Chapter III

The criticism of William Empson: Some points of its 'ancestry' in Coleridge

An intriguing question raised by the apparent novelty of Empson's criticism has been its relation to other criticisms and critics. Although Empson, throughout his writings, names Richards, Robert Graves and Laura Riding as the immediate influences upon him, one remembers Coleridge's definition of imagination as "the balance of reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness with difference; of the general with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order."¹

Looking at Coleridge's anthropomorphic view of imagination (and art) from the Empsonian point of view, one can say

that by means of a sensuous and expressive medium an individual tries to capture the totality of the world around him (with himself at its centre) and to recreate it within the self-contained totality of a poem, novel, painting or musical composition. In every case the work, composed of a system of signs which in a way opt for medium, asserts two simultaneous fields of reference: one is interior and closed, the other exterior and open. A tension results between the structural (syntactic-semantic) plane and the structural-semiotic plane, in other words, between the form and the content of the work on one hand and the form-content syndrome and its sociological referents on the other. This antinomy which is characteristic of all mimetic (including realist) works is paralleled by a tension between the represented world and the representable world. Accordingly, in Empson's view, the logical and grammatical disorder of a work of art is simply the vehicle for presenting psychological complexity, and hence the ultimate task of criticism is to explore either the mind of the poet in creation or the mind of the reader in perception, though of course the inception and the goal of the study must be the artifact. The manner in which Empsonian analysis of poetic language is essentially Coleridgean and how Empson is different from the American New Critics are mainly the issues looked into in this chapter.
It is important to note that Empson's critical approach to literature, under various labels of verbal analysis, formalistic, ontological or contextual criticism, has been identified with the American New Criticism to such an extent that "where he is mentioned, it is mentioned, and where it is, he is." This critical movement reacting violently against the Neo-Humanist emphasis on the moral uses of literature, and the academic interest in historical and literary tradition, chiefly concerned itself with the "internal" analysis of a work of art: that is to look at a poem as poem, not as an appendage to the poet's biography, nor as an illustration of the history of ideas. Accordingly the New Critics stressed a close reading of the texts, and, since poems are written in words, they also paid careful attention to the language of poetry. Because of this

there is a general tendency to identify the American New Criticism with close textual reading, and Empson, "the closest and most resourceful reader" as Ransom calls him, is regarded as the founder — or a strong supporter of this school of criticism. How far this is justified and whether Empson's significance lies elsewhere are issues that merit special attention. To consider these issues it is necessary to go back to Richards' early writings because, as Fowler rightly points out, "they were specifically and directly productive of what came to be known in England as 'practical criticism' and in America as the New Criticism." Also, as David Miller has indicated, "William Empson is at once the most brilliant and least theoretical of the critics who followed, and reacted against, the principles set forth by I.A. Richards."


4 The only critic, among the New Critics, who has denied that Empson was a source of New Criticism is Cleanth Brooks. But even he acknowledges that they found in Empson a support for their critical theories. See his article "Empson's criticism", *Accent*, IV, (Summer, 1944) pp. 208-16.


Richards in his earlier writings, particularly in *Principles of Literary Criticism*, *Practical Criticism*, and *Science and Poetry*, had asserted that the validity or otherwise of a poetic statement should not be judged by applying to it the criteria applicable to scientific statements because the function of statements is not the same in both cases. Accordingly he observed:

A statement may be used for the sake of the reference, true or false, which it causes. This is the scientific use of language. But it may also be used for the sake of the effects in emotion and attitude produced by the reference it occassions. This is the emotive use of language. 7

Elucidating the distinction between the two "uses of language" Richards in *Practical Criticism* claims four main aspects of all articulated speech: Sense, Feeling, Tone and Intention. 8 Sense "is the referential meaning" which demands a correspondence between a sign and what it signifies"; Feeling is "the attitude or desire which

7  *Principles of Literary Criticism* p. 267.

8  See *Practical Criticism* Chapter I of Part III pp. 179-188.
colours the language”; Tone, the writer’s “attitude towards his reader”; and Intention, “the purpose of writing” so that apart from mere references, emotional reactions and subtle nuances enter into the picture.  

In other words, Richards thinks of meaning as composed of these four related elements: Sense, Feeling, Tone and Intention. The way he was looking at meaning made him underplay sense (the paraphrasable content) and to say that “it is never what a poem says which matters, but what it is”. He observes:

A poet may distort his statements; he may make statements which have logically nothing to do with the subject under treatment; he may, by metaphor and otherwise, present objects for thought which are logically quite irrelevant; he may perpetrate logical nonsense, be as trivial or as silly, logically, as it is possible to be; all in the interests of the other functions of his language — to express feeling or adjust tone or further his other intentions. If his success in these other aims justify him, no reader (of the kind at least to take his meaning as it should be taken) can validly say anything against him.  

9 Poetries and Sciences p. 33.

Richards underplayed 'sense' because his objective in writing *Principles of Literary Criticism*, *Practical Criticism* and *Science and poetry* was to find a value in poetry when the contemporary scientific thinking denied the validity of poetic statements. Consequently, Richards, using science in order to justify non-sciences like ethics and poetry, termed poetic statements as 'pseudo-statements'. But while underplaying sense, Richards was always over-playing not so much 'intention' as 'tone' and 'feeling' which according to him were useful in structuring the responses of the reader.  

Richards' underplaying of 'sense' is taken as a clue by the American New Critics — not very much concerned with the overplayed aspects — and, accordingly in their own analysis of poetry the New Critics contended that poetry is a unique mode of discourse and that the first business of the critic is to find out exactly what, in its own terms and in its own ways, a poem is saying.

