

# **Redirections in Critical Theory**

Truth, Self, Action, History

*Edited by*  
Bernard McGuirk



## REDIRECTIONS IN CRITICAL THEORY

Truth, Self, Action and History, previously linchpins of philosophical and literary critical discourses, have been steadily deprived of their stabilizing functions in a plural theoretical age. The essays in *Redirections in Critical Theory* seek to reanalyse and reconstruct major figures and configurations of the past, asking questions often neglected or overlooked by a readership ever in pursuit of new theoretical directions.

In this volume, Christopher Norris re-examines the work of William Empson and his treatment of the sublime. Nick Heffernan explores the 'truth' to their moment of the events of May 1968 in France, and places the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in this specific poststructuralist historical context. Steve Giles analyses Chekhov's later plays and theorizes what it means to 'be in a state of crisis'. And finally, Sara Danius takes up Fredric Jameson's own invitation, in *The Political Unconscious*, to be read and tested both theoretically and against his interpretive practice.

*Redirections in Critical Theory* brings together established critics and new names in the field of theory who re-examine key debates on discourses often said to be deprived of any stable terminology. It will be an important text for students of literature, critical theory and philosophy.

**Bernard McGuirk** is Reader in Romance Literatures at the University of Nottingham, where he is Head of the Graduate School of Critical Theory. He has published widely on modern literature.



# REDIRECTIONS IN CRITICAL THEORY

Truth, Self, Action, History

*Edited by Bernard McGuirk*



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# CONTENTS

	<i>Notes on contributors</i>	vii
	INTRODUCTION <i>Bernard McGuirk</i>	ix
1	WILLIAM EMPSON AND THE CLAIMS OF THEORY <i>Christopher Norris</i>	1
2	OEDIPUS WRECKS? OR, WHATEVER HAPPENED TO DELEUZE AND GUATTARI? Rereading <i>Capitalism and Schizophrenia</i> <i>Nick Heffernan</i>	110
3	THE IRREDEEMABILITY OF CHANGE Action and structure in the late plays of Anton Chekhov <i>Steve Giles</i>	166
4	IN SEARCH OF TOTALITY On narrative and history in Fredric Jameson's <i>The Political Unconscious</i> <i>Sara Danius</i>	197
	<i>Index</i>	264



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# INTRODUCTION

*Bernard McGuirk*

Redirections at once seek new trajectories and derive from prior movements. Truth, self, action, history, previously linchpins of philosophical and literary critical discourses, have been ever more deprived of their stabilizing functions amidst the multiplicities of a plural theoretical age. Yet as terms, and as values, they have not disappeared; neither have their roles been reallocated as relative turning-points in a metaphysics generally lacking such prime movers. The essays that follow reflect both current developments and reassessments, offering fresh insights and, at the same time, re-evaluations of major issues of the avowedly theoretical era of the late twentieth century. For a decade, the key word in the realm of criticism has been the prefix 'post-': poststructuralism, postmodernity, postfeminisms and so forth. The historical moment of a century moving towards its close, however, cannot be confined to such a postscript. For writing and speaking, thinking and showing move ever on. Intellectual exchange anticipates and activates, as well as reflecting upon, social change. In a climate of often headlong theorizing rhythms, these essays seek to resituate, reanalyse, restructure and reconstruct major figures and configurations of the past.

The first contribution is an important reassessment, by Christopher Morris, of the work of William Empson. The study covers the whole range of Empson's critical writing but invites us to re-examine such works as *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, *The Structure of Complex Words*, *Argufying*, *Some Versions of the Pastoral*, in the light of contemporary theoretical concerns. Norris reminds us that, for Empson, 'criticism is most usefully employed in making rational sense of semantic complications that would otherwise open the

way to all manner of mystified quasi-religious doctrine or “paradoxical” pseudo-wisdom’. In the process, he stresses the

need to distinguish between Empson’s strikingly down-to-earth treatment of the sublime and those other (post-modernist or deconstructive) readings that emphasize its aporetic character, its paradoxical claim to ‘present the unrepresentable’, or its power to discompose all the normative categories of thought and perception.

In short, Norris ‘sees little virtue in theories that equate the most valuable forms of critical insight with a knowledge that lies somehow beyond the reach of rational analysis, or in a realm of “paradox”, “aporia” or flat contradiction where reason fears to tread’.

