

Seven Types Of  
Ambiguity



William Empson

1949

Chatto and Windus

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## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

THE first and only previous edition of this book was published sixteen years ago. Till it went out of print, at about the beginning of the war, it had a steady sale though a small one; and in preparing a second edition the wishes of the buyers ought to be considered. Many of them will be ordering a group of books on this kind of topic, for a library, compiled from bibliographies; some of them maybe only put the book on their list as an awful warning against taking verbal analysis too far. Anyway, such a buyer wants the old book, not a new one, even if I could make it better. On the other hand, there was obviously room to tidy up the old one, and I would not want to reprint silently anything I now think false.

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. Sometimes 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. However, I have cut out a few bits of analysis (hardly ever without a footnote to say so) because they seemed trivial and likely to distract the reader's attention from the main point of the passage; I have tried to make some of the analyses clearer, and occasionally written in connecting links; the sources of the quotations needed putting in; there were a lot of small proof corrections to make; and some of the jokes which now seem to me tedious have gone. I do not think I have suppressed quietly any bit of analysis which would be worth disagreeing over. There is now an index and a summary of chapters.

I was surprised there was so little of the book I should prefer to change. My attitude in writing it was that an honest man erected the ignoring of 'tact' into a point of honour. Apart from

trailing my coat 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. As for the truth of the theory which was to be stated in an irritating manner, I remember saying to Professor I. A. Richards in a 'supervision' (he was then my teacher and gave me crucial help and encouragement) that all the possible mistakes along this line ought to be heaped up and published, so that one could sit back and wait to see which were the real mistakes later on. Sixteen years later I find myself prepared to stand by nearly the whole heap. I have tried to clear the text of the gratuitous puzzles of definition and draw attention to the real ones.

The method of verbal analysis is of course the main point of the book, but there were two cross-currents in my mind leading me away from it. At that time Mr. T. S. Eliot's criticism in particular, and the *Zeitgeist* in general, were calling for a reconsideration of the claims of the nineteenth-century poets so as to get them into perspective with the newly discovered merits of Donne, Marvell, and Dryden. It seemed that one could only enjoy both groups by approaching them with different and incompatible presuppositions, and that this was one of the great problems which a critic ought to tackle. My feeling now is not so much that what I wrote about the nineteenth century was wrong as that I was wrong in tackling it with so much effort and preparation. There is no need to be so puzzled about Shelley. But I believe that this looking for a puzzle made me discover something about Swinburne, and I did not treat the Keats *Ode to Melancholy* as a dated object.

The second cross-current was the impact of Freud. Some literary critics at the time were prepared to 'collaborate' with the invading psycho-analysts, whereas the honest majority who were prepared to fight in the streets either learned fire-watching technique or drilled with the Home Guard. This problem, too, I think, has largely settled itself in the intervening years, and I can claim that my last example of the last type of ambiguity was not concerned with neurotic disunion but with a fully public theological poem. However, I want now to express my regret

that the topical interest of Freud distracted me from giving adequate representation in the seventh chapter to the poetry of straightforward mental conflict, perhaps not the best kind of poetry, but one in which our own age has been very rich. I had not read Hart Crane when I published the book, and I had had the chance to. Mr. T. S. Eliot, some while ago (speaking as a publisher), remarked that poetry is a mug's game, and this is an important fact about modern poets. When Tennyson retired to his study after breakfast to get on with the *Idylls* there had to be a hush in the house because every middle-class household would expect to buy his next publication. I believe that rather little good poetry has been written in recent years, and that, because it is no longer a profession in which ability can feel safe, the effort of writing a good bit of verse has in almost every case been carried through almost as a clinical thing; it was done only to save the man's own sanity. Exceedingly good verse has been written under these conditions in earlier centuries as well as our own, but only to externalise the conflict of an individual. It would not have been sensible to do such hard work unless the man himself needed it. However, if I tried to rewrite the seventh chapter to take in contemporary poetry I should only be writing another book.

I want here to consider some theoretical points which have been raised in criticisms of the book; and I am sorry if I have missed or failed to keep some powerful attack which ought to be answered. I have remembered a number of minor complaints which I have tried to handle in the textual corrections or the footnotes. The fundamental arguments against my approach, I think, were all put briefly and clearly by Mr. James Smith in a review in the *Criterion* for July 1931; so it is convenient to concentrate on that article, though many other critics expressed similar views. To some extent I think these objections were answered in the text, but obviously they were not answered clearly or strongly enough, and if I have anything fresh to say I ought to say it now.