11 cf. *Practical Criticism*. "Poetry, which has no other way remarkable qualities, may sometimes take very high rank simply because the poet's attitude to his listener — in view of what he has to say — is so perfect". p. 206. Also: "The poet's task is constantly (though not only) that of finding ways and means of controlling feeling through metaphor. He has to be expert, if not in describing feeling, in presenting it, and presenting and describing are here rather near together". p. 223.
that has not been and cannot be said elsewhere. They point to two different modes of the linguistic medium and indicate that the world of scientific discourse is 'denotative' while the universe of poetic discourse is 'connotative'. To use the terminology of Ransom — 'the leader and the philosopher of the group' as George Core calls him — they believe that science has only 'structure', 'sense' or 'paraphrasable content' whereas a poem has both 'texture' and 'structure'; the former overshadowing the latter gives us not a streamlined argument but an argument that has been complicated through having been hindered. The various terms like 'paradox' and 'irony' in Brooks, 'structure-texture' dichotomy in Ransom, and 'tension' generated by 'connotation' and 'denotation' in Allen Tate are labels to describe the complicated nature of poetry. This is what, according to these critics, Richards had in mind while discriminating between the 'referential' and 'emotive' aspects of language on the one hand, and statements and pseudo statements on the other. By


13 It is useful to point out here how Tate establishes a relationship between these terms. In his essay "Reflections on the Death of John Crowe Ransom", The Sewanee Review: 82 (1974) pp. 46-47 he says, "What the inventor of the poetic "tension" had in mind was a pseudo erudite pun; that is he dropped the prefixes of the logical terms extension and intension, and had the tension derived from both, and containing both. Intension is connotation or Ransom's texture; extension, denotation or Ransom's structure".
asserting that poetry is made of 'emotive' language and 'pseudo-statements' they believed (quite wrongly) that Richards meant statements in poetry to be independent of 'sense' and without any referential value.

Having argued that 'sense' or paraphrasable content is irrelevant to poetry, the New Critics became interested in a highly organized kind of poetry, a poetry which exhibited the density of 'texture' or form. They ignored drama and the novel and attacked each and every poet except Donne and the other Metaphysicals, who became the touchstones for judging others. They assumed that it was the nature of poetry to use "indirections" or a kind of complexity and they were involved in a sort of mechanistic analysis quite opposed to Richards' intention. They began to read poetry as "always a model example of its own, critically sanctioned, unique in status" having an "inviolable resistance to paraphrase, and above all its removal from contingent spheres of 'intention' and

14 Quite wrongly because Richards in "The Max Eastman's The Literary Mind: Its place in an Age of Science," Criterion, 12. (1932) pp. 150-55 has clearly stated "Mr. Eastman insists on identifying Sense with science and Feeling with poetry directly against my insistence that all four functions are present in most utterances and pre-eminently in poetry".
This approach, as Hyman has remarked, is not only contrary to Richards' intention but also "remote from literature".16

Against it we have Empson's open-minded practice which takes into consideration all the four aspects of meaning —— Sense, Feeling, Tone, and Intention —— and at the sametime approaches a poem as a self-contained semantic structure. In his analysis of the poetry of Donne, for example, Empson takes issues with Eliot while arguing that Donne's love poems are 'true' in the sense of their drawing upon the poet's actual experience.17 Empson claims that the love poems of Donne represent a balanced and commonsense attitude to life which critics can ignore only at the cost of distorting the poet's character. The same assumptions about the poet's experience, and its relevance to his poetry, are at the basis of Empson's analysis of Coleridge. Empson argues, partly on the basis of Allosp's testimony, that Coleridge was never able to


throw off completely the religious doubts that made him
turn to utilitarianism, during his early years, as a
doctrine which helped to soften the idea of Christian
redemption.\textsuperscript{18} Similarly while analyzing Fielding's \textit{Tom}
\textit{Jones}, Empson forms a working notion of Fielding's
mentality and balance of judgement in the course of
interpreting the author's attitude to his hero. What
impresses Empson is Fielding's capacity to see all sides
of a question and, at the same time, to refer to one's
judgement to honest self-appraisal.\textsuperscript{19} Such illustrations
are enough to prove that the question of Empson's progress
from "a primary concern with what Ransom calls 'texture' to
a primary concern with what he calls 'structure',"\textsuperscript{20}
does not arise because he never divided the two. In his
\textit{Seven Types of Ambiguity}, he sets out with the basic faith
that if the poet is 'using language carefully' then it
would be impossible to maintain any distinction between the


\textsuperscript{20}This is how Fryman in \textit{Armed vision} p. 237 distinguishes Empson from the New Critics.
verbal and the psychological levels of meaning, or between 'sound and sense'. He also states that 'the sound must be an echo of the sense' and 'sounds are valuable because they suggest incidental connections of meaning.'

Accordingly, the term ambiguity, as used by Empson, implies not the density of texture but 'a dynamic quality in language' which enables meaning to be deepened and enriched as various layers of it become simultaneously available:

What often happens when a piece of writing is felt to offer hidden riches is that one phrase after another lights up and appears on the heart of it, one part after another catches fire...

In fact Empson asserts that 'the complexity of logical meaning, and even of the texture, ought to be based on the complexity of thought.'

The above examples indicate

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21 Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930; rpt London: Penguin Books in Association with Chatto and Windus, 1977) p. 29. All the subsequent references have been taken from this edition of the book referred to Seven Types, Unless otherwise stated.