From his opening comparison of Empson’s stance with the arguments of Donald Davidson’s ‘On the very idea of a conceptual scheme’, Norris pursues a wide-ranging and combative series of juxtapositions of Empson’s ideas with those of New Critics, neo-Christians, Marxists, structuralists and poststructuralists, ever with a view to demonstrate that, for Empson, ‘criticism is simply not doing its job if it fails to make a bridge between “technical” interests and issues of a real-world moral and practical kind’.

While, polemically, focusing on aspects of Empson’s work which distinguish his thought from that of such as I.A. Richards and Cleanth Brooks, Norris situates Empson close to philosophers in the Anglo-American ‘analytical’ tradition (Frege, Russell, Quine) and moves on to outline his ‘rational humanist’ position. One of the most telling of the comparisons Norris makes is with Mikhail Bakhtin’s ‘sociological poetics’. Yet even here Empson’s rigorous pursuit of fitting the ‘relevant historico-semantic’ text or context into ‘a “grammar” of implicit semantic equations’ is set up as a project of the theoretical exposition of ‘Truth’ values. Finally, Christopher Norris makes an eloquent culminating plea in support of his view that *The Structure of Complex Words* ‘is by far the most original and substantial effort of literary theory to have appeared in this country during the past fifty years’.

The ‘truth’ to its moment—the events of May 1968—of the critical enterprise of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari is the subject of Nick Heffernan’s study. Tracing how they ‘successfully

## INTRODUCTION

assimilated Lacanian theory in order to turn it against itself in defence of the spirit of 1968' in *Anti-Oedipus*, he goes on to illustrate how their project broadened, developed and changed in *A Thousand Plateaus*. The dissolution of subjectivity is 'dramatized' for Heffernan, by the peculiar parallel dissolving of the political into the aesthetic, and vice versa. By situating the Deleuze and Guattari enterprise in its specific poststructuralist historical context, he is able both to trace its demise and, at the same time, to argue for its enduring suggestivity in an era already being classified as post-theoretical.

The underlying assumption that modernity consists in fragmentation and crisis has operated at the level both of general theories (socio-political, cultural, aesthetic) and of specific analyses of individual texts. Steve Giles, in his study of Chekhov's late plays, sets out to theorize what it means to 'be in a state of crisis'. In the process he explores the relationship between paradigm and change largely within a framework of Hegelian theory, juxtaposing his case-study of Chekhov with other models such as the theatre of Büchner and Ibsen with a view to demonstrating a 'final implosion' of the structuring concepts of 'freedom, volition, decision and will'. In short, we are offered here a prefiguration of the modernist abolition of action and self and, concomitantly, a scrutinizing of the concepts of truth and history which all the essays in this volume address.

Finally, Sara Danius, in a meticulous response to Fredric Jameson's own invitation, in *The Political Unconscious*, to be read and tested both theoretically and against his interpretive practice, pursues the case-study of Joseph Conrad. She argues that Jameson's readings are never applications of, but always extensions to, theory. First, however, she offers a thoroughgoing political analysis of Jameson's Marxism as it purports to transcend the theory-practice dichotomy, a tactic designed to reconcile her own treatment of the philosophy of history and textual interpretation as inseparable discursive activities. At the same time, however, she is careful to point out the vulnerabilities of Jameson's and, indeed, her own enterprise. We are left in no doubt that insight is as bedevilled by blindness in the theorizing of history as it has been shown to be—amongst others—in the discourses of truth, of self and of action.

It was originally intended that this volume would appear with Pinter Press as part of a project presenting Nottingham Studies in

Critical Theory. This explains the format of *Redirections in Critical Theory: Truth, Self, Action, History*, consisting as it does of two extensive essays by established scholars—one external and one internal to the University of Nottingham Postgraduate School of Critical Theory—and two by former postgraduate members of the School. In Spring 1991, Pinter withdrew from Humanities publishing, and this volume was transferred to Routledge with Pinter's Humanities list.

