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CHAPTER I

*Introduction: Empson as literary theorist:
from Ambiguity to Complex Words and beyond**Christopher Norris*

William Empson didn't read much in the way of recent (post-1970) literary theory, but made it very clear that he disliked – even hated – those few books and articles that latterly came in for review, or that well-meaning commentators (myself included) sent along in the hope of provoking some lively response. His aversion to 'theory' has been found rather puzzling by many of Empson's younger admirers since he was, after all, by widespread assent the most theoretically minded and intellectually resourceful of twentieth-century English critics, as well as having written – in *The Structure of Complex Words* – a book which explored philosophical issues with a fine disregard for the standard academic division of intellectual labour. But the whole point of *Complex Words* was to rescue literature from the vagaries of subjective or emotive response by providing some more or less adequate bits of theoretical 'machinery' – the equations, or various forms of logico-semantic entailment – by which to make sense of multiple meaning without falling back on the catch-all notion of poetic 'ambiguity', or (even worse) the irrationalist rhetoric of 'paradox' raised into a quasi-theological absolute by the adepts of American New Criticism. The only use for theory in literary studies was to clear away non-existent problems and sources of bafflement – doctrines like emotivism and the so-called 'Intentional Fallacy' – and show the way back to a decent respect for authorial meaning, historical context and literature's capacity to communicate truths of human experience despite all the difficulties dreamed up by theorists in the grip of some modish sceptical dogma. Like Empson in his own later essays, one could then go on in a sturdily untheoretical way and set about rescuing those various authors whose work had been

For more detailed information on sources and matters of publication history, see Frank Day, *Sir William Empson: an Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1984).

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‘kidnapped’ – or grievously misread – by the zealots of this latest bother-headed critical orthodoxy.

For the prevailing anti-cognitivist bias went along with what Empson saw as a ‘cult of unnaturalism’, a perverse desire to cut literature off from any wider background of ethical or socio-political debate (see Empson, 1987a, pp. 563–5; 627–31). This cult had its origins in the 1890s and was carried across into the academic study of literature by critics who adopted the aestheticist posture as a part of their crusade against scientism, rationalism and other such bug-bears of the modern literary imagination. Hence the various efforts – from Arnold, through Eliot to Richards, Leavis and the New Critics – to devise some alternative account of poetic ‘truth’, one that would have no truck with the truth-claims of scientific reason. For his part, Empson regarded all this as an absurd misunderstanding of what ‘science’ was about, coupled with a narrowly professionalized ethos which disguised its own failure of intellectual nerve with various kinds of obscurantist jargon designed to keep readers from questioning the sacrosanct values handed down by the high priests and commissars of latter-day Eng. Lit. fashion. The rot had set in by 1951, when he came back to teach at Sheffield after the years in China and Japan. Empson was made to feel, as he wrote at the time, like a wild old man who had now lost touch and couldn’t catch up with the newly invented rules of the game. What made the situation still more irksome was the fact that those rules had been derived in large part from the kind of close-reading ‘analytical’ approach that Empson himself had done much to popularize. By the early 1950s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* had taken its place as a set-piece classic of modern critical method, the single most sustained and impressive example of what T. S. Eliot was soon to label the ‘lemon-squeezer school of criticism’ (1933). Eliot himself was in no strong position to complain, since his own early essays on seventeenth-century poetry and drama had helped to establish the idea that criticism is best, most rewardingly engaged in the business of detailed verbal exegesis with a minimal reliance on ‘background’ history and a marked aversion to those heterodox strains of thought that were liable to emerge if one took poets to be seriously *arguing a case*, rather than just playing with ingenious ‘conceits’ or inventing elaborate rhetorical structures devoid of any truth-claims or real argumentative force. Meticulous attention to the ‘words on the page’ – or analytical close-reading in the early Empson style – could thus be turned into a

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pretext for ignoring everything that gave those words their significance and saved poetry from becoming just a plaything in the hands of this or that revisionist school.

