

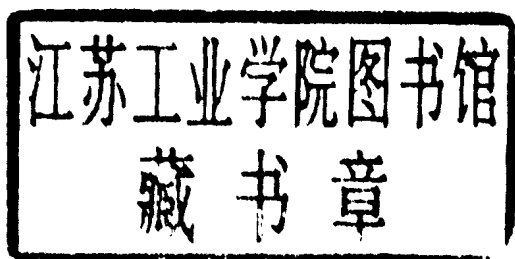
# Lexical Ambiguity in Poetry

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Soon Peng Su

# LEXICAL AMBIGUITY IN POETRY

SOON PENG SU



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## CHAPTER ONE

# Introduction

### 1.1 Aim and scope

Names are finite and so is the sum total of formulae, while things are infinite in number. Inevitably, then, the same formula, and a single name, have a number of meanings.

Aristotle, *De Sophisticis Elenchis*, 165

Ambiguity is a pervasive feature of language,<sup>1</sup> and thus deserves to be studied in its own right. Where ambiguity occurs as a topic of interest in various disciplines such as literature, linguistics, psychology and philosophy, it is used mainly as a sounding board in the analysis of other phenomena. For instance, in linguistics, the notion of ambiguity is fundamental in the treatment of certain arguments about deep structure and about the relation between syntax and semantics; in psychology, it can serve as a key to the study of the human psyche; and in literature, it 'fits itself to contain within the form of discourse aspects of human experience' (Nowotny 1962: 146). A fairly recent article (Hagenbuchle 1984), makes use of the concept of ambiguity to point to the fundamental difference between the linguist and literary critic in their attitudes to language.

In the various disciplines which discuss ambiguity, the term is often assumed to be self-evident, but its nature is, in fact, far from clear. For many, the term is synonymous with 'double meaning', 'lack of clarity' or 'equivocation'. Some base their concept of ambiguity on dictionary definitions, usually given as 'a word which has more than one interpretation, or explanation; of double meaning, or of several possible meanings: equivocal' and 'doubtful, questionable; indistinct, obscure, not clearly defined' (as found in Norrman 1977: 6). The term has also been subjected to an idiosyncratic use to cover 'change' and

'diversity' in addition to 'polyvalence', such as is found in Page (1985: 13). Even within the same discipline, the term is not always used consistently to refer to the same thing. This is notoriously the case in literary criticism where ambiguity, taken particularly at the global level, is sometimes equated with multiple subjective interpretations (which Barthes characterizes as 'infinite plurality' and Eco as 'openness of the work'; see Rimmon 1977: 12-13), or sometimes with indeterminacy, vagueness or suggestiveness. Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1961), a seminal book on the subject from a literary angle, has a wide-ranging definition of the term (see section 1.2.2).

In his comment on another term, 'irony', Booth (1974: ix) remarks that: 'Once a term has been used to cover just about everything there is, it perhaps ought simply to be retired; if it can apply to everything, it can hardly be rescued for everyday purposes.' This remark can be extended to 'ambiguity' so that, for the term to be useful once more, it must be rescued from confusion and indiscriminately loose usage. More particularly, for the concept of ambiguity to be useful, the scope of the term should be delimited to fit the purpose at hand, which in the present study is to see how ambiguity is used as a stylistic device for aesthetic effects.

The primary aim of this book is to provide some theoretical clarity about the concept of ambiguity. This task is carried out with the following restrictions in mind.

- (a) Although the explication of the concept has general application, the focus will be on dealing with ambiguity as it occurs in poetry.
- (b) The theoretical explication will be illustrated mainly from the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins which is marked by ambiguity (see, for instance, Frye 1957: 193), although data gathered from other poetic as well as non-poetic sources will also be included where it serves to illuminate a point being made.
- (c) Linguistically, ambiguity has often been dealt with at the levels of phonology, lexis and surface and deep structures (see Kooij 1971 and MacKay 1966); for an in-depth study, this book will concentrate only on lexical ambiguity.
- (d) The analysis will be carried out within the framework of stylistics, and hence, the approach is interdisciplinary, making use of linguistics (in particular, semantics), pragmatics and literary criticism and theory.<sup>2</sup>

It seems apt to choose poetry as the register for the study of ambiguity, as poetry is compact and dense; in addition, it allows a

unique freedom (commonly known as 'poetic licence') for poets to make creative and innovative use of linguistic resources. Thus, it offers a rich as well as interesting source of data for the examination of ambiguity. However, poetry is not used here only as a source of data to illustrate a theoretical concept, but it is itself to be illuminated through the explication of ambiguity. This forms the secondary aim when we focus on the poetry of Hopkins, a poet whose rich exploitation of ambiguity repays particularly careful study. In fact, a run-through of the critical bibliography on Hopkins reveals that, except for a few articles which specifically discuss ambiguity in his poetry, little has been written substantially on this aspect of Hopkins's poetic works.<sup>3</sup> The hope is, therefore, that the present work will also contribute to highlighting this ambiguous aspect of Hopkins which has, hitherto, been given relatively little attention.