# WILLIAM EMPSON AND THE CLAIMS OF THEORY

*Christopher Norris*

When is a theorist not a theorist? Perhaps when, like William Empson, he starts out by writing an extraordinary first book (*Seven Types of Ambiguity*)<sup>1</sup> which raises all manner of subtle and far-reaching theoretical questions, but then lives on to develop a hearty dislike of the modern 'Eng. Lit.' industry, its ethos of geared-up professional expertise and—most especially—its tiresome display of both-headed 'theoretical' concern. Such was certainly Empson's response to just about every school or movement of literary theory, from the American New Criticism to structuralism and deconstruction. For a while he made a point of keeping up with these developments, reviewing any books that came his way (though rarely with much enthusiasm), and at least hanging on to the basic conviction—so strong in *Seven Types*—that 'theory' was a worthwhile pursuit just so long as it helped us to puzzle out the sense of some otherwise mysterious passage, and didn't fly off at a speculative tangent, or become tied up in philosophical problems of its own ingenious creating. After all, as he wrote in *Seven Types*,

[n]ormal sensibility is a tissue of what has been conscious theory made habitual and returned to the pre-conscious, and, therefore, conscious theory may make an addition to sensibility even though it draws no (or no true) conclusion, formulates no general theory, in the scientific sense, which reconciles and makes quickly available the results which it describes.

(p. 254)

At this time Empson was mainly concerned to head off the objections of those posturing aesthetes ('Oxford' types as he

tagged them) who would no doubt regard his book as a monstrous piece of clanking theoretical machinery, an approach that threatened to 'kill the plant'—or destroy the very sources of poetic response—by 'pruning down too far toward the emotional roots'. In face of such attitudes Empson felt justified in adopting a stance of sturdy 'Cambridge' rationalism, an outlook informed by his own keen interest in mathematics, theoretical physics, and the scientific disciplines in general. To this extent at least 'theory' was useful: as a means of persuading oneself and others that poetry—even 'obscure' modern poetry—was best approached with the intellect fully engaged, and without giving way to an aestheticist mystique that would leave readers entirely at the mercy of this or that irrational prejudice. In short, 'it is necessary to protect our sensibility against critical dogma, but it is just because of this that the reassurance given by some machinery for analysis has become so necessary in its turn' (*ST*, p. 253). For otherwise one might as well admit that criticism—especially Empson's kind of criticism—performs a great disservice to poetry by analysing that which of its very nature resists the best efforts of analytic commentary.

It is worth looking more closely at Empson's arguments here since they help to explain both his early, positive attitude to 'theory' and the reasons for his subsequent lack of sympathy for what others were attempting to do under the same broad description. In *Seven Types* he takes the view that, if poetry makes sense, then its sense-making properties are likely to be continuous with those of our everyday 'prosaic' understanding, even if raised to a much higher power of semantic or syntactic condensation. At any rate it is better to work on this assumption—to press as far as possible towards analysing the character and sources of poetic 'emotion'—than to take easy refuge in the wholesale aestheticist creed which elevates the mysterious nature of poetry to a high point of critical doctrine. Thus:

[t]hings temporarily or permanently inexplicable are not, therefore, to be thought of as essentially different from things that can be explained in some terms you happen to have at your disposal; nor can you have reason to think them likely to be different unless there is a great deal about the inexplicable things that you already know.

(*ST*, p. 252)

In other words, there is something wrong—philosophically suspect—about the attitude that treats poetry as somehow vouchsafing imaginative truths, insights or orders of ‘paradoxical’ wisdom that inherently transcend the powers and capacities of rational thought. Critics who take this line are in much the same position as cultural relativists who argue that there exist languages, world-views, scientific paradigms, ‘universes of discourse’ or whatever that differ so radically from our own (modern Eurocentric) standpoint that there can, in principle, be no question of ‘translating’ reliably between them, or at any rate of knowing for sure that such translation has in fact occurred.<sup>2</sup> For you could only be in a position to assert this incommensurability-thesis if you had at least understood sufficient of the language or world-view in question to register the problems of achieving any reasonably accurate or truthful grasp. And then of course the thesis would self-deconstruct, since the very fact of claiming to be in such a position, i.e., to *know* where the difficulties arose, would constitute a standing reproof to the claims of any wholesale cultural-relativist outlook.