Eliot had now put such interests behind him, regarding merely 'technical' (or verbal) criticism as a species of frivolous distraction, and declaring that the act of interpretive judgement had to be 'completed' by a disciplined awareness of larger (ethical and ultimately religious) values. But this was just a smokescreen, Empson thought, since those same techniques of verbal exegesis had helped to give rise to an academic movement of decidedly orthodox neo-Christian persuasion. Moreover, *Seven Types* had itself played a role in promoting this dismal trend. For ambiguity was soon transformed – mainly at the hands of the American New Critics – from a loose (even casually inclusive) term for any kind of multiple meaning into a full-dress critical orthodoxy where 'paradox' and 'irony' were treated as the measures of true poetic worth, and where any hint of heterodox or dissenting ideas – as for instance in poets like Donne, Milton or Coleridge – could be kept out of sight by strict application of the relevant critical ground-rules (Wimsatt, 1954). In short, it had become a form of surrogate or ersatz theology, along with all the attendant baggage of canonical dogmas and heresies. The connection was visible in Eliot's praise for that form of devotional technique epitomised by Lancelot Andrewes: 'dividing the word of God', or seeking out layers of associative meaning to drive home the doctrinal point (Eliot, 1928). There were clear links between the new style of secularized close-reading and a long tradition of scriptural hermeneutics in the service of dogmatic or revealed religious truth. *Seven Types* had indeed found some of its most striking examples in poets like Donne and Herbert, engaged (as Empson reads them) in a desperate struggle of conscience between 'decent human feelings' and the cruel exactions of orthodox Christian belief. Thus the book reaches a climax with Herbert's 'The Sacrifice', where this conflict engenders a violent series of unresolved verbal clashes and tensions. But in other hands the method could be put to very different uses, including the standard neo-Christian ploy of ignoring the rational *resistance* to paradox and praising the poet for his 'deep' perception of religious truths beyond reach of mere analytic reason. Close-reading thus became a sure route of access to regions of the soul untouched by the spirit of latter-day secular critique.

For Empson, returning to discover this orthodoxy now firmly in

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place, it seemed that he had somehow lived on into a twilight era, depressingly remote from his Cambridge years when the 'two cultures' were still closely in touch, and when a poet like Empson could confidently emulate a poet like Donne, since both were alive to the full range of moral and imaginative possibilities opened up by a knowledge of new scientific ideas. But this was just impossible, according to the current wisdom, since now critics were required to accept (1) that poetry had nothing to do with arguments, truth-claims or rational debate; (2) that a poet's intentions were in any case unknowable; and (3) that one would surely fall into error – the so-called 'heresy of paraphrase' – if one took Empson's line of figuring out the sense of some complex passage and then treating it as properly subject to the usual kinds of reasoned assessment on logical, ethical, social or political grounds. To Empson this seemed nothing more than a species of abject irrationalist doctrine backed up by an appeal to the worst elements of instituted Christian belief. He was quick to see what the New Critics were at when – objecting to the vagueness of 'ambiguity' as a handle for critical analysis – they replaced it with other, more clear-cut notions like 'paradox', 'irony', 'tension' or 'plurisignification'. This wasn't just a matter of terminological tidiness, or even of improved interpretive grasp. What these concepts served to underwrite was a notion of the poem as 'verbal icon', a structure of inwrought rhetorical figures whose meaning was henceforth declared unavailable to mere prose summary or rational critique.

Hence the various New Critical 'heresies' declaimed against those (Empson included) who so far mistook the name and nature of poetry as to talk about the poet's intentions, ideas or anything that might be rendered by way of plain-prose commentary. Worst of all, from this point of view, was Empson's habit of reading poetry always in light of his own decidedly liberal, secular-humanist values. Rather than respect poetic language for its peculiar, uniquely 'paradoxical' character, Empson insisted on trying to make sense of it in terms continuous with those of our everyday – and often no less complicated – choices, motives, problems and decisions. The result, in John Crowe Ransom's words, was to 'suggest a reading of the poet's mind by some later, freer and more self-conscious mind' (1938–9, p. 333). The New Critics were unable to accept this, first because it broke down the privileged autonomy of the poem as 'verbal icon', and second because it opened the way to all manner

