do better to employ verbal analysis as his Miltonic critical instrument ("Myth and Moral," *Time and Tide*, September 21, 1961, p. 1572). David Daiches calls *Milton's God* a stimulating book, but argues that Empson should have explored the larger implications of Milton's thought ("Justifying the Devil," *Spectator*, September 29, 1961, pp. 434-435). Hugh Kenner accuses Empson of evasion and subjectivity in all of his books, but especially in *Milton's God*, and severely criticizes him as "slippery," "uninformed" and "old-maidish" ("The Critic's Not For Burning," *National Review*, August 28, 1962, pp. 149-151). Rex Warner says that Empson has failed to refute the neo-Christian critics, as one hoped that he would have, and that his moralizing keeps him from seeing Milton clearly (*London Magazine*, New Series, I/October 1961, 81-85). Lastly, Kenneth Burke says that Empson "is being Impson" and accuses him of failing to develop a "mature, terministic or 'logological' analysis of Milton's theological and poetic problems" ("Invective Against the Father," *Nation*, June 16, 1962, pp. 540-541).

5. *Sewanee Review*, LXI (Winter 1953), 15-42; (Spring 1953), 185-205. There are two other essays on Shakespeare of some importance: "Dover Wilson on *Macbeth*," *Kenyon Review*, XIV (Winter 1952), 84-102; and "Falstaff and Mr. Dover Wilson," *Kenyon Review*, XV (Spring 1953), 213-262. In the first, Empson claims that
Wilson's arguments for Shakespeare's revising of Macbeth are wrong, because the confusions attributed to revision are in fact essential to the play's dramatic effect. In the second he is concerned with proving that Wilson's theory that Henry V was revised to exclude Falstaff is not supported adequately by the meaning of the play.

6. *Nimbus*, III (Summer 1956), 16-29; reprinted in *Elizabethan Drama: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Ralph J. Kaufmann (New York, 1961), pp. 60-80. I have ignored chronology in discussing this essay before that on *Ulysses* in order that it follow the essay on *Hamlet*.


8. Ibid., 39. The phrases are Empson's.


11. Ibid., 218-219.

12. Ibid., 225.

13. In his later work Empson's critical position closely resembles that of Yvor Winters and his disciples, although Winters (who, as far as I know, published no opinion on Empson) probably would have taken exception to such a comparison. As early as 1938, John Crowe Ransom commented on the similarity of their work: "It would be interesting to bring Mr. Empson and Mr. Winters together for an exchange of views. They have a good deal in common. Mr. Empson is well aware of the force of the metric in poetry, and I think would sympathize with Mr. Winters' accusation of 'limpness' against some contemporary specimens. They have similar tastes as to the older poets they like to read, though Mr. Winters of course does not draw his reading so fine as Mr. Empson has" (Mr. Empson's Muddles," 335-336). Winters probably would not have supported the intricacies of Empson's psychological conception of language, but he surely would have acknowledged a sympathy with Empson's rationalist approach to the study of poetry. Their own poetry is also somewhat similar in being traditional in form and tough-minded in execution. Empson's skepticism about *vers libre* is paralleled by Winters', although the latter wrote well in that form. The work of both men reflects a common belief in reason as an aesthetic principle, and that fact sets them both apart from many of their contemporaries.


15. Ibid., 45.

16. Ibid., 49. In a recent letter to Professor Monroe K. Spears at Rice University, Empson echoed this same sentiment in a
statement about "Symbolist" poetry: "Symbolist technique requires both author and reader to pretend they are imbeciles, incapable of normal mental activity. I have never joined in this game, though I have only recently come to think it disgusting."


22. Empson does, however, have a real sympathy for the scientific aspect of the Romantic mind. See, for example, his review of H. W. Piper's book The Active Universe in Critical Quarterly, V (Autumn 1963), 267-271.

