

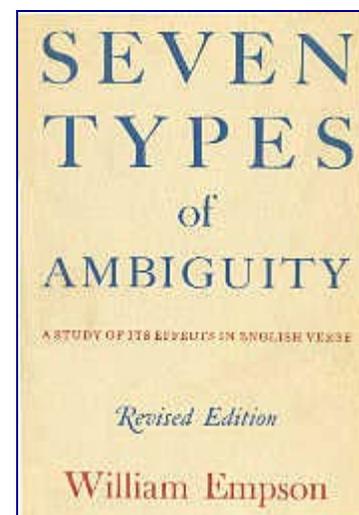
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A READER'S JOURNAL
Seven Types of Ambiguity
A Study of Its Effect in English Verse
by
William Empson

ARJ2 Chapter: Writing
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2010

Margaret Atwood brought me to first read Empson in 2002 after she credited him in several places in her insightful book on writing, [Negotiating with the](#)



[Dead](#). I was working on my final paper for Dr. Michael Paulsen's "Teaching & Learning in the College Classroom" and my subject was [The Live Lecturer in the Classroom](#). In that paper, I wrote:

While reading the classic book, *Seven Kinds of Ambiguity* by William Empson, I had an insight. What I wrote in the top margin of page 14 was this, "Who is the other when I'm reading but myself?" Suddenly I had the answer to this unanswered question that I had been holding for some three years. Here is where my insight comes in. It's so simple, it's hard to explain. The other is my self. When I am reading, I am receiving direct mind-to-mind communication, not from the author to my self, but from my self to my self!

Said differently: when I read, I can only make sense of what I'm reading if my mind is receiving direct communication from the me that exists at the point right before I read the next word or phrase or sentence. For me to understand what I'm reading, a part of me must already understand most of what the next sentence is going to contain. The me that already knows communicates with the me that doesn't know as the words proceed into my thoughts, mind-to-mind. Thus, while one part of me was reading Empson's words, another part was doing the live lecture using Empson's lesson plan.

Empson's book was put aside after that course, partially read, until I stumbled upon Michael Wood's quotation from it in this passage from *London Review of Books* 17 December 2009:

[page 10, LRB] Honour itself is not a patient word, and Empson also likes to talk of self-respect, as in the following brilliant passage from *Seven Types of Ambiguity*:

people, often, cannot have done both of two things, but they must have been in some way prepared to have done either; whichever they did, they will have still lingering in their minds the way they would have preserved their self-respect if they had acted differently; they are only to be understood by bearing both possibilities in mind.

With the impetus provided by Wood's article, I picked up Empson's book and read the rest of it and will hazard to review it. This is a dense book, full of literary references and language which many will find indecipherable — I certainly found my share of unanswered questions along the way, but also many gems which sparked from the pages of the book and whose facets reflected in my mind. I will endeavor to share some of those facets with you.

Here's a salient example, from the beginning of Empson's Preface to the Second Edition, 1947, in which

he discusses the problems of coming back to edit one's own works years later.

[page vii] It seemed the best plan to work the old footnotes into the text, and make clear that all the footnotes in this edition are second thoughts written recently. Sometime the footnotes disagree with the text above them; this may seem a fussy process, but I did not want to cut too much. Sir Max Beerbohm has a fine reflection on revising one of his early works; he said he tried to remember how angry he would have been when he wrote it if an elderly pedant had made corrections, and how certain he would have felt that the man was wrong.

In attacking the profundities of Empson's subject and trying to discern the differences in the seven types, one would do well to hold his advice in mind:

[page vii, viii] Apart from trailing my coat(1) about minor controversies, I claimed at the start that I would use the term 'ambiguity' to mean anything I liked, and repeatedly told the reader that the distinctions between the Seven Types which he was asked to study would not be worth the attention of a profounder thinker.