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of subversive speculation on the psycho-pathology of Christian belief. Empson's commentary on Herbert's 'The Sacrifice' makes a point of *not* letting the poem settle down into some region of profound theological 'truth' where reason finds itself ultimately played off the field. To take it on faith – as the New Critics did – that poetry just *is* paradoxical through and through is to miss the whole point of what Empson describes as the tortured and nerve-racking style of Herbert's poem, its refusal (at whatever 'unconscious' level) to acquiesce in the grim doctrine of Atonement forced upon the poet by his official creed. In short, Empson turns back the charge brought against him by mystery-mongering critics like Ransom by assuming that any 'muddles' (or irrational beliefs) in the poet's mind go along with a measure of resistance encountered in the process of working these confusions out into some kind of decently intelligible poetic and narrative form. On the other hand he could hardly deny that *Seven Types* had lent itself all too readily to the purposes of a critical movement squarely opposed to any such rational-humanist outlook.

The main result of this realization on Empson's part was the work in theoretical semantics and philosophy of language that went toward *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951). Even so, he makes it clear that the chapters of 'theory' are intended primarily as a ground-clearing exercise, an attempt to see beyond the cramping orthodoxy of currently fashionable 'Eng. Lit'. ideas, and must therefore be judged successful only in so far as they offer support – or show themselves intuitively adequate – when put to work in the 'practical' essays on Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth and others. 'The idea that the theorist is not part of the world he examines is one of the deepest sources of error, and crops up all over the place' (1951, p. 445). This applies just as much to ethics and linguistics – on both of which topics Empson has a good deal to say – as to matters of interpretive judgement where thinking can go very badly wrong if it gets out of touch with the everyday business of trying to understand what people mean. And in literary criticism especially there is no point having 'theories' – Empson believes – if they don't feed back into a better, more accountable or humane practice of readerly response. If the academic study of literature could defend its specialized domain only by erecting such counter-intuitive principles as the 'Wimsatt Law' (or the Intentionalist Fallacy), then in Empson's opinion it had failed the first test of any such communal sense-

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making enterprise, and its pretensions needed showing up along with their morally and intellectually harmful effects. ‘Theory’ would have to play a part in this therapeutic effort, since one major source of the prevailing obscurantist ethos was a widespread revolt against science, reason and truth-values in criticism, resulting – as he thought – from an absurdly simplified view of what science (and philosophy of science) had been up to since the early years of this century. Thus trying to figure out an author’s intentions ‘is much better than pretending you can’t know anything (imitating a Logical Positivist in a different field of study)’ (Empson, 1987a, p. 125). More specifically: theory could provide at least the working basis for a critical hermeneutics alert to the varieties of ‘compacted doctrine’ (or logico-semantic entailment) contained within the different orders of complex word. By so doing, it could put an argued case against the various strains of obscurantist doctrine promoted by critics who sought – for whatever reason – to insulate poetry from the interests and values of enlightened communicative grasp. But in this case theorists had better accept that theirs was a mainly corrective endeavour, one whose only practical use was to clear away unnecessary sources of confusion or bewilderment, and thus put criticism back in touch with those ordinary, everyday modes of understanding involved in all forms of linguistic transaction. However, Empson saw little evidence of this in the various ‘bother-headed’ theoretical books that turned up for review during the heyday of New Criticism and its various successor movements on the US academic scene. On the contrary: these theorists only seemed happy when raising bafflement – to adapt a phrase from one of Empson’s poems – into a boast they could take as some kind of doctrinal or professional guard.

In *Complex Words* Empson puts the case for a broadly rationalist approach to all kinds of language, poetry among them, and sees no need to suspend this principle when dealing with particularly complex, resistant or paradoxical forms of expression. Other theorists – notably Chomsky – have likewise argued that language reflects the very grammar of human rationality, its ‘deep’ logical structure as opposed to its surface relativities from culture to culture (see Chomsky, 1957). But for Chomsky these linguistic universals are derived by starting out from the level of syntax and applying a series of increasingly abstract rules and transformational procedures. In its early form at least, the theory made no allowance for the ways in