Further, the scope is limited to lexical ambiguity for several reasons:

- (a) There is, as Ricoeur (1977: 125) puts it, 'an uncertainty at the very heart of the semantics of word', meaning that the lexical system is non-systematic in some aspects, as compared to the phonological or grammatical systems. For instance, there is a finite number of phonemes or grammatical rules, but the lexical code is relatively open so that it is possible for new entities to be added to it, hence word-coinages, and changes in, or additions to, the meanings of established words. This feature of openness renders the vocabulary 'an unstable structure in which individual words can acquire and lose meanings with the utmost ease' (Ullmann 1962: 195, quoted in Ricoeur 1977: 127). Such instability makes the lexical level an especially fertile area for the investigation of ambiguity.
- (b) Word-consciousness is the hallmark of all poets, but in Hopkins, this is a particularly distinctive feature which is seen in the poet's keen interest in the etymology and coinage of words as well as in the use of words in non-standard senses. Much of the poet's deep concern with words can be gathered from his journals and letters. The openness of the lexical system mentioned in (a) is, thus, especially evident in Hopkins's poetry, which provides a rich enough source of data for a study of lexical ambiguity.
- (c) From a psycholinguistic point of view, Kess and Hoppe (1981: 77) mark out lexical ambiguity as a special class:

There is nothing to guarantee that the recognition, processing, storage, and recall procedures that go into dealing with lexical

ambiguity has anything to do with the other types of structural ambiguity . . . . In fact, from the way that lexical ambiguity seems to have been treated, it would appear that treating lexical ambiguity separately is a more realistic approach to the problem.

On the other hand, lexical ambiguity is used a great deal in psycholinguistic research as a kind of test-bed for ambiguity in general. Both these points, in their different ways, indicate lexical ambiguity as a rich area for the investigation of the concept of ambiguity.

Carter (1987: 103) sounds the warning that analysis focused on the lexical level may be accompanied by 'a corresponding analytical narrowing and a failure to perceive the semantic densities which result from an interpenetration of levels'. In anticipation of this potential problem, it could be noted that, although the focus is on lexical ambiguity, the fact that words occur in relation to other words and in particular contexts means that a consideration of other factors such as syntax, text and context will be included. In addition, although the focus is on the *micro-level* of small-scale verbal analysis, for the study to have any significance, this level is to be related to the *macro-level* of ambiguity involving the theme or design of a poem as a whole (see, in particular, Chapter 8, section 8.1).

## 1.2 Ambiguity in poetry: a critical survey

Since the concern of this book is with the concept of ambiguity as it occurs in poetry, and particularly, the poetry of Hopkins, one of the first steps to take is to survey the literary field of already available material on the subject. Two main sub-sections are given, the first dealing with aspects of ambiguity and ambiguity-related issues which are of most concern to critics, and the second with what is more directly relevant to our purpose, i.e. the definitions of ambiguity in poetry and literature. For the latter subsection, only certain works are selected either because they are seminal to the subject or because they are representative of the general literary approach to ambiguity.

### 1.2.1 *The status of ambiguity in poetry*

Literary studies of ambiguity seem to agree that this phenomenon receives much more attention now in the twentieth century than in

most earlier ages. Schaar (1965: 157) quotes Mahood's observation in *Shakespeare's Wordplay* (1957: 94): 'Where the Augustans disapproved of Shakespeare's wordplay and the Victorians ignored it, we now acclaim it. A generation that relishes *Finnegan's Wake* is more in danger of reading non-existent quibbles into Shakespeare's work than of missing his subtlest play of meaning.' Ambiguity is seen to be so prevalent in literature possibly because, as Frye (1957: 72) observes, 'The conclusion that a work of literary art contains a variety or sequence of meanings seems inescapable.' Frye calls this 'the principle of polysemous meaning', and this pluralistic nature of literary texts leads to the realization of extensive ambiguities.