This is not to deny—as Empson readily admits—that there may be ‘things temporarily or permanently inexplicable’, whether these have to do with some radically alien set of cultural beliefs, practices, or life-forms, or perhaps (his more immediate concern) with some passage of especially opaque poetry that turns out to baffle the best efforts of rational prose commentary. But to take these exceptional cases as the norm is to fall into the same error that anthropologists, philosophers, historians of science and others make when they conclude on the basis of such localized (however well-documented) problems that translation between languages and cultures is a radically impossible enterprise; that different ‘language games’ or ‘forms of life’ are incommensurable one with another; that there is no judging between various scientific ‘paradigms’ or ‘discourses’ since they each set their own, strictly immanent or *sui generis* terms for understanding; or that knowledge (including scientific knowledge) is always a product of the dominant conventions, the professional codes of practice or research programmes that effectively determine what shall count as such at any given time. These arguments are open to the obvious rejoinder, as above: that without at least some measure of shared understanding across and between languages, disciplines and cultures the sceptic’s positions would be strictly unintelligible,



since they would lack any means of making their point with respect to *particular* or well-attested cases of misunderstanding.<sup>3</sup> In short, this attitude of out-and-out cultural relativism is self-refuting in so far as it trades on a generalized refusal to acknowledge the terms on which *all* understanding necessarily proceeds, at least in so far as it hopes to make sense in the forum of accountable public debate.

Such—in broad outline—is the case advanced by the philosopher Donald Davidson in his well-known essay ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’.<sup>4</sup> His main targets here are the various forms of currently fashionable cognitive scepticism, among them Whorfian ethno-linguistics (where ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ are held to be constructed entirely in and through language),<sup>5</sup> Quine’s ultra-empiricist attack on the analytic/synthetic distinction (along with his consequent denial of the possibility of ‘radical translation’),<sup>6</sup> Feyerabend’s anarchist philosophy of science (which throws out all validity-conditions save those adopted more or less at whim on the part of this or that localized short-term collective),<sup>7</sup> and other such versions of the basic idea that all knowledge is mediated by ‘conceptual schemes’ (language games, ‘forms of life’, etc.) which differ so fundamentally in respect of their sense-making criteria that nothing could justify our claiming to compare them, or to understand, interpret or criticize one in terms of the other.<sup>8</sup> To this catalogue Davidson might well have added poststructuralism, postmodernism, Foucauldian ‘genealogy’ (or discourse theory), and at least one variety of deconstruction as practised by (mainly American) literary critics.<sup>9</sup> For with these thinkers also it is a high point of doctrine that ‘truth’ is nothing more than what counts as such according to the codes, cultural conventions, power/knowledge interests, ‘intertextual’ relationships and so forth which make up the conditions of intelligibility within this or that field of ‘signifying practice’. And he (Davidson) would surely have much the same point to make against this latest efflorescence of epistemic scepticism in a textualist or literary-rhetorical mode. For they all raise the question—wholly unanswerable on their own terms—of just what constitutes a valid (or even meaningful) interpretation when all ‘discourses’ come down to a play of strictly incommensurable language-games with no rational grounds for adjudicating the issue between them.

It seems to me that Empson is within sight of this question when he devotes the last chapter of *Seven Types* to a

defence of 'analytic', as opposed to subjective or 'appreciative' criticism. For the main purpose of verbal exegesis, as he sees it, is to offer a 'machinery' of rational understanding which may not satisfy the aesthete (on grounds of tact, sensibility or mere good taste), but which can at least give heart to the critic in search of more solid grounds for debate. And this machinery is necessary, he writes,

partly so as to look as if you knew what you were talking about, partly as a matter of 'style', and partly from the basic assumption of prose that all parts of speech must have some meaning. (These three give the same idea with increasing generality.) Otherwise, one would be constantly stating relations between unknown or indefinite objects, or only stating something *about* such relations, themselves unknown or indefinite, in a way which probably reflects accurately the nature of your statement, but to which only the pure mathematician is accustomed. So that many of my explanations may be demonstrably wrong, and yet efficient for their purpose, and vice versa.

(*ST*, p. 253)

Or again: the situation with criticism is much like that in the sciences, where intuition may go a long way—may indeed be indispensable when it comes to assessing the truth-claims of rival, equally plausible theories—but where one still needs the 'machinery' of rational argument by way of making good some particular claim.

Hence the alternating process, as Empson describes it, between commentary of a broadly 'appreciative' kind and commentary that ignores the rules of good taste and presses as far as it can towards a limit-point of lucid, rational understanding.

When you have made a quotation, you must first show the reader how you feel about it, by metaphor, implication, devices of sound, or anything else that will work; on the other hand, when you want to make a critical remark, to explain *why* your quotation takes effect as it does, you must state your result as plainly (in as transferable, intellectually handy terms) as you can.