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which meaning (the province of semantics) might have to be included in any such generalized picture. Subsequent versions went so far as to build in a structural-semantic system of rules, such that meaning could be given its place in a more refined and adequate theory of language (Chomsky, 1966). But syntax has remained the chief interest and methodological focus of this whole 'transformational-generative' approach in linguistics, philosophy of mind and cognitive psychology. For Empson, conversely, semantics is the main route of access to whatever truths about human rationality language has to show. It is in the structures of semantic implication contained in certain 'complex words' that Empson locates the most significant (and humanly revealing) facts about language. And so it becomes a matter of unpacking those words, not merely to pile up multiple meanings (like the conjuror producing rabbits from a hat), but in order to show how their senses relate through a 'grammar' of semantic entailment which in turn points back to the normative structures of human understanding in general. Thus 'the term Ambiguity . . . implying that the reader is left in doubt between two readings, is more or less superseded by the idea of a double meaning which is intended to be fitted into a definite structure' (Empson, 1951, p. 103n).

In short, the 'grammar' of Empsonian semantics is best regarded as a working system of rational assumptions about language, meaning and interpretive competence which are mostly taken for granted in our everyday linguistic dealings, but which may on occasion need stating explicitly in face of some perverse new theory or other. As so often with such arguments, 'there is a sense in which it [i.e. the 'machinery' or grammar of reader-response] does not need to be expounded; if it is true, we are already acting on it all the time' (Empson, 1987a, p. 107). But this didn't prevent theorists like Wimsatt from inventing all manner of elaborate theories to back up their absurdly counter-intuitive doctrine that poetic 'intentions' were inherently unknowable, or that any attempt to paraphrase the meaning of a poem (as for instance by teasing out its logico-semantic 'grammar') must always involve a kind of ontological violence, a failure to recognize the qualitative difference between poetry and other sorts of language. Sometimes Empson responded with a bluff, common-sensical line of argument, suggesting that 'theory' was altogether useless if it tended to promote such patent falsehoods as the anti-intentionalist dogma. 'Estimating other people's intentions

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is one of the things we do all the time without knowing how we are doing it, just as we don't play catch by the Theory of Dynamics . . . Only in the criticism of imaginative literature, a thing delicately concerned with human intimacy, are we told that we must give up all idea of knowing his [the author's] intention' (Empson, 1987a, pp. 124–5). And again, from the same article (his 1950 review of Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon*): 'in the teasing work of scholarship, a man must all the time be trying to imagine another man's mind; as soon as that stops, he is off the rails. One cannot have a sheer theory to *keep* him off them' (p. 125).

What is more, such doctrines had a harmfully narrowing effect on the critic's range of moral and imaginative sympathy, since they seemed to imply – like some currently fashionable forms of neo-pragmatist thinking (see Fish, 1989; Rorty, 1982) – that one could never get outside the goldfish bowl of one's own cultural presuppositions. Thus Empson is startled by Wimsatt's apparently taking it for granted that 'there is only one right code of morals, a thing already known to himself'. But there is a sense in which this follows inexorably from the anti-intentionalist case, since the logic of that position makes it hard to conceive how anyone could experience the reading of literature as anything other than a comforting reflection of their own preexistent values and beliefs. 'The idea that a piece of writing which excited moral resistance might be a discovery in morals, a means of learning what was wrong with the existing system, somehow cannot enter his [Wimsatt's] mind' (p. 126). In which case, as Empson rightly remarks, there wouldn't be much point in reading literature at all, let alone subjecting it to the kind of close analytical scrutiny that critics like Wimsatt had raised to such a high point of method and principle.

So it is hardly surprising that Empson's antipathy to 'theory' became all the stronger with each new manifestation of what he saw as a rampant professionalist ethos allied to a stubborn narrowness of moral judgement and a total disregard for authorial intentions where these went against the current consensus of 'informed' Eng. Lit. opinion. In his later work Empson goes various ways around to combat this rising tide of anti-humanist or downright irrationalist prejudice. One response – as we have seen – was to adopt a line of sturdy common-sense wisdom, pointing out the sheer absurdity of trying to read poems on a theory so remote from our shared experience as language-using creatures. Thus 'to say that you won't be