CONCLUSION

The object of life, after all, is not to understand things, but to maintain one's defences and equilibrium and live as well as one can; it is not only maiden aunts who are placed like this.

from Seven Types of Ambiguity

In Le temps retrouvé Marcel Proust defines the difference between the artist and the scientist in terms of the temporal relationship between perception and intellection: "L'impression est pour l'écrivain ce qu'est l'expérimentation pour le savant avec cette différence que chez le savant le travail de l'intelligence précède et chez l'écrivain vient après."¹ In many ways Proust's idea is a valid characterization of the splitting of the scientific and poetic modes of consciousness, a modern and somewhat intellectually debilitating conception of the human mind, and it would seem that its validity is realized more in the contemporary technocratic world than ever before. It implies, to a certain extent, the death of the Renaissance man in an age of specialization when the imaginative act of the poet and the cognitive act of the scientist are of two different orders. However, Proust's dichotomy does not apply to most of the work of William Empson, regardless of the extent to which it applies to his age. Although I didn't begin this study with Proust's statement in mind, it was nonetheless part of my purpose to disprove the general- lity of any such statement by demonstrating the significance of Empson's attempt to effect a creative reconciliation of the
scientific and poetic aspects of the mind, to make their action of the same order through an intellectual synthesis of vision.

It was the stated purpose of this study to examine chronologically Empson's poetry and criticism in order to discern a relationship between the two. The starting point was defined by the fact that his effort in both disciplines is characterized by an attempt to comprehend the role of the human mind in ordering experience in literary forms. This attempt, insofar as it is realized as a contribution to modern literature and criticism, is characterized by his concern with what I termed "the psychology of verbal forms," with the hope that such a phrase would include the important aspects of Empson's work as a psychological poet-critic. His poetry and criticism involve both the experimental impulse and rational control of the scientist and the sensitivity of impression and fertility of imagination of the artist. His intelligence, unlike that of Proust's writer or scientist, involves a creative interaction and simultaneity of these aspects of the mind, and his psychological approach to the study of literature and the writing of poetry defines the perspective in which art and science are in a harmony of endeavor. The role of the "sensitive scientist" may be converted into those of "scientific critic" and "intellectual poet," both of which Empson exhibits in his role as litterateur in the modern world.

In a chronological perspective, both his poetry and his criticism reveal a shift of attention from the psychological minutiae of language to larger and more general considerations. In the poetry this shift occurs during the late 1930's in such
a way that it is easy to discern two periods of poetic creativity: the earlier involving extreme complexities of language and an elaborate exploration of the scientific and ironic modes of human consciousness; the later being more simple in style and theme, involved with the political, social or collective mind of man, concerned with more essentially concrete aspects of human experience in time of impending, and then actual, war. In the criticism this shift is not so easily plotted. *Seven Types of Ambiguity* parallels the early poetry in terms of its focus on the complex psychological processes of poetic language, and *Some Versions of Pastoral*, published in 1935 when the shift in poetic style was beginning, indicates a definite change toward the psychosociological study of literature, including drama and other forms as well as poetry. *The Structure of Complex Words* involves an expansion of the methods and interests of both the earlier books and is the culmination of Empson's study of language and of the psychosociological context of language and literature. Thus, until 1952, when he stopped publishing poetry, one may discern a parallel course of development between it and the criticism, although there is no simple chronological correspondence. It is only after 1952 that his criticism begins to shift in focus to an extent that is radical enough to parallel the difference between his early and late poetry. In neither of these out-of-phase shifts does he turn completely away from his psychological approach, but he does change his focus from language to more general concerns: in the criticism, to biography and history; in the poetry, to the social community of man. In
neither, however, is the change completely radical. It is gradual, and there is a sense of continuity throughout his corpus.

In the final analysis, the poetry and the criticism are clearly the product of the same mind. Both are constructs of the "flickering of wit," the complex act whereby the knower and the known are mediated through words. For Empson this act always involves psychological equilibrium and tension: in the poetry it is the basis of the "style from a despair," the conscious fictions through which the poet maintains his sanity; in the criticism it is the foundation of analysis through ambiguity, the weighing of denotation against connotation, the gauging of implicit and explicit meanings, the measuring of the author's mind in terms of poetic effect, the discerning of the universal implied by the particular and the comparison of the work and its context. For Empson, even in the criticism since Milton's God, the literary work of art is a Gestalt which is to a large extent continuous with the general character of the mind, but at the same time it has its own psychic economy and aesthetic autonomy. In his view of literature these aspects should be seen in relation to one another; they interact; they define a tension. Literature for him is a mode of communication as well as of artistic creativity; the two are finally inseparable aspects of imaginative verbal consciousness.