(p. 250)

What this amounts to (as perhaps one might have expected, given Empson's early and continued interest in mathematics and the natural sciences) is a theory of criticism that minimizes—even looks like collapsing—the difference between problems of literary interpretation and problems in the nature of scientific reasoning. His poems of this period show Empson puzzling in much the same way about just how far the more advanced (i.e., speculative) models and metaphors of modern science find expression through modes of 'poetic' reasoning that tend to jump over the logical relations required of a straightforward demonstrative sequence of argument.<sup>10</sup> But it is equally important to recognize that Empson is very far from regarding this as a one-way relation of dependence, a version of the argument (much touted by recent 'radical' philosophers of science) that scientific discovery is ultimately reliant on imaginative 'leaps' that somehow elude all the standard protocols of method and verification.<sup>11</sup> For he is just as keen to make the point that criticism will amount to nothing more than a species of aestheticist self-indulgence if it doesn't give *reasons*—sound analytical reasons—for coming up with this or that ingenious piece of closely wrought verbal exegesis. The one idea that he won't entertain is that poetry somehow expresses a wisdom—an order of 'higher', paradoxical, or purely intuitive thought—beyond the reach of rational analysis. And this was a conviction that stayed with Empson right through to the books and essays of his last period.

In *Seven Types* it produces the strong rationalist conviction that *poetry ought to make sense according* to the best, most rigorous (if 'prosaic') standards of hard-pressed analytic commentary. Thus

explanations of literary matters..., involving as they do much apparently random invention, are more like Pure than Analytical Geometry, and, if you cannot think of a construction, that may show that you would be wise to use a different set of methods, but cannot show the problem is of a new kind.

(pp. 252–3)

What I think this means—and the meaning is far from self-evident—is that theory works best if allowed to settle down into a generalized sense that adequate explanations ought to be available, even in cases of 'obscure' modern verse where the meaning (in

Wallace Stevens's pregnant phrase) 'resists the intelligence almost successfully'. In other words, criticism has to operate on the principle that any poem worth the effort of detailed exegesis will most likely make sense in rationally accountable terms, and that where such efforts fail—or find themselves at last driven back upon talk of 'deep' symbolism, obscure private motives, paradoxical truths or whatever—then one can always go back and try another analytical 'construction'. Thus

[any] advance in the machinery of description makes a reader feel stronger about his appreciations, more reliably able to distinguish the private or accidental from the critically important or repeatable, more confident of the reality (that is, the transferability) of his experiences; adds, in short, in the mind of the reader to the things there to be described, whether or not it makes those particular things more describable.

(p. 254)

For it is Empson's firm belief that the only way to read intelligently is to keep the reasoning faculties fully in gear and not to go along with emotive, symbolist, Jungian or other such doctrines that would sever all links between poetic language and the language of plain-prose reason. This is not to say that there may not be passages, and among them passages of genuinely powerful, haunting or profound poetry, which in the end turn out to elude all the critic's dogged sense-making efforts. Such was Empson's experience with the lines from Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' which he puzzled over at length in *Seven Types* and took up again—hoping to explain the puzzlement—in a chapter of his later book *The Structure of Complex Words*.<sup>12</sup> But instances like this, though not at all uncommon, were best regarded as exceptions that in some sense proved the rule, or cases that could only be dealt with adequately by keeping one's rational defences up and not (so to speak) admitting defeat at the first hurdle.

Such was at any rate the lesson that Empson drew from the scientific disciplines—especially the advances in theoretical physics—that dominated the Cambridge intellectual scene during his student years. It was an outlook as remote as possible from the kinds of extreme cognitive scepticism or the varieties of relativist doctrine which nowadays pass (at least among literary