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bothered with anything but the words on the page (and that you are within your rights, because the author didn't *intend* you to have any more) strikes me as petulant, like saying "of course I won't visit him unless he has first-class plumbing". If you cared enough you would' (1987a, p. 125). Then again, there were the essays of his later years – most of them collected in the posthumous volume *Using Biography* – where Empson mounted a sustained polemical assault on the doctrine (also put about by the New Critics) that one couldn't, or shouldn't, interpret texts in the light of 'extraneous' biographical information (Empson, 1984). Of course he has no time for this purist attitude, regarding it as just another aspect of the prevailing guild mentality, designed to keep professional critics in business by ruling the amateurs strictly off bounds. Furthermore, he suspects that it is often used to smuggle in meanings of an orthodox, conservative or neo-Christian cast that happen to suit the current interpretive trend. The essays bring up all kinds of biographical material, some of it the product of painstaking archival research, though on occasion Empson gives free rein to a highly speculative (not to say fanciful) mode of treatment which allows him to fit the available facts into a satisfying narrative shape.

What comes across most strongly is his deep-laid humanist conviction that the best – indeed the only – way to make sense of complex or problematic novels and poems is to read them with a mind unburdened by the self-denying ordinances of modern critical dogma, and willing to entertain the widest possible range of human experiences, motives and desires. Like R. G. Collingwood (1936, 1939) – whose work he read while preparing to write the 'theoretical' chapters of *Complex Words* – Empson thinks it an important truth about criticism, historiography and the human sciences in general that one cannot make a start in really understanding a text – as opposed to just decoding its sign structure – except by way of such imaginative insights arrived at through a mode of rational reconstruction based on an adequate working knowledge of the author's motivating interests. And this means paying close attention to the story, whether fictive or biographical, since it is here that one finds the best possible evidence of those interests working themselves out through a sequence of humanly intelligible choices and decisions. In fact Empson regularly explodes against critics who show themselves incapable of following a narrative line (or noticing salient details of the plot) while claiming to uncover extraordinary subtleties of style,

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structure or imagery (1987a, pp. 147–66; 167–73). Hence his impatience with the modern fashion for ‘symbolist’ readings which ignored this essential narrative dimension in their quest for some timeless, transcendent order of meaning and truth indifferent to details of plot, circumstance or background history. Thus on Yeats’s ‘Byzantium’ poems he admits (rather grudgingly) that a ‘deep’ interpretation seems called for at various points, but maintains none the less that an interest in the story will improve matters (1984, pp. 163–86). With Eliot likewise, he refuses to go along with high-toned symbolist readings of *The Waste Land*, since the poem – as Empson sees it – is a brave if tortuous attempt to work out some kind of narrative frame (or decently intelligible story-line) for episodes that can make little sense unless interpreted in light of Eliot’s neurotic conflicts, especially those brought about by his adherence to the Christian religion at its most repellently orthodox. All the same, Empson concedes that the poem remains a ‘mystery’, one of Symbolism’s few successes (1987a, pp. 189–200). But he then goes on to adduce such a mass of significant or suggestive ‘background’ information that his essay effectively retracts this concession and turns into a full-scale polemical assault on the Symbolist ‘programme’ and its various offshoots in present-day Lit. Crit. fashion.

In fact one can see the same principle at work in some of Empson’s earliest writings, long before he came to associate depth-hermeneutical techniques with the strain of neo-Christian obscurantism which Eliot had done so much to promote. Most often he preferred to coax the meaning up, so to speak, from the twilight zone of preconscious or irrational motives to the level of ‘open public debate’ where those motives achieved articulate form, as for instance by being reworked into narrative shape or through the kind of ‘multi-consciousness’ – the appeal to a broad range of human sympathies and impulses – typically encountered in a good theatrical production. This attitude comes across clearly in a review of Auden’s ‘Paid on Both Sides’ which Empson wrote for the Cambridge magazine *Granta* in 1931 (1987a, pp. 369–71). The charade involved a ‘sort of surrealist technique’ which Auden had used most effectively to communicate the protagonist’s divided feelings, his near-schizophrenic confusions of will and desire. ‘They could only, I think, have been conveyed in this way, and only when you have accepted them can the play be recognized as a sensible and properly motivated tragedy’ (p. 369). The surrealist connections are interesting enough, but not so much