22 Seven Types p. 11.

23 Ibid p. 70.
that Empson's basic stand, unlike that of the American New Critics, is that the complexity of language should be taken not as an end by itself but as a means to realize the complexity of the artist's experience. This is clear from his review of Brooks' *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* where he argues that the poem's structure of inwrought paradox, whatever its demonstrable subtlety, cannot be used to determine "whether the machine worked the right way."\(^\text{24}\) Again, while talking of the nineteenth century poets, particularly Wordsworth, he asserts that they were "making a use of language very different from that of their predecessors because their experiences were different."\(^\text{25}\) It is a clear example of how Empson's emphasis is on 'experience' as the key to poetic analysis in contrast to the assumptions of the New critics who account for a poem by matching it with 'a priori' notion of organised meaning which removes it from the informal


\(^{25}\) *Seven Types* pp. 40-41.
context of personal utterances. Empson's readings, whether in *Seven Types* or *Complex Words*, or individual essays, are constantly qualified by a sense of 'dramatic context' which lies beyond the reach of constituent analysis, and, more than that, where the question of 'structure' and 'texture' does not arise at all.

It may be pointed out here that F.R. Leavis, who found "more of the history of English Poetry" in *Seven Types* than in any other book is closer to Empson when he challenges the 'structure-texture' oscillation of the New Critics. In his book *Revaluation* he uses these two terms in order to assimilate a part of the Augustan line to the Metaphysical tradition in the manner Brooks also does in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*. Through an analysis of the representative poems or satires of Donne, Pope and Byron, Leavis indicates that their difference is not in the texture of their poems alone but in their whole attitude towards art. He, like

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Empson, asserts that "the texture of actual sounds, the run of vowels and consonants, with the variety of action and effort, rich in subtle analogical suggestion, demanded in pronouncing them, plays an essential part, though this is not to be analysed in obstruction from the meaning."\textsuperscript{27} A proper understanding and analysis of \textit{Seven Types} will indicate that Leavis's approach, rather than that of the New Critics, is closer to Empson (and to I.A. Richards). But it would be incorrect to wholly identify the Empsonian approach with that of Leavis because whereas Leavis' appeal is to the physical properties of language, Empson is interested in the complex semantic structure. A 'semantic Frontiersman', as Richards calls Empson,\textsuperscript{28} he proposes to consider a work of art as a semantic structure; that is, a structure which does not refer to aesthetic form, nor to the morphology of words as verbal units but to the coherence of meaning.


The fact remains that Empson is too independent and individualistic to be associated with the American New Critics or with the most influential English group which developed around Leavis at Cambridge. His critical works, though a few in number, are attempts to analyse the subtle implications of Richards' idea of metaphor and, at the same time, point out the shortcomings of the 'a priori' ontological constructions placed upon poetry by the New Critics — this is a fact which has been neglected by those who view Empson as a 'pioneer' of the New Critics.

Empson takes up the term 'connotation' as used by the American New Critics and points out the limited range of meaning given to it by them. Against their stance that the connotative use of language is a special use through which a poet is capable of expressing his attitudes Empson maintains that the connotative use of language is not a special feature of poetic language alone but a feature of language in general. Accordingly, like Richards and Coleridge before him, Empson attempts to make terms between poetry and the normal condition of language in commonsense discourse. In *Structure of Complex Words* he singles out the words which claim the attention of ordinary language philosophers. In the preface to the third edition of *Seven Types* he is content
to define ambiguity as "a feeling of generalization ... an appeal to a background of Human experience which is all the more present when it cannot be named."\textsuperscript{29} He insists that ambiguity is essentially "a part of the normal, rational habit of thought,"\textsuperscript{30} and does not belong to a uniquely poetic order of thought and language only. Consequently the division between scientific (prose) and poetic discourse or between connotative and denotative meanings, which is at the basis of New Criticism, is not to be found in Empson. Ransom was right to a great extent to point out that Empson's readings of poetry might often apply equally to "a piece of infinitely qualified prose."\textsuperscript{31} This is equally true of Richards' concept of 'emotive' language because throughout his literary career Richards maintained that all language carries with it an emotional burden and, therefore, the scientific language he held, is comparatively a "late development of linguistic activity"\textsuperscript{32} and is a limited

\textsuperscript{29} Seven Types, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid p. 16.
\textsuperscript{32} Richards Principles of Literary Criticism p. 273.
one because it tries to isolate language from its natural characteristic — its emotional burden.

It is important to point out here that the distinction between the poetic and prose discourses in American New Criticism came not from I.A. Richards but from T.E. Hulme who spoke of a clear break between aesthetic and rational realms of discourse, between our conceptions of the scientific, the human and the divine. Empson, a close follower of Richards and Coleridge, remarks that the separating of human and divine amounts to an excuse for "boasting about seducing shop-girls and then boasting about revelations." Like Coleridge, who described Secondary (poetic) Imagination "as an echo" of the Primary Imagination, Empson claims that poetic experience and ordinary modes of knowledge are related and so are the media through which poetic and non-poetic experiences find expression. As a result of this

33 A further discussion of Hulme and the New Critics will follow in the next chapter.


conviction, Empson is in a position to talk intelligently about poetry, even paraphrase its meaning with accuracy, because it shares with prose discourse the fundamental logic common to all articulated thought. More than that he creates a new theory of 'ambiguity' which goes beyond the usually held notion of metaphor as the means through which similarities are found in dissimilarities.