theorists) as the last word in *au courant* philosophy of science. Small wonder, as I have said, that Empson found himself increasingly at odds with an enterprise (that of professional 'Eng. Lit.') whose drift he perceived as getting further and further out of touch with the interests of science and—more urgently—the needs of enlightened rational understanding. Not that this involved the kind of vulgar positivist conception of science and truth that literary theorists are apt to hold up as a justification for their own more 'sophisticated' views. (Barthes's *Critique et vérité* has a good deal to answer for here,<sup>13</sup> along with the anti-cognitivist bias of American New Criticism and—albeit from a very different angle—F.R. Leavis in his absurd crusade against science during the 'two cultures' debate with C.P. Snow.) On the contrary: Empson saw very clearly that such a model was out of the question, not only for literary criticism but even (or especially) for the kinds of scientific enquiry that most engaged his speculative interest. In *Seven Types*, as indeed in his poems of the period, Empson shows himself fully up-to-date with ideas—like Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle—which had already done much to problematize the relation between knower and known, or scientific observation and the order of 'objective' reality. All of which tended to complicate his view that verbal analysis was the right way for criticism to go, or at any rate a method that would serve critics better than the lame retreat into various kinds of emotivist, irrationalist or aestheticist doctrine. For very often one had to concede, as he put it, that 'the act of knowing is itself an act of sympathizing; unless you are enjoying the poetry you cannot create it, as poetry, in your mind' (*ST*, p. 248).

On the one hand this meant that any claims for 'analytical' as opposed to 'appreciative' criticism had better take account of these deep-laid problems and not pin their faith to an old-fashioned positivist paradigm which no longer possessed much credibility even among scientists. Such would be the view that 'the mind, otherwise passive, collects propositions about the outside world' (p. 248); a view whose application to poetry would at least have the negative virtue of showing up its inbuilt limitations, or 'reduc[ing] that idea of truth (much more intimately than elsewhere) to a self-contradiction' (p. 249). But this is no reason—so Empson maintains—to go along with the prevalent idea of poetry as somehow enjoying a special dispensation from the standards of rational accountability or plain good sense. Least of all could it

justify what Empson regards as the desperate recourse to emotivist doctrines that entirely sever the link between poetry and other (scientific, philosophical or everyday) uses of language. This last had been the view of I.A. Richards, argued in a series of influential books, notably his *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1927).<sup>14</sup> On Richards's view, it was simply a muddle—a species of category-mistake—to worry about the status of poetical truth-claims as if they aspired to the condition of a constative (i.e. factual or assertoric) truth. Poems were valuable chiefly for their power of evoking a complex *emotional* response in the reader's mind, a state in which the chaos of our humdrum, day-to-day experience could achieve a momentary 'equipoise' or balance of diverse (normally conflicting) psychological impulses. The greatest poetry, according to Richards, is the product of 'exceptional experiences' in the lives of 'exceptional individuals'. Its power to communicate such privileged moments comes from the poet's peculiar gift for condensing a range of otherwise confused or contradictory emotions into a verbal form that achieves the maximum degree of lucidity and poise. But it can do so only on the condition that readers approach it in the proper frame of mind, that is to say, by suspending the standards appropriate to other (truth-functional) kinds of discourse, and effecting that 'complete severance of poetry from belief which Richards (like the early T.S. Eliot) considered the *sine qua non* of its survival in a scientific age.

What this amounts to is a modern restatement of Matthew Arnold's case in 'The Study of Poetry', retaining the stress on literature's vital role as a force for cultural renewal, but adopting the language of behaviourist psychology to back up its claims. The march of science had left small room for those forms of collective belief or imaginary projection that had once made it possible to feel at home in an otherwise hostile or indifferent universe. Poetry can 'save' us, Richards believes, but only if we learn to read it aright, and give up thinking of poetic truth as in any way subject to the normal criteria of factual or veridical discourse. This means accepting that poets deal only in varieties of 'pseudo-statement', sentences which share the grammatical *form* but not—he insists—the assertoric *force of* genuine propositions. Otherwise poetry must forfeit all claim to be taken seriously in an age when science has pressed so far towards defining the terms of rational debate in every other realm of enquiry. Richards would seem to have arrived at this conclusion by endorsing the logical-

positivist argument in its strongest (and least tenable) form, i.e. that the only propositions which really made sense were those that squared with the world-view of modern scientific reason, or which lent themselves to verification in accordance with principles derived from that programme. Thus truth-values would apply to just two classes of utterance: empirical truths-of-observation on the one hand and purely analytic (hence empty or tautologous) statements of logical necessity on the other. Hence Richard's unfortunate retreat—as Empson saw it—into a form of dead-end 'emotivist' doctrine that attempted to save appearances by cutting poetry off from any semblance of rational sense.