He made objections to my uses of the term 'ambiguity' which I have tried to handle in re-editing; but I have also to answer this sentence: 'We do not ordinarily accuse a pun, or the better type of conceit, of being ambiguous because it manages to say

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two things at once; its essence would seem to be conciseness rather than ambiguity.' We call it ambiguous, I think, when we recognise that there could be a puzzle as to what the author meant, in that alternative views might be taken without sheer misreading. If a pun is quite obvious it would not ordinarily be called ambiguous, because there is no room for puzzling. But if an irony is calculated to deceive a section of its readers I think it would ordinarily be called ambiguous, even by a critic who has never doubted its meaning. No doubt one could say that even the most obvious irony is a sort of playing at deception, but it may imply that only a comic butt could be deceived, and this makes a different sort of irony. Cardinal Newman found Gibbon ambiguous, we must suppose, because some remarks by the Cardinal imply that he did not know that Gibbon meant to be ironical. But most readers would consider the ironies of Gibbon unambiguous, though possessed of a 'double meaning,' because they would feel that no one could be deceived by them. Thus the criterion for the ordinary use of the word is that somebody might be puzzled, even if not yourself. Now I was frequently puzzled in considering my examples, though not quite in this way. I felt sure that the example was beautiful and that I had, broadly speaking, reacted to it correctly. But I did not at all know what had happened in this 'reaction'; I did not know why the example was beautiful. And it seemed to me that I was able in some cases partly to explain my feelings to myself by teasing out the meanings of the text. Yet these meanings when teased out (in a major example) were too complicated to be remembered together as if in one glance of the eye; they had to be followed each in turn, as possible alternative reactions to the passage; and indeed there is no doubt that some readers sometimes do only get part of the full intention. In this way such a passage has to be treated as if it were ambiguous, even though it may be said that for a good reader it is only ambiguous (in the ordinary sense of the term) while he is going through an unnecessary critical exercise. Some critics do not like to recognise this process because they connect it with Depth Psychology, which they regard with fear. But it is ordinary experience that our minds work like this; that we can often see our way through a situation, as it were practically, when it would be extremely



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hard to separate out all the elements of the judgment. Most children can play catch, and few children are good at dynamics. Or the way some people can do anagrams at one shot, and feel sure the letters all fit, is a better illustration; because there the analytic process is not intellectually difficult but only very tedious. And it is clear that this process of seeing the thing as a whole is particularly usual and important in language; most people learn to talk, and they were talking grammar before grammarians existed.

This is not to argue that some elemental and unscholarly process is what is in question, nor that what has to be explained always happens in a rapid glance of the eye. Indeed, what often happens when a piece of writing is felt to offer hidden riches is that one phrase after another lights up and appears as the heart of it; one part after another catches fire, so that you walk about with the thing for several days. To go through the experience in question is then slower, not quicker, than the less inspiring process of reading an analysis of it; and the fact that we can sometimes grasp a complex meaning quickly as a whole does not prove that a radically different mode of thought (an intrusion of the lower depths) is there to be feared. | ?

This is meant as a sketch of the point of view which made 'ambiguity' seem a necessary key word; of course, I do not deny that the term had better be used as clearly as possible, and that there is a use for a separate term 'double meaning,' for example when a pun is not felt to be ambiguous in effect. But it could be argued that, until you have done your analysis of the ambiguities, you cannot be sure whether the total effect is ambiguous or not; and that this forces you in some degree to extend the meaning of the term. I wanted in any case to put such a sketch before giving a longer quotation from Mr. James Smith's review, in which his objections are more fundamental. As the book went on, he said, there was an increasing proportion of examples from plays:

The effect of the dramatic upon the poetic scale is almost sure to be unfortunate. The first business of the student of drama, so far as he is concerned with ambiguity, is historical; he records that situations are treacherous, that men are consciously or unconsciously hypocritical, to such or such a degree. The student of

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poetry, on the other hand, has as his first business the passing of a judgement of value. It is not his main, or even his immediate, concern that a word can be interpreted, that a sentence can be construed, in a large number of ways; if he make it his concern, there is a danger that, in the enumeration of these ways, judgements of value will be forgotten. And unless they are put in at the beginning of an analysis they do not of their own account emerge at the end. Quite a number of Mr. Empson's analyses do not seem to have any properly critical conclusion; they are interesting only as revelations of the poet's, or of Mr. Empson's, ingenious mind. Further, some of Mr. Empson's analyses deal, not with words and sentences, but with conflicts supposed to have raged within the author when he wrote. Here, it seems to me, he has very probably left poetry completely behind. . . .