Empson quotes Mr. James Smith's review of his book which says, "A poem is a noumenon rather than a phenomenon." Translated into Korzybski's words, "a poem is What Is Going On, not a Map of What Is Going On." The poem is an object itself as distinct from a perceived object, i. e., there is always more going on in a poem than what a reader can perceive, so that anyone who calls a poem *bad* is describing more what is going on in one's head than in the poem itself. On page 8, Empson writes, "It is more self-centered, and less reliable, to write about the poems you have thought bad than about the poem you have thought good." Why? Good poems are good in unique ways, and "you must rely on each particular poem to show the way in which it is trying to be good." (Page 7)

Critics, especially those who dote on bad poems or literature, are like "barking dogs" of two sorts, "those who merely relieve themselves against the flower of beauty, and those, less continent, who afterwards scratch it up."

[page 9] I myself, I must confess, aspire to the second of these classes; unexplained beauty arouses an irritation in me, a sense that this would be a good place to scratch; the reasons that make a line of verse likely to give pleasure, I believe, are like the reasons for anything else; one can reason about them; and while it may be true that the roots of beauty ought not to be violated, it seems to me very arrogant of the appreciative critic to think that he could do this, if he chose, by a little scratching.

Unleash a critic of Empson's sensibilities upon ambiguity and it's amazing to me that he only uncovered seven types!

[page 25] Among metaphors effective from several points of view one may include, by no great extension, those metaphors which are partly recognized as such and partly received simply as words in their acquired sense. All languages are composed of dead metaphors as the soil of the corpses, but English is perhaps uniquely full of metaphors of this sort, which are not dead but sleeping, and, while making a direct statement, color it with an implied comparison.

My poem below was inspired by the above passage which hints at how ambiguity may arise from implied comparisons:

**Sleeping Beauties in my prose —
I'll have none of those.**

**Give me ones who
spring to liveliness
Without the need of
slobbery kiss.**

**Let not one stay unawake
till I my terminal period make.**

**Please pay respect to my acuity
if you find an unintended ambiguity —
It is apt to happen, now and then,
that one should split in twain and twin.**

The ambiguities in the next stanza by Browning are rife, and yet resolve into a beautiful song before the terminal period.

**I want to know a butcher paints,
A baker rhymes for his pursuit,
Candlestick-maker, much acquaints
His souls with song, or, haply mute,
Blows out his brains upon the flute.**

If I might offer a paraphrase, given that the only similarity of myself to Robert Browning is our common given name, it would be this:

**My dear friend if you would suicide commit,
And fain would not relent in your pursuit,
Find yourself a song that to your mood would fit,
And, forsooth, blow your brains out with a flute.**

One of the more offensive conversational ploys to come into recent popularity is making verbal quotes with two fingers of two raised hands. One wonders if such people could communicate with their hands tied behind their backs. In written text, the habit of quotes or italics around one word for emphasis is equally egregious. One may use such artifacts until one learns to write in such a way that they are not needed, rather as one soon learns to walk as a child without leaning upon nearby objects.

[page 28] And that is why the practice of putting single words into italics for emphasis (again the Victorians are guilty) is so vulgar; a well-constructed sentence should be able to carry a stress on any of its words and should show in itself how these stresses are to be compounded. Both in prose and poetry, it is the impression that implications of this sort have been handled with more judgment that you yourself realise, that with this language as text innumerable further meanings, which you don't know, could be deduced, that forces you to feel respect for a style.

If I might hazard to re-code Empson's florid style into one flower of meaning: you feel a respect for the style of an author whose crafty combination of stresses and text (process and content) hints of meanings beyond those that you yourself might be able to evoke with the same economy of expression.

It is easy to be confused by the prolix of spelling and punctuation which fill Shakespeare's plays. Empson points out that our confusion is merely a consequence of having frozen the forms of words and punctuation since then. One does better to consider the leeway which we can have when reading Shakespeare. ". . . the Elizabethan rules of punctuation trusted to the reader's intelligence and were more interested in rhetoric than in grammar." (Page 134)

[page 83, 84] One must consider . . . that the Elizabethans minded very little about

spelling and punctuation; that this must have given them an attitude to the written page entirely different from our (the reader must continually have been left to grope for the right word); that from the comparative slowness, of reading as of speaking, that this entailed, he was prepared to assimilate words with a completeness which is now lost; that only our snobbish oddity of spelling imposes on us the notion that one mechanical word, to be snapped up by the eyes, must have been intended; and that it is Shakespeare's normal method to use a newish, apparently irrelevant word, which spreads the attention thus attracted over a wide map of the ways in which it may be justified.