The American New Critics, Wimsatt and Brooks chief among them, did nothing to challenge this anti-cognitivist bias despite their taking issue with Richards's 'affective' or psychologistic premises.<sup>15</sup> What they managed, in effect, was a wholesale transfer of priorities from the realm of subjective reader-response to that of the poem as 'Verbal icon', an inwrought structure of paradox, irony, or multiple meaning under whatever favoured designation. It would then become possible—so they hoped—to place criticism on a properly disciplined or methodical footing by avoiding the appeal to reader-response with all its impressionistic vagaries, and attending instead to the 'words on the page', or those various privileged figures and tropes that characterized poetic language. But they retained from Richards the same root conviction that poetry wasn't in the business of offering arguments, advancing truth-claims, or in any way providing fit material for the purposes of logico-semantic analysis. Indeed their whole approach was premised, like his, on a principle of non-continuity between poetry and other kinds of discourse, a *de jure* principle which required—among other things—that critics should respect the (supposedly) autonomous character of poetic language and form, and thus guard against the manifold 'heresies' of paraphrase, biography, historical source-hunting, sociological background-studies and so forth. What these approaches had in common was a tendency to substitute content-analysis (or an unseemly rush from words to world) for the effort of detailed rhetorical exegesis which alone provided an adequate grasp of the poem's meaning and structure. And this applied above all to the 'heresy of paraphrase', the idea that one could so far separate 'form' and 'content' as to offer a plain-prose summary which fleshed out the poem's meaning in conveniently simplified terms.

In which case—according to the New Critics—one might as well give up reading poetry altogether, since any difference between it and the various discourses that attempted to analyse, describe or explain it could only be a matter of degree, not a qualitative difference, and would therefore tend to reduce or disappear as soon as one applied the requisite analytic skills. Only by respecting the uniqueness of poetry—its resistance to paraphrase and other such reductive ploys—could criticism make out a convincing case for the continued value of literary studies in an age of rampant scientism or technocratic reason.

Thus the New Critics followed Richards in this respect at least: they drew a firm line between the rational prose virtues that (supposedly) governed their own interpretive procedure and the realm of poetic meaning where issues of truth and falsehood—or of argumentative warrant—no longer had any significant role to play. For Empson, on the contrary, there seemed little point in pursuing an ‘emotive’ (or non-cognitivist) theory of poetic language whose effect—as he saw it—was to isolate literature in a self-enclosed realm of feelings or affects which bore no relation to wider practical or socio-political concerns. In *Seven Types* the main thrust of this argument is against the kind of woolly-minded ‘appreciative’ criticism which shies away from verbal analysis for fear of harming our delicate intuitive responses. Empson puts this case most forcefully in a 1930 article responding to John Sparrow’s polemical attack on Richards, Cambridge, and the newly emergent ‘school’ of tough-minded analytic criticism.<sup>16</sup> Where Sparrow goes wrong—in company (one might add) with many reviewers of *Seven Types*—is in trying to separate enjoyment from analysis, or judgements of value (supposedly arrived at on the basis of ‘pure intuition’) from the process of patiently figuring out what this or that passage actually means. But he ignores all the evidence, as Empson argues, that ‘those who judge in literary matters by “intuition” always assume a legacy of analysis, and complain when it is carried further’. Thus Sparrow treats ‘beauty’ as a simple noun, a non-natural attribute (like ‘goodness’ in G.E. Moore’s ethical theory) which somehow typifies our best, most responsive and rewarding moments of experience, but which cannot be in any way explained or analysed beyond making the right appreciative noises. To Empson, this seemed nothing more than an easy escape-route, a retreat not only from problems in the realm of aesthetics or literary theory, but also from those very real difficulties which arose at every point in the



effort to understand other people's motives and intentions. In short, it is an outlook which 'stultifies the intelligence, abolishes criticism, makes most of the facts about beautiful things unintelligible, and leaves us with a sense that the whole thing is a necromancy to which any charlatan may have the password'.<sup>17</sup> Thus Sparrow is here cast as a typical 'Oxford' aesthete, a critic who refuses to examine the sources of his own emotive reactions, and who therefore remains entirely at the mercy of whatever irrational prejudice may happen to capture his mind. Whereas it is the great virtue of 'analysis', as Empson sees it, to make us more aware of those prejudicial blind-spots and thus more capable of thinking our way through and beyond them.