Empson, it must be kept in mind, is not concerned with the supposed psychology of Richards' 'ideal reader' nor with the selective use of such a reader as done by the later formalist critics who tried to transfer all such complexities from an affective to a rhetorical plane. Instead he develops a new qualified, philosophical and phenomenological account of literary meaning where so many other influences are also visible. One of the major influences was Robert Graves who in *Poetic Unreason* (1925) examined or proposed to examine the 'phase of mental conflict' which lay behind the reader's immediate response; and then to work back to the author and his own apparent conflict. Following Graves, Empson arrives at a solid conclusion that the idea of 'intentionality', or of the reader's constitutive role in poetry, is inseparable from the idea of 'ambiguity' or multiple meaning. It is clear from the following remarks of his on George Herbert:
Herbert's paradoxes are not to be thought of as making up some unique and self-supporting system of beliefs. They are part of poet's intelligent efforts to reconcile reason with the beguiling false logic of religious metaphor. 36

Similarly reviewing an anthology of Thomas Hardy Empson found himself irritated by the sheer complacency of a poet who made no real attempts to reconcile the patent contradictions of his own philosophy. Such, he reflected, is the evasive outlook of most people "who are admired for unpretentious integrity." 37

In Seven Types he, at the outset, proposes to use the term 'ambiguity' in an extended sense to mean "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language." 38 Later on he points out that 'type three is related to the fourth', that the sixth may be included in the fourth, that the fourth may belong in either the fifth or the sixth,


37 "Review of the Selected poems of Thomas Hardy" New Statesman 14 September, 1940 pp. 263-64.

38 Seven Types p. 19.
that the sixth may fall in the seventh, and vice versa. He goes to the extent of saying that "to a more serious analysis they would appear trivial and hardly to be distinguished from one another,"\(^39\) or "the distinction between the seven types would not be worth the attention to a profound thinker."\(^40\) Accordingly the listing of the various kinds of 'ambiguity' as done by Ransom in \textit{New Criticism} or the categorizing of it into different metaphors, as is done by Miller,\(^41\) is not a serious reading of \textit{Seven Types}. It is, on the other hand, an attempt to find out in Empson one's own meanings as it were, and it gives a rather inaccurate picture of Empson and reflects more of the quality of the writer himself. Miller, for instance, rightly states that Empson is a true follower of Richards and the main aim of \textit{Seven Types} is to analyse Richards' concept of metaphor. But while analysing the relationship between the two he concludes

\(^{39}\) \textit{Seven Types} p. 292.

\(^{40}\) Ibid. pp. 56-58.

that "almost all metaphors are, by Empson's definition, ambiguous to some extent, but there are many sorts of ambiguities which are not metaphors." Having argued thus Miller categorizes Seven Types into 'a metaphor of tension', 'positive metaphor', 'exclusive pun', 'illustrative pun', 'inclusive pun', 'meaningful ambiguity' etc. This kind of analysis results from isolating the Seven Types from The Structure of Complex Words — nowhere does Miller refer to the Complex Words or any other book of Empson — and from relating Empson and other New Critics, through Richards, to Hulme's 'intensive' and 'extensive' manifolds. The danger with such an approach is that it groups both Richards and Empson as 'pioneers' of the American New Criticism and, thereby, gives a wrong perspective on these critics. Such a perspective, for instance, has led Winifred Nowottny to reject 'ambiguity' as a vague term and to


43 Ibid. pp. 56-58.
replace it by the concept of 'extralocation' which implies more firmly "a stopping short of complete specification" and a rhetoric which transcends the limitation of 'ordinary language'. 44 Similarly, it has made Wheelwright suggest 'plurisignation', as he calls it, to be a more positive term than ambiguity; 45 or Ernest Kris to invent a number of logical distinctions, speaking of the separate orders of 'conjunctive', 'additive' and 'integrative ambiguity' — the last more completely characterizing the 'poetic use of Ambiguity'. 46 All these attempts, one way or the other, miss the complicated and vital aspect of Empsonian ambiguity.

A correct perspective is one that starts with Empson's preoccupations with the operation of language in poetry, not as an end in itself but as a means to grasp


the nature of poetic idiom and the poetic process — a procedure that can be attested to by his critique of Richards. Far from being a misunderstanding of Richards, as Hotopf would make one believe, his critique is a fair judgement on the kind of misunderstandings Richards' earlier pronouncements had given rise to. This stance is clear not only in The Structure of Complex Words but its roots can be traced back to the Seven Types. As R.G. Cox says in his review of the second edition of the Seven Types:

There is a paragraph in the last chapter which bears on this question where Empson weighs the possible objection that he ought to have considered meaning under Professor Richards' headings: Sense, Feeling, Tone and Intention. He answers that the process of apprehension, both of a poem and its analysis, is not at all like reading a list: 'to state the fact and the judgement' (the thought and feeling) separately, as two different relevant matters, is a bad way of suggesting how they are combined; it makes the reader apprehend as two things what he must in fact apprehend as one thing. 48


48 Scrutiny Vol. XV, p. 151.
An elaborated critique of these four headings is found in *The Structure of Complex Words*. A lengthy as well as difficult analysis of literary language, the book heavily relies upon the theories of literary language, the book heavily relies upon the theories of language and value derived from I.A.Richards. Empson starts off by analysing Richards' 'theory of emotive language' and the possible misunderstandings it had given rise or might give rise to. He attributes to Richards the view that "the emotions given by words in poetry are independent of sense" so that "a writer of poetry had better not to worry about the sense; or the gesture of a word (in which is included its emotion, tone, and intention) may be wholly separate from its sense." Such a view about the emotive use of language is perhaps backed by an odd misreading of some remarks made by Richards in his early writings (e.g. in *Menicus on the Mind* in the essays on Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn") — remarks, which

49 *The Structure of Complex Words* p. 56.