Explanations of why literature is pluralistic are not necessary here, but an indication can suggest reasons for the interest in the study of ambiguity, and point to the aesthetic value of the phenomenon. According to Braendlin (1988: 3), the literature of earlier times contains many expressions which suggest irresolvable ambiguities in order to realize the potential for idiosyncratic expression. Recent and modern literature admits ambiguities as a reflection of modern man's 'inchoate and complex experience' (Nowotny 1962: 149) with its insistent ambiguities. It will be seen in subsequent chapters (especially Chapters 7 and 8) that these two reasons pertaining to artistic use of language and perception of real life by means of ambiguity (though not as the sole means) are also found in Hopkins.

The pluralism of literary texts leads some critics to claim that ambiguity is central to poetry. Empson, for instance, declares that 'the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry' (1961: 21), and he is not alone in regarding ambiguity as a crucial and valuable poetic device. New Critics such as Cleanth Brooks in *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947) consider literary texts to be fundamentally ambiguous; similarly, to Wellek and Warren (1963: 23) literature abounds with ambiguities, and Jakobson (1960: 371) considers ambiguity to be a 'corollary of poetry'. These observations of ambiguity as poetically valuable and intrinsic are closely connected to the commonly held view that the more different, interesting interpretations a poem evokes, the better it is (Kasher 1976: 81), and may be summed up in the representative view of Widdowson (1975: 114): 'It is the nature of poetry to be ambiguous and no one interpretation can capture the meaning of a poem in its entirety.'

If ambiguity is considered to be a poetic device, as mentioned in the preceding paragraph, then it must perform a function. This function is usually regarded as one associated with the poetic use of language to enrich the aesthetic experience. In studies such as Schaar (1965), ambiguity is seen as a method of reading or interpreting literary texts, with an important role of deepening our understanding

of the texts. Positive value is given to ambiguity in literature because the process of producing a literary piece, involving numerous rewritings and revisions, reduces the likelihood of accidental ambiguities. This leads to the assumption on the part of literary critics that ambiguity in literature, and poetry especially, is deliberate and contributes to the larger design of the work. Richards's observation in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936: 40), made decades ago, is still upheld by critics today: 'The old Rhetoric [e.g. Aristotle] treated ambiguity as a fault in language, and hoped to confine or eliminate it. The new Rhetoric sees it as an inevitable consequence of language and as an indispensable means of our most important utterances – especially in Poetry and Religion.'

Critics' discussion on ambiguity inevitably revolves around the value of the phenomenon in literature (e.g. Wheelwright 1967; Empson 1961; Nowotny 1962) and this is appropriate. But evaluation is preceded by interpretation and understanding of the term 'ambiguity', so it is really essential to see if critics are talking about the same phenomenon by examining their definitions of the term and concept.

### 1.2.2 Some definitions of literary ambiguity

In the following sub-sections, some definitions of ambiguity are examined for their strengths and weaknesses.

#### *Empson*

Empson's seminal book, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, is almost a household name with most students and scholars of literature. In fact, it is reasonable to claim that interest in the phenomenon of ambiguity as central to literature has largely been generated by this book, which can boast the triumph of showing how close attention to ambiguity (resulting in, or from, close attention to the text) enriches the experience of reading poetry. However, Empson's use of the term is rather wide-ranging, as will be discussed below.

Empson considers ambiguous 'any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language' (1961: 19). An objection to this definition is that it is indiscriminately accommodating, with no constraint whatsoever on declaring any expression ambiguous. This gives the term 'ambiguity' little use as a designation of a property. We might hang hope on the word 'alternative' but this is insufficient to constitute a criterion for

defining the phenomenon, especially when coupled with the rather vague notion of 'reactions' which places the onus of identifying ambiguity squarely on the reader. Empson has, thus, offered no clear definition of 'ambiguity'. Perhaps it is difficult to define the phenomenon in a sentence, but even the 'types' of ambiguity Empson describes only add to the confusion of what he means by the term.

Empson's seven types are summarized in his page of Contents as follows:

- (1) '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.' This type is so broad that it seems to cover almost everything of literary importance, thus rendering 'ambiguity' too vague and general as an umbrella term for many different phenomena.
- (2) 'In second-type ambiguities two or more alternative meanings are fully resolved into one.' Ordinarily, ambiguity is resolved by choosing one of the meanings, but implicit in Empson's second type is resolution by integration. This results in ambiguity becoming indistinct from what Wheelwright (1967: 266) calls 'plurisignation', i.e. multiple meaning or complexity.<sup>4</sup> This confusion is common in the literary perspective of ambiguity as a welding together of acceptable meanings into a unified poetic statement, rather than an opening up of alternatives which are allowed to coexist.
- (3) 'The condition for third-type ambiguity is that two apparently unconnected meanings are given simultaneously.' This type seems to correspond to the more commonly accepted definition of 'ambiguity' as the presence of double meaning, each meaning being discrete and alternative in the context. This is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to distinguish it from some of the phenomena included in this type, such as allegory (see Chapter 7, section 7.2.3).
- (4) 'In the fourth type the alternative meanings combine to make clear a complicated state of mind in the author.' This type seems to contravene the 'intentional fallacy' thesis of New Criticism; on the evidence of the text alone, it is not always certain if we can say whether or not an instance of ambiguity is intended, although foregrounding and other poetic devices may indicate the possibility that an ambiguity is deliberate.