There are a number of irrelevancies in Mr. Empson's book, and as in a measure they derive from, so probably in a measure they increase, his vagueness as to the nature and scope of ambiguity. Finding this everywhere in the drama, in our social experience, in the fabric of our minds, he is led to assume it must be discoverable everywhere in great poetry. I doubt whether the reader who remembers his Sappho, his Dante, or the Lucy poems of Wordsworth is even prepared to be convinced of this; but even if he were he could not be so until Mr. Empson had made his position much clearer. Is the ambiguity referred to that of life—is it a bundle of diverse forces, bound together only by their co-existence? Or is it that of a literary device—of the allusion, conceit, or pun, in one of their more or less conscious forms? If the first, Mr. Empson's thesis is wholly mistaken; for a poem is not a mere fragment of life; it is a fragment that has been detached, considered, and judged by a mind. A poem is a noumenon rather than a phenomenon. If the second, then at least we can say that Mr. Empson's thesis is exaggerated.

I thought this ought to be reprinted with the book, if only because it puts clearly what many readers will feel. Other reviewers made an illustrative point along the same line of objection: that in learning a foreign language the great thing is to learn to cut out the alternative meanings which are logically possible; you are always liable to bring them up till you have 'grasped the spirit' of the language, and then you know they aren't meant. Of course, I don't deny that the method could lead to a shocking amount of nonsense; in fact, as a teacher of English literature in foreign countries I have always tried to warn my students off the book. It is clear that we have to exercise a good deal of skill in cutting out implications that aren't wanted in



reading poems, and the proof of our success is that we are actually surprised when they are brought out by a parody. However, I recognised in the book that one does not want merely irrelevant ambiguities, and I should claim to have had some success in keeping them out. To be sure, the question how far unintended or even unwanted extra meanings do in fact impose themselves, and thereby drag our minds out of their path in spite of our efforts to prevent it, is obviously a legitimate one; and some of the answers may be important. But it is not one I was much concerned with in this book.

In the same way, when Mr. James Smith said that I often left out the judgment of value he was of course correct. Many of the examples are only intended to show that certain techniques have been widely used. Even in the fuller examples, where I hope I have made clear what I feel about the poem as a whole, I don't try to 'make out a case' for my opinion of its value. The judgment indeed comes either earlier or later than the process which I was trying to examine. You think the poem is worth the trouble before you choose to go into it carefully, and you know more about what it is worth when you have done so. It might be argued that a study of the process itself is not really 'criticism'; but this change of name would not prove that there is any fundamental fallacy in trying to study it. No doubt the study would be done badly if there were wrong judgments behind it, but that is another thing.

The distinction made by Mr. James Smith between the dramatic situation and the judgment of the poet is, therefore, a more fundamental objection. It seems to me one of those necessary simplifications, without which indeed life could not go forward, but which are always breaking down. Good poetry is usually written from a background of conflict, though no doubt more so in some periods than in others. The poet, of course, has to judge what he has written and get it right, and his readers and critics have to make what they can of it too. When Mr. James Smith objected to my dealing with 'conflicts supposed to have raged within the author' I think he was overplaying his hand very seriously; he was striking at the roots of criticism, not at me. If critics are not to put up some pretence of understanding the feelings of the author in hand they must condemn

themselves to contempt. And besides, the judgment of the author may be wrong. Mr. Robert Graves (I ought to say in passing that he is, so far as I know, the inventor of the method of analysis I was using here) has remarked that a poem might happen to survive which later critics called 'the best poem the age produced,' and yet there had been no question of publishing it in that age, and the author had supposed himself to have destroyed the manuscript. As I remember, one of the best-known short poems by Blake is actually crossed out by the author in the notebook which is the only source of it. This has no bearing on any 'conflict' theory; it is only part of the difficulty as to whether a poem is a noumenon or a phenomenon. Critics have long been allowed to say that a poem may be something inspired which meant more than the poet knew.