50 Professor Richards says: "Urns induce states of mind in their beholders, they do not enunciate philosophical positions — not in this kind of poetry — and *say'st* here is used as a metaphor which should not be overlooked." Similarly, he gives three ways of making "Beauty is Truth" a mere tautology (not a sentence with any meaning, as Empson points out). These ways, Richards says "account for its power in the poem (when, of course, it is not apprehended analytically) to convey that feeling of deep acceptance which is often a chief phase in the aesthetic experience". *Menicus on the Mind* p. 116 quoted by Empson in *Complex Words* p. 6. see also pp. 368-70.
"if taken at all simply, would be sure to lead to bad criticism." 51 How it led to 'bad criticism' is hinted at by Empson later when he asserts that whereas Richards' treatment of 'Ode to a Grecian Urn' is too emotive, Brooks makes it too philosophical as he "neglects the emotions as well as the feelings of the poet." 52 The problem with this attempt at separating of Sense and Feeling is that both have to be explained differently whereas, according to Empson "What appears to us a 'feeling' will in fact be quite an elaborate structure of related meaning." 53 Instead of analysing this sense-feeling paradigm in Richards and Brooks in greater detail Empson admits succinctly "However, by the time Professor Richards came to write The Philosophy of Rhetoric and Interpretation in Teaching he seems to have dropped the

51 Complex words, p. 6; 242.
52 Ibid., pp. 368-70.
53 Ibid., p. 57.
idea that a writer of poetry had better not worry about the sense.54 The second view that Empson attributes to Richards — a view which is related to the first — is that the function of poetry is to call out an attitude which is not dependent on any belief open to disproof by facts. Empson categorises Richards' statement that the references in poetry are used "not for the sake of their truth or falsity but for the sake of the attitudes they evoke" as a pseudo-statement, that is a statement which should not be taken literally.55 Similarly while discussing the theme of Science and Poetry that "poetry can save the world from the disasters which will otherwise follow the general loss of religious and semi-religious beliefs", Empson adds:

I would be sorry to treat this as a mere false analysis of poetic language ... The point I want to make, on the contrary, is that all this has almost nothing to do with the analysis of poetic language; when we come down to detail, and find a case where there are alternative ways of interpreting a word's action, of which one can plausibly be called Cognitive and the other Emotive, it is the Cognitive one which is likely to have important effects of sentiment or character, and in general it does not depend on accepting false beliefs. But in general it does involve a belief of some kind, ... 56

54 Complex words p. 14
55 Ibid. p. 424.
56 Ibid p. 10.
Accordingly in Appendix I to *Complex Words* Empson, after examining the various theories of value, maintains that Richards' theory of value was a warning to his contemporary philosophers (logical positivists) that the function of poetry is not to provide information only but also to "organise the whole soul of man". Similarly while discussing the concept of 'pseudo-statements' Empson indicates that although Richards sometimes wrote as though they were to be limited to statements expressing the 'Magical view of the universe' their definition given by him in *Science and Poetry* as "a form of words which is justified entirely by its effects in releasing and organizing our impulses and attitudes"\(^{57}\) suggests a much wider class of statements. This definition of pseudo-statements, as Empson argues, is the basis of Richards' concept of metaphor analysed in *Coleridge on Imagination* and *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*.

*The Structure of Complex Words*, which according to William Norris is "beyond doubt Empson's critical *summa*",\(^ {58}\)

\(^{57}\) *Poetries and Science* p. 47.

\(^{58}\) *William Empson and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* p. 1.
analyses further Richards' conception of metaphor and 'pseudo-statements' and the relation between the two. This book can be divided, in Empson's own words, into two main parts: the two introductory chapters on "Feelings" and "Sentiments" and the seven concluding chapters which hold between them the twelve analytical chapters. In this book Empson takes Richards' critical theory at a point "where the distinction between Emotive and Cognitive language breaks down." In the chapter on "Feelings in Words" Empson asserts that there is something like an impertinence in calling a good poet's work "emotive"; he makes it emotive "because that gives the right basis for the relation of the emotive to the cognitive part." Empson believes that the "emotive is not some separable, irreducibly affective mode of understanding"; that it

59 Complex Words p. 2.
60 Ibid p. 424.
61 Ibid p. 33
62 Ibid p. 55
involves structures of implicit assertion, open to rational explanation, and this implies a basic sanity about the general habits of usage. Accordingly, "The Emotions which are in the words will normally evoke Senses that correspond to them", and "the structure to be examined is that of the resultant senses". In other words, Empson attempts to fit in the cognitive element in his own analysis of poetic medium on the one hand, and, on the other, avoids the ontological construction placed upon poetry by the New Critics. Unlike the New Critics, Empson is of the opinion that in order to understand the complex uses of language "the critic has to realize their inexplicit background, those hints they contain of a subdued and somewhat normal state of feeling, rather than fit them into some specialized theory of meaning and structure." Having argued thus, he states:

63 Complex Words p. 55

64 Norris, William Empson and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism p. 25.
The emotions which are in the words will normally evoke senses that correspond to them (except in swearwords, intensifiers, and for that matter in raving), and the structure to be examined is that of the resultant senses. 65