According to Stanley Edgar Hyman, "Empson is an objectivist or phenomenalist in philosophy, a subjectivist or relativist in criticism, taking man as the measure in both cases."² One might
add that he takes "man as the measure" in his poetry as well. This subjective-objective tension which defines his work, both as a poet and as a critic, is another way of conceptualizing the complex artistic-scientific quality of his mind, and it accounts in part for the extraordinary richness of his work as well as its problematic limitations. The "subjectivist or relativist" aspect of his criticism, when it gains the upper hand over objectivity, can lead him into very mistaken interpretations, as happened occasionally in Seven Types of Ambiguity, for instance, and more obviously in Milton's God. The "objectivist or phenomenalist" aspect can be equally limiting in some instances, especially in The Structure of Complex Words, where the equations tend to become mechanical reductions of complex psychological experiences. Likewise, some of the poems are very complex subjective puzzles or abstract, scientific models of a universe which almost excludes human thought and emotion. On the other hand, when there is a resonance of these two poles, Empson's work demonstrates an impressive intellectual eclecticism in which the complexity of human experience is the ultimate sanction for a synthetic, fundamentally psychological view of literature. Like Freud, he takes his own experience as a primary datum but tries always to validate his conclusions in terms of objective criteria; and like Freud, he does not always meet with the approval of his critics and, in the opinion of many, is occasionally quite mistaken.

In spite of the problems which arise in attempting to evaluate Empson's contribution to modern literature, there are several
significant affirmations which can easily be made. His early
criticism was a revolutionary attempt to lend to modern critical
practice a psychological and analytical basis; in doing so, it
was part of the beginning of the New Critical movement. His
criticism, taken as a whole, is an invaluable contribution to
the understanding of verbal expression and communication, as
well as to the teaching of creative reading. He has helped to
direct modern criticism back to the fundamentals of literary in-
terpretation, to the details of language that define the essential
psychology of literature. Likewise, his best poetry will endure
and be included with the finest of this century not so much be-
cause of its stylistic elegance and ingenuity as because of its
artistic re-creation of the enigma of the modern mind. In the
words of Cleanth Brooks, "his work is fraught with revolutionary
consequences for the teaching of all literature and for the future
of literary history."
NOTES TO THE CONCLUSION


BIBLIOGRAPHIES

I

A CHRONOLOGICAL EMPSON BIBLIOGRAPHY

Note: The following is an attempt at a comprehensive chronological bibliography of the published work of William Empson from 1927 to 1967. Besides accidental omissions, the only work excluded (due to scholarly limitations) is the early writing in Granta magazine (XXXVI-XXXVIII (1926-29)). Late reprints of particular poems are cited only when they occur in well-known anthologies, although reprints of critical articles are cited as extensively as possible. Occasionally, information concerning an article is incomplete, but it is cited as fully as possible. The chronological sequence is always arranged from the general to the specific. When no dating is possible for work published in a given year, it is arranged alphabetically at the end of that year. Work published in the same issue of a journal is arranged in terms of pagination. In those cases where revision of a poem has involved a change of title, the new title is given as it appears in Collected Poems (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1949), abbreviated "CP." Likewise, poems which have not been collected in that edition are cited as "uncollected." This bibliography is in large part derived from Peter Lowbridge's "An Empson Bibliography," Review, Special Number: William Empson, 6 and 7 (June 1963), pp. 63-74. I have attempted to supplement Lowbridge's work as much as possible and bring it up to date.
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II

A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SECONDARY WORKS

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citations than is usual in bibliographical procedure, in order that the following works may be easily seen in the same chronological perspective as that of the primary sources.


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