The topic seems to me important, and I hope I may be allowed to digress to illustrate it from painting. As I write there is a grand semi-government exhibition of the painter Constable in London, very ample, but starring only two big canvases, both described as 'studies.' Constable painted them only as the second of three stages in making an Academy picture, and neither could nor would ever have exhibited them. I do not know how they survived. They are being called by some critics (quite wrongly, I understand) the roots of the whole nineteenth-century development of painting. It seems obvious to many people now that they are much better than Constable's finished works, including the two that they are 'studies' for. However, of course, nobody pretends that they were an uprush of the primitive or in some psychological way 'not judged' by Constable. When he got an idea he would make a preliminary sketch on the spot, then follow his own bent in the studio (obviously very fast), and then settle down on another canvas to make a presentable picture out of the same theme. 'My picture is going well,' he remarks in a letter, 'I have got rid of most of my spottiness and kept in most of my freshness.' You could defend the judgment of Constable by saying that he betrayed his art to make a living, but this would be absurdly unjust to him; at least Constable would have resented it, and he does not seem to have had any gnawing conviction that the spottiest version was the best one. Of course, the

present fashion for preferring it may be wrong too; the point I am trying to make is that this final 'judgment' is a thing which must be indefinitely postponed. Would Mr. James Smith say that the 'study', which is now more admired than the finished work, was a noumenon or a phenomenon? I do not see any way out of the dilemma which would leave the profound truths he was expressing much importance for a practical decision.

The strongest point of Mr. James Smith's criticism, I felt, was the accusation that, owing to my vagueness about ambiguity, I supposed it to exist everywhere in great poetry, whereas this would obviously be false about Sappho, Dante, and Wordsworth on Lucy. Oddly enough among the other reviewers at the time, one chose a passage from Dante and another from Wordsworth on Lucy to make a rather different point. They used the lines they quoted as examples of the real ambiguity of great poetry, a thing, they said, which underlay the superficial and finicking ambiguities I had considered, and gave them whatever value they had. These views are perhaps not really very unlike, though I would feel more at home with the second. But it seems clear that I ought to try to answer a question: 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. As I understand it, there is always in great poetry a feeling of generalisation from a case which has been presented definitely; there is always an appeal to a background of human experience which is all the more present when it cannot be named. I do not have to deny that the narrower chisel may cut more deeply into the heart. What I would suppose is that, whenever a receiver of poetry is seriously moved by an apparently simple line, what are moving in him are the traces of a great part of his past experience and of the structure of his past judgments. Considering what it feels like to take real pleasure in verse, I should think it surprising, and on the whole rather disagreeable, if even the most searching criticism of such lines of verse could find nothing whatever in their implications to be the cause of so straddling a commotion and so broad a calm.

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# I

AN ambiguity, in ordinary speech, means something very pronounced, and as a rule witty or deceitful. I propose to use the word in an extended sense, and shall think relevant to my subject any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, especially in this first chapter, the word may be stretched absurdly far, but it is descriptive because it suggests the analytical mode of approach, and with that I am concerned.

In a sufficiently extended sense any prose statement could be called ambiguous. In the first place it can be analysed. Thus, 'The brown cat sat on the red mat' may be split up into a series: 'This is a statement about a cat. The cat the statement is about is brown,' and so forth. Each such simple statement may be translated into a complicated statement which employs other terms; thus you are now faced with the task of explaining what a 'cat' is; and each such complexity may again be analysed into a simple series; thus each of the things that go to make up a 'cat' will stand in some spatial relation to the 'mat.' 'Explanation,' by choice of terms, may be carried in any direction the explainer wishes; thus to translate and analyse the notion of 'sat' might involve a course of anatomy; the notion of 'on' a theory of gravitation. Such a course, however, would be irrelevant not only to my object in this essay but to the context implied by the statement, the person to whom it seems to be addressed, and the purpose for which it seems to be addressed to him; nor would you be finding out anything very fundamental about the sentence by analysing it in this way; you would merely be making another sentence, stating the same fact, but designed for a different purpose, context, and person. Evidently, the literary critic is much concerned with implications of this last sort, and must regard them as a main part of the meaning. There is a difference (you

<sup>1</sup> In the first edition I made it 'adds some nuance to the direct statement of prose.' This, as was pointed out, begs a philosophical question and stretches the term 'ambiguity' so far that it becomes almost meaningless. The new phrase is not meant to be decisive but to avoid confusing the reader; naturally the question of what would be the best definition of 'ambiguity' (whether the example in hand should be called ambiguous) crops up all through the book.



may say that between thought and feeling) between the fact stated and the circumstance of the statement, but very often you cannot know one without knowing the other, and an apprehension of the sentence involves both without distinguishing between them. Thus I should consider as on the same footing the two facts about this sentence, that it is about a cat and that it is suited to a child. And I should only isolate two of its 'meanings,' to form an ambiguity worth notice; it has contradictory associations, which might cause some conflict in the child who heard it, in that it might come out of a fairy story and might come out of *Reading without Tears*.