Against the logical positivistic conception that each word has only a single meaning, Empson, like the Richards of Coleridge on Imagination and The Philosophy of Rhetoric believes that words have the potential to achieve meaning in a context which includes not only the words printed or spoken 'before and after' in the sentence but also the situation of the writer and the reader, or better still of the producer and the perceiver. Empson limits the scope of his agreement with Richards by saying that "whether I really disagree with his [Richards'] account I am not sure, but if I do it is only in a marginal way." 66 Once the above mentioned contention is granted it will be realized that Empson in the Seven Types is not concerned with classifying ambiguities but substantiating his belief that the logical examination of poetic language leads to the understanding and appreciation of the

65  Complex Words p. 55.

66  Ibid. p. 311.
multiplicity of poetic experience. He is concerned with two things at the same time: the quality of poetic experience and the mode of operation demanded by such experience. This is an unmistakable pointer to Richards' notion of metaphor and to Coleridgean imagination, a point which most of the critics of Empson have ignored. The notion of ambiguity-metaphor is traceable to Richards' _Coleridge on Imagination_ and _The Philosophy of Rhetoric_ — two books which discuss the different kinds of meaning derived from poetic experience — and it is also hinted at in _Principles of Literary Criticism_. Following Richards, Empson refuses to turn 'ambiguity' into a settled system of distinctions, or to posit any simple theory of literary meaning which would seem to compass the whole of an author's active intelligence. Besides affirming the 'slippery' nature of the term 'ambiguity', Empson in the preface to the third edition of the _Seven Types_ defines ambiguity broadly as "a feeling of generalization — an appeal to the background of human experience ... all the more present when it cannot be

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67 *Seven Types* (1961) p. xii.
The same reservation is at work in the Complex words, where in an anxious footnote, Empson is on guard against the charge of absorbing 'the living water of thought' to a mere system of 'fixities and definities'. He recalls the warning of Coleridge that "too much definiteness of a term is a bad thing", wasting "the vital and idea-creating force" and preventing "originality". At the same time, he maintains that intelligence operates at a level beyond the reach of any system of ideas or subconscious 'rules', which could be offered to explain it.

It is worthwhile to note that Empson makes these remarks after his explanation of equations and his attempt to relate the sense and gesture or the four components of meaning discussed by Richards. He says:

I do not imagine that Professor Richards would seriously disagree with this; in fact he was already making the essential point on the matter in Practical Criticism. 72

68Seven Types p. XV.
69Complex words p. 57.
70Ibid. p. 57
71Ibid. p. 57.
72Ibid. p. 57.
Empson's essays on Shakespeare, Donne and Joyce, his analysis of George Herbert, or any other poet or writer indicate in the broadest common sense terms that 'intention' and 'sense' are as important as 'feeling' and 'tone'.

In the Complex Words Empson goes ahead of Richards' 'interinanimation' of words when besides separating various entities in the habitual uses of a single word, he distinguishes five ways in which a word can carry a doctrine and observes:

No doubt while you are reading the single consistent author the meaning of his key words will grow in your mind, but once you have got the full meaning it is a fully unified one. 73

In order to explain how a word can carry a doctrine, Empson works out a theory of equations, starting from the statement A=B, that is the identity of A and B in which case the statement actually either defines 'B' or 'A' or

Complex Words p. 40.
both 'A' and 'B' together. He further defines this A=B equation in terms of the 'implications of words' and 'moods of words', and uses four sets of different symbols for making equations the type to which the statement can belong, with a claim that "these four types of equations, together with the existence assertion, cover all the possibilities for a word which is to imply a doctrine." By 'Existence assertion', it is to be noted here, implies that "what the word names is really there and worth naming." Empson's analysis of equations clearly indicate that he is actually working out a semantic theory of metaphor in which the 'emotive' and 'referential' functions of language collapse as is clear from his discussion of the theory in the last seven chapters of Complex Words where he describes the five ways in which words carry doctrines. These are: 'Ironic use', Descriptive

74 Complex Words pp. 40-53.
75 Ibid. p. 53
76 Ibid. p. 39
pregnancy'; 'Appreciative pregnancy', 'Associative pregnancy', and 'Typifying pregnancy'.

There is a very close connection between Empson's doctrine of verbal 'equations' and the context theory of meaning put forward by Richards in *The philosophy of Rhetoric* and his subsequent books. Empson believes that decisive patches of compressed argument are often carried (and retained) in individual words, rather than being spread through some extended passage of language which then becomes the control or context, which defines their relevant senses. According to this later view, the word would lose its assertive independence, its force of compacted argument; it would simply adjust pragmatically to whatever dominant set of meanings formed its immediate context.

Having worked out an algebra of statements and the means of classifying types of statements, Empson indicates how a text is a semantic structure. The key words and phrases upon which he concentrates throughout the twelve chapters are "wit", "all", "fool", "dog", "honest", "sense and sensibility". By applying his theory of equations as a means of classifying statements, he is able to show how these words and phrases, with
their inherent capacity to shift their meanings in a particular and recognizable social or historical context, can be used to interpret even difficult texts in a better way.