Nevertheless, there is no reason to reject any evidence of an author's intended ambiguity, when such evidence (which can lie outside of the text being studied) is available. This fourth type, unlike the first three, is a functional characterization of ambiguity, and rather vague at that, given the difficulty of deciding what the author's state of mind is.

- (5) '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 . . . .' Like type four, this one relies on knowing what goes on in the author's mind; in fact, it is even more incredible than the fourth type as it tries to locate ambiguity in the author's mind *while* he is in the process of creating a poem. The very fluid and dynamic nature of the process of creation makes it difficult, if not impracticable, to discover this type of ambiguity.
- (6) 'In the sixth type what is said is contradictory or irrelevant and the reader is forced to invent interpretations.' This form of interpretation seems to be, in reality, what psychologists call 'projection', which occurs when the reader imposes his own reading onto a word or piece of text which does not clearly signal that reading. The utter subjectivity inherent in this method of reading makes it suspect as a defining feature of this type of ambiguity.
- (7) 'The seventh type is that of full contradiction, marking a division in the author's mind.' Empson considers this type most ambiguous. The second part of this description can be subjected to the objections made for type four; the first part, however, is more acceptable and may, perhaps, be further refined as the kind of disjunctive ambiguity discussed by Kaplan and Kris (1948) and Rimmon (1977), as shown in the next two sub-sections which follow.

The main thrust of Empson's discourse is a psychological perspective on ambiguity, in that he talks in terms of a reader's and author's viewpoint. Ransom (1941: 120) observes that 'Empson is beforehand with his readers.' There is no doubt that Empson is right to direct attention to the reader in his conceptualization of ambiguity, but his weakness is to allow the reader an unbridled liberty to project ambiguity on to any word or part of a text, as represented by type six. This gives rise to the danger of overreading,<sup>5</sup> with no criterion given for how far or in what direction the meanings of words can be stretched. This occurs because, in the words of Norris (1978: 81):



'Empson had been concerned with the "vertical" reaches of association, or what Saussure calls the "paradigmatic" dimension; the meanings called out by a word's associative properties, without any clear or decisive controls of context.'

The indication that the reader plays an important role in the concept of ambiguity should not be dismissed, and will be developed in Chapter 5 of this book. However, constraints by means of context and an explication of 'meaning' (dealt with in Chapters 4 and 2 respectively) will help to sort out much of the muddle that Empson has created over what constitutes ambiguity.

Although he leaves much to be desired as far as clarity in the concept of ambiguity is concerned, Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* is, nevertheless, important in initiating a heightened awareness and interest in the phenomenon in the twentieth century. The next piece of work to be discussed, Kaplan and Kris's 'Esthetic Ambiguity' (1948), is one of those written as a response to Empson's book.

#### *Kaplan and Kris*

The most obvious difference which distinguishes the treatment of ambiguity by Kaplan and Kris (1948) from that of Empson (1961) is a principle or theory that is found in the former but lacking in the latter. Empson uncovers ambiguities by the method of close analysis of poems, but what the underlying principles are for such identification are not clear. This is one of the reasons for the confusion occasioned by his types. By contrast, Kaplan and Kris anchor their concept of ambiguity in a response theory of meaning.

The authors characterize the meanings of a word in terms of a reader's responses, a set of which constitutes a 'cluster'. There is a scale in the degree of response-constancy: high constancy is accorded to a 'code-word' which 'has a single fixed meaning regardless of the words accompanying it or the situations in which it occurs' (1948: 416). But there is a greater degree of variation for a 'symbol-word' which is dependent on the context in which it occurs, and which can only be specified in terms of a range of responses and their clusters. The code/symbol distinction here is similar to the linguistic type/token distinction (developed in Chapter 2, section 2.1.1). However, a discussion in terms of 'responses' has the danger of degenerating into emotive associations which are hard to pin down and hard to verify. The linguistic notion of 'type' and 'token' would be less fraught with such subjective implications.

Using the above theory of meaning, Kaplan and Kris draw up a