Can you spot the pattern in Othello's words, "the flinty and steel couch of war"? We have a noun and noun of noun, a flinty couch and a steel couch of war or taken together "the flint and steel with which you fire your gun." (Page 90) Or in this one from Hamlet (page 91), "Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults." Or this one from Measure for Measure, "Whether it be the fault and glimpse of newness" (Page 92). Or this one of the form "by noun and noun, the noun": "As when, by night and negligence, the fire is spied". There is a good reason this usage seems familiar.

[page 94] . . . Shakespeare uses it very often; it has been drummed, therefore, into the ears of his reader till they take it for granted.

**Within the book and volume of my brain.
Upon the heat and flame of thy distemper.
The flash and outbreak of a fiery mind.
The pales and forts of reason.
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.
The whips and scorns of time.
The natural gates and alleys of the body.**

After reading all these examples of the form, I could not resist incorporating the form into a poem I was writing for an annual event in which my club members invite their ladies to a formal dinner at Antoine's Restaurant in the French Quarter and read poems to them.

**In this year and night of mirth we come here
To feast and fete you ladies with our song.
Let us lift our Spirit and our Task to Thee
Whose voices and shapes to Heav'n belong —
While we Earth-bound, and bound to worship Thee,
Loose our tongue and spirit with our melody.**

**What could stay our chorus on this night
But a look and sigh of Love from Thee
Upon my fellow romantics and me.
Hold but a minute and a smile aright
And we will hold our glasses high to Thee
To toast the Love that you have shown to them and me.**

This next poem by Pope about old women, seems to me most true about women of the country club set for whom beauty is the be all and end all of their otherwise empty lives. It is droll to imagine the ghosts of beauty haunting the wrinkles where formerly beauty lived. They marry the convivial young stud lubricated by martinis who grows into an alcoholic slug.

**[page 149] As hags hold sabbats, not for joy but spite,
So these their merry miserable night;
So round and round the ghosts of beauty glide,
And haunt the places where their honor died.
See how the world its veterans rewards.**

**Fair to no purpose, artful to no end,
Young without lovers, old without a friend;
A fop her passion, and her prize a sot;
Alive ridiculous, and dead forgot.**

Empson suggests that it was the study of Hebrew, especially the Old Testament, and the English versions of the Bible that helped create our tolerance and even penchant for ambiguity.

[page 193] The study of Hebrew, by the way, and the existence of English Bibles with alternatives in the margin, may have had influence on the capacity of English for ambiguity; Donne, Herbert, Jonson, and Crashaw, for instance, were Hebrew scholars, and the flowering of poetry at the end of the sixteenth century corresponded with the first thorough permeation of the English language by the translated texts. This is of interest because Hebrew, having very unreliable tenses, extraordinary idioms, and a strong taste for puns, possesses all the poetical advantages of a thorough primitive disorder.

With Egyptian hieroglyphics, we find the seventh type of ambiguity most strongly, the one in which the two meanings of a word can be opposite to one another. One word could mean both young and old, with only a gesture in spoken language available to distinguish the baby from the old man. In writing, a hieroglyph could be present to indicate which is meant and to trigger the extra hieroglyph when required.

Here we are, having survived the seven types of ambiguity and still possessing a working sense of humor, we hope. We have learned a bit about ambiguity and how it brings a liveliness and freshness to poetry. Contrary to our modern "belts and suspenders of meaning", we have discovered the freedom of Elizabethan poetry which required neither a belt of exact spelling nor any suspenders of grammatical punctuation, hanging instead upon the page and awaiting our pleasure for the dressing or undressing of its meaning. To paraphrase my favorite poet, [Samuel Hoffenstein](#), "Lives there a man with hide so tough, who thinks seven types of ambiguity are not enough?"

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----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. *To trail one's coat* means to invite attack.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

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