In analysing the statement made by a sentence (having, no doubt, fixed on the statement by an apprehension of the implications of the sentence), one would continually be dealing with a sort of ambiguity due to metaphors, made clear by Mr. Herbert Read in *English Prose Style*; because metaphor, more or less far-fetched, more or less complicated, more or less taken for granted (so as to be unconscious), is the normal mode of development of a language. 'Words used as epithets are words used to *analyse* a direct statement,' whereas 'metaphor is the synthesis of several units of observation into one commanding image; it is the expression of a complex idea, not by analysis, nor by direct statement, but by a sudden perception of an objective relation.' One thing is said to be like another, and they have several different properties in virtue of which they are alike. Evidently this, as a verbal matter, yields more readily to analysis than the social ambiguities I have just considered; and I shall take it as normal to the simplest type of ambiguity, which I am considering in this chapter. The fundamental situation, whether it deserves to be called ambiguous or not, is that a word or a grammatical structure is effective in several ways at once. To take a famous example, there is no pun, double syntax, or dubiety of feeling, in

Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang,

but the comparison holds for many reasons; because ruined monastery choirs are places in which to sing, because they involve sitting in a row, because they are made of wood, are carved into knots and so forth, because they used to be surrounded by a sheltering building crystallised out of the likeness of a forest, and

coloured with stained glass and painting like flowers and leaves, because they are now abandoned by all but the grey walls coloured like the skies of winter, because the cold and Narcissistic charm suggested by choir-boys suits well with Shakespeare's feeling for the object of the Sonnets, and for various sociological and historical reasons (the protestant destruction of monasteries; fear of puritanism), which it would be hard now to trace out in their proportions; these reasons, and many more relating the simile to its place in the Sonnet, must all combine to give the line its beauty, and there is a sort of ambiguity in not knowing which of them to hold most clearly in mind. Clearly this is involved in all such richness and heightening of effect, and the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry.

Such a definition of the first type of ambiguity covers almost everything of literary importance, and this chapter ought to be my longest and most illuminating, but it is the most difficult. The important meanings of this sort, as may be seen from the example about the cat, are hard to isolate, or to be sure of when you have done so; and there is a sort of meaning, the sort that people are thinking of when they say 'this poet will mean more to you when you have had more experience of life,' which is hardly in reach of the analyst at all. They mean by this not so much that you will have more information (which could be given at once) as that the information will have been digested; that you will be more experienced in the apprehension of verbal subtleties or of the poet's social tone; that you will have become the sort of person that can feel at home in, or imagine, or extract experience from, what is described by the poetry; that you will have included it among the things you are prepared to apprehend. There is a distinction here of the implied meanings of a sentence into what is to be assimilated at the moment and what must already be part of your habits; in arriving at the second of these the educator (that mysterious figure) rather than the analyst would be helpful. In a sense it cannot be explained in language, because to a person who does not understand it any statement of it is as difficult as the original one, while to a person who does understand it a statement of it has no meaning because no purpose.

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Meanings of this kind, indeed, are conveyed, but they are conveyed much more by poets than by analysts; that is what poets are for, and why they are important. For poetry has powerful means of imposing its own assumptions, and is very independent of the mental habits of the reader; one might trace its independence to the ease with which it can pass from the one to the other of these two sorts of meaning. A single word, dropped where it comes most easily, without being stressed, and as if to fill out the sentence, may signal to the reader what he is meant to be taking for granted; if it is already in his mind the word will seem natural enough and will not act as an unnecessary signal. Once it has gained its point, on further readings, it will take for granted that you always took it for granted; only very delicate people are as tactful in this matter as the printed page. Nearly all statements assume in this way that you know something but not everything about the matter in hand, and would tell you something different if you knew more; but printed commonly differ from spoken ones in being intended for a greater variety of people, and poetical from prosaic ones in imposing the system of habits they imply more firmly or more quickly.

As examples of the things that are taken for granted in this way, and assume a habit, rather than a piece of information, in the reader, one might give the fact that a particular section of the English language is being used; the fact that English is being used, which you can be conscious of if you can use French; the fact that a European language is used, which you can be conscious of if you can use Chinese. The first of these 'facts' is more definite than it sounds; a word in a speech which falls outside the expected vocabulary will cause an uneasy stir in all but the soundest sleepers; many sermons use this with painful frankness. Evidently such a section is defined by its properties rather than by enumeration, and so alters the character of the words it includes; for instance, one would bear it in mind when considering whether the use of a word demands that one should consider its derivation. Regional or dialect poets are likely to use words flatly from that point of view. No single example of so delicate and continuous a matter can be striking; I shall take one at random out of the Synge *Deirdre*, to make clear that a word