A clear example of how Empson uses his theory to interpret various texts is his interpretation of the word "Honest" in Othello where without paying too much attention to the metaphysical meaning of tragedy he is able to arrive at a sound conclusion. He points out at the outset

What Shakespeare hated in the word, I believe, was a peculiar use, at once hearty and individualist, which was then common among raffish low people but did not become upper-class till the Restoration. 77

Expressing full agreement with Bradley's view that "the way everybody calls Iago honest amounts to a criticism of the word itself", 78 Empson lays the ground for his reading of Othello with the two preceding chapters "Honest man" and "Honest Numbers", in which he shows

77 Complex Words p. 218.
78 Ibid p. 219.
how the word 'honest' achieved a different sense in the Elizabethan age — a sense which cuts it away from the sanctions of official morality and substitutes instead an unillusioned sense of 'mutual fallibility'. While talking of Shakespeare's deviant use of the word he traces the pathology of its possible semantic distortions and arrives at his conclusion that "the confusion of moral theory in the audience ... was symbolized or echoed in a high degree by the confusion of the word." Nineteenth century audience took Iago as an abstract form of evil whereas in Empson's reading he becomes "a critique on an unconscious pun" and both Othello and Iago carry on an intensive dialogue with the play's verbal resources just as, on a larger view, the play itself works out a sub-set of the rational structure of the word 'honest'.

The uniqueness of Empson's semantic priorities can be established by comparing his reading with Leavis' essay "The Rhetoric of Othello". The essence of Leavis' interpretation of Othello is that the hero with his

Complex words p. 235.

manifest taste for grandiloquent self-assertion, fails to live up to the renunciatory ethic of tragedy in general. This conclusion is the outcome of Leavis' belief in the primacy of the poetic 'medium' over anything pertaining to the poet's verbal ingenuity—a belief which was at the root of Leavis' early objection to Empson's method of criticism. Once the same belief is applied to Othello the result is the judgement that the hero's eloquence is a species of 'face-saving rhetoric' and that therefore his character is gravely flawed and 'open from the outset to Iago's evil'. Empson takes a quite different view. He finds Othello all the more plausible for his contradictory motives, and is happy to allow "a certain wilful heightening to be expected of a man of honour." Similarly, analysing Pope's Essay on Criticism Empson claims that his analysis "improves the poem a

83 Complex Words p. 245.
great deal and indeed shows how it was meant to be read." The word 'wit' occurs "on the average every sixteen lines of the essay", says Empson; and he proceeds to trace the possible meanings with the help of his favourite authority, the dictionary. Empson believes that Pope in using the word was striking a balance between Longinus and Horace, between the sublime use which thrills and the epigrammatic use which causes fools and wise men alike to admire or approve. He even considers it a mistake to suppose that the word 'wit' could not come near Coleridgean imagination, because "Pope sets out to combine the seventeenth and nineteenth century notions of wit, range of imaginative power with bright social criticism." Pope's man of wit, as Empson delineates him may be "(1) bright social talker, (2) critic of arts or of society, (3) poet or artist" and in any of these roles, he may be "(a) mocking (b) acting as judge (c) giving aesthetic pleasure or expressing new truth." Context, tone, implication and mood — all these are incorporated

84 Complex Words p. 84
85 Ibid. p. 84
86 Ibid. p. 86
87 Ibid. p. 86
88 Ibid. p. 86.
in one word 'Sense' —— are used to analyse the essence of style and the equations determine the meanings between them. Through an investigation of the hierarchies of meanings attached to 'wit' Empson admirably illuminates the richness and complexity of Pope's 'Essay on Criticism'.

Significantly enough, Empson reserves his fourth type of equation for Wordsworth and others whose poetry carries conviction. He clearly indicates that the only metaphysical ideas which need to be mentioned are those which were "in the mind of the author" to the extent that they pre-empt the logic of his language, demanding a specialized rhetoric rather than remaining a matter of theme and ideas. He comes to terms with Wordsworth's philosophy, explaining it by the compact semantics of 'sense'. According to him, Wordsworth is mainly concerned with "how the mind interprets what it gets from the senses", and his strength as a poet, particularly in 'Tintern Abbey' and 'Prelude', lies in giving assent to what is not a consciously and deliberately held belief. Not only this,

89 Complex Words p. 289.
Wordsworth connects the basic pattern of sensory perception with the supreme act of imagination:

...Though Sensation and Imagination appears as the two ends of the scale in view, so that one might expected them to be opposites, the word is so placed that it might equally well apply to either. 90

Empson's analysis of Wordsworth leads us to understand poetry better because Empson, more than any other commentator on Wordsworth, enables us to view both romantic and modern poetry in fully secular terms. This seems to be particularly significant because romantic criticism, prior to Richards' reinterpretation of Coleridge's theory of imagination, had made religious beliefs too important a plank of analysis and appreciation to allow its application to modern poetry. In other words, Richards and other formalist critics, particularly Empson, have given a more inclusive critical view as they furnish tools of analysis appropriate to modern as well as to romantic poetry. Similarly the analysis

90 Complex Words p. 298.
indicates that ambiguity is not only a semantic idea but also a philosophical concept that leads us back to Kant, particularly to his idea of judgement. 'Judgement' in Kantian dialectics arises from the amalgamation of two faculties of mind: 'Understanding' and 'Reason'. It is a faculty not accommodated by either understanding (a priori) or Reason (a posteriori). Earlier philosophers like Hume, following Aristotle, had built their theory of causality but Kant pointed out that not causality but teleology —— a purposive teleology —— is what is more important and it is realized only when Judgement operates. Naturally, it is through the capacity of judgement only that one knows 'concrete universal' —— fusion of idea and image, or abstract and concrete. 91 This appears as a paradox but once we look at it from the Kantian point of view we realize that through the mental operation alone symbol and metaphor come into being. Symbol in itself is abstract but it is realized through metaphor.

Coleridge was doing the same thing in his analysis of imagination. He distinguished two aspects of imagination or the imaginative process: that of the

primary imagination which operates within "the ordinary world" and the secondary imagination which "reworks this world and impresses its shape upon it." Translating this philosophical issue into the linguistic-semantic plane one can observe that imagination is a process whereby words construct reality from within themselves and impose it on the objective world. It is a process which "reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image..." According to Coleridge, imagination is a power by which one image or feeling is made to modify many others, and by a sort of fusion "to force many into one." Once the opposites, subject and object, or thought and thing are fused in the mind of the poet, a set of symbols arises which convey "not the object alone, but likewise the character, mood and intention of the person who is representing it." These

92 *Biographia Literaria* vol.I, p. 202

93 Ibid. vol.II, p. 12.


95 Ibid. vol.II pp. 115-16.
symbols do not remain abstract but become part of 'concrete' experience and their language is never self-conscious or artificial. In short, Coleridge's idea of imagination and the way it differs from 'fancy' leads one directly to language. The model for fancy, according to Coleridge is the doctrine of association in which each word has a carefully established relationship to the thing it represents physically. With his seminal conception of Imagination, Coleridge "destroyed the antithesis of Words and Things, elevating, as it were words to Things and living things too." Metaphor provides the means by which words are 'elevated' into things and so does 'ambiguity' which, used in the extended Empsonian sense, "gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language." The same Coleridgean spirit of revolt against the associationist philosophy is at the root of Empson's use of the term 'ambiguity'. Like Coleridge, Empson believes that "during the eighteenth century English poets were trying

96 Coleridge's letter to Godwin (September, 1800) quoted by Richards in Coleridge on Imagination (1955) p. 12.
97 Seven Types p. 19.
to be honest, straightforward, sensible, grammatical and plain* and sets his business "to outwit these poor wretches [the eighteenth century poets], and to applaud them for qualities in their writings which they would have horrified to discover."98 Following Coleridge, Empson believes that if each word has only a single meaning — as the eighteenth century associationist philosophers and the twentieth century logical positivists believe — then the meaning of one word can in no way be affected by or transferred to another, nor could new meanings be generated by juxtaposing one word with another. Empson's analysis of the key-words in The Structure of Complex Words is an outcome of a more comprehensive view of meaning and so is his discussion of 'ambiguity', as is clear from the following statement:

A word may have several distinct meanings; several meanings connected with one another; several meanings which need one another to complete their meaning; or several meanings which unite together so that the word means one relation or one process ... Ambiguity itself can mean an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings. 99

98 Seven Types p. 91.
The idea of metaphor discussed above is also propounded by Richards in his later writings and we find an explication of it in Empson's *Seven Types* and *Complex Words*; although every word is ultimately a metaphor for its referent, what we usually mean by 'metaphor' is a compound unit. In fact the principle of 'interinanimation' and 'multiple levels of meaning' introduced by Richards — as the reformulated versions of Coleridge's imagination — and subsequently analysed by Empson, can be extended so that a single word in 'context' includes not only all other words in the language related to it, but also the feelings, emotions, attitudes and associations which are implied thereby — a fact which connects both these critics to Coleridge. How Coleridge paved the way for this conception of metaphor may be indicated from his analysis of *The Tempest* where he points out as follows: "The power of poetry is, by a single word perhaps, to instil that energy into the mind which compels the imagination to produce the picture," He cites a passage from *The Tempest* where *Prospero* tells *Miranda*:

One midnight,
Fated to the purpose, did *Antonio* open
The gates of Milan; and in the dead of darkness
The ministers for the purpose hurried thence
Me, and thy crying self.
"Here", Coleridge goes on to add, "by introducing a single happy epithet, 'crying', in the last line, a complete picture is presented to the mind, and in the production of such pictures the power of genius consists." Similarly, while discussing dramatic irony — one of the devices coupled under Irony — in relation to Shakespeare's Macbeth, Empson asserts that it gives an intelligible way in which the reader can be reminded of the rest of a play while he is reading a single part of it. Thus it gives one some means of understanding the view of a work of genius as a sort of miracle whose style carries its personality into every part of it, whose matter consists of microcosm of its form, and whose flesh has the character of the flesh of an organism. 101

S.E. Hyman is right in pointing out that Coleridge's analysis "is rather Empsonian and might well be regarded as an ancestor of his method." 102


101 Seven Types p. 66.

102 S.E. Hyman, Armed Vision (op.cit.) p. 266.
A better example of such a method, quoted and elaborately discussed by Richards,\textsuperscript{102} is Coleridge's analysis of the two lines from Shakespeare's \textit{Venus and Adonis} where he points out how, through the faculty of imagination, diverse meanings of the words are put together in order to give expression to the poetic experience.

Thus both Richards and Empson are Coleridgean in essential aspects because it was Coleridge who indicated that the complexity of experience demands a complex verbal medium which again leads back to the complex nature of the human mind. The only difference between Coleridge's conception of poetic language and that of Richards', or Empson's, is this: whereas Coleridge believed that 'words' in poetry fuse the 'external' and 'temporal' in order to recreate something new, the latter believed that the reality created by words is quite independent. This difference, as Richards himself points out in \textit{Principles of Literary Criticism}, is traceable to the 'theological' implications of Coleridge's criticism. Without such theological implications, both Empson and Richards come to the same conclusions after their detailed analysis of the poetic medium, for which Coleridge had paved the way a century earlier.

\textsuperscript{103}\textit{See Coleridge on Imagination} pp. 82-83.