All the same Empson is willing to concede that there *is* something deeply problematic about the claims of analytical criticism, especially when these are combined—as in Richards—with a sense that poetry needs to preserve its mysterious, 'inexplicable' power if it is ever to provide the imaginative sustenance required in a post-religious world of drastically naturalized meanings and values. To Sparrow this seems nothing more than a cheat on Richards's part, a means of smuggling myth and magic back in by the back door while exploiting the appeal of a 'method' that trades on its pseudo-scientific credentials. For Empson, conversely, the issue about 'analysis' must be seen as one of those deep and *inescapable* problems which arise as soon as one reflects on the nature and limits of human understanding. In fact his rejoinder to Sparrow at this point reads like a synopsis of what Kant has to say in that section of the First *Critique* devoted to the 'Antinomies of Pure Reason'.

The prime intellectual difficulty of our age is that true beliefs may make it impossible to act rightly; that we cannot think without verbal fictions; that they must not be taken for true beliefs, and yet must be taken seriously; that it is essential to analyze beauty; essential to accept it unanalyzed; essential to believe that the universe is deterministic; essential to act as if it was not. None of these abysses, however, opened under Mr Sparrow's feet.<sup>18</sup>

Empson's point is that you won't avoid these problems—whether in ethics, epistemology, aesthetics, or literary criticism—by adopting the kind of blinkered emotivist outlook which counts

them irrelevant for the purposes of ordinary, day-to-day human understanding. For the result of such thinking, as shown by Sparrow, is to fall back on vague appeals to 'intuition' that make no allowance for the reasoned appraisal of motives, meanings and intentions. So the puzzle about analytic criticism is often within reach of larger questions as to how we can cope with those various vexing antimonies (free will *versus* determinism, etc.) which don't disappear through a simple application of intuitive or commonsense criteria.

On this point Empson is fully in agreement with Richards, whatever his differences elsewhere: that the 'scientific' method which Sparrow so despises is better than any amount of 'appreciative' waffle since it does at least try to sort these problems into some kind of humanly intelligible sense. Richards is right to take a robust line on the question of reader-response (or affective psychology), and is also quite justified—Empson thinks—in treating poetry as fit material for tests under near-laboratory conditions, tests which take it pretty much for granted (1) that there is no ultimate mystery about poems, (2) that their language is continuous with the language of straightforward prose communication, and therefore (3) that any failures of readerly grasp can best be understood—and hopefully remedied—by examining the various causal factors (social, cultural, psychological, etc.) which may be shown to have brought them about. All this strikes Empson as far preferable to Sparrow's squeamish protests on behalf of an obscurantist ethos which amounts to little more than a species of 'Oxford' high-table snobbery. Where he *will* take issue with Richards—increasingly so in his articles and reviews of the next two decades—is over the argument that criticism can only practise these needful therapeutic skills on condition that it treat poetry as an 'emotive' form of utterance, a language-game devoid of truth-telling warrant, cognitive interests, or veridical force. Only thus, Richards thinks, can poetry 'save' us from the encroachments of science in an age given over to positivist conceptions of meaning and method. That criticism should emulate these methods—that is to say, turn itself into a branch of behavioural psychology—is a development that Richards can happily endorse since it promises to place literary studies on a footing with the other, more prestigious 'sciences of man'. But there would be no point in mounting such a strong neo-Arnoldian case for the high destinies of poetry if it weren't

for this saving difference between poetic and other (referential or truth-functional) varieties of discourse. For on Richards's view—again carried over from the logical positivists—it is impossible to conceive how poetry could ever be taken seriously except by suspending those otherwise normative conditions for valid utterance and treating it as a language of 'pseudo-statements' devoid of any genuine prepositional force.

In his rejoinder to Sparrow there are signs already that Empson is unwilling to take his doctrine on board. He concedes that the emotivist argument might be more 'decently plausible' when applied to painting or the other visual arts since here 'the modes of satisfaction are little understood, and are far removed from the verbal system on which the discursive intelligence usually supports itself.'<sup>19</sup> But it shouldn't be so attractive to literary critics whose main business, after all, is to explain as best they can how language works, including the language of poetry, and who therefore shouldn't rest content with 'explanations' which in fact explain nothing bar their own deep puzzlement. This was why Empson went on, in *The Structure of Complex Words*, to develop a theory of multiple meaning that would offer precisely a working account of that 'verbal system on which the discursive intelligence usually supports itself'. *Seven Types*, he came to feel, had rather fudged this issue by ranging its examples on a vaguely defined scale of 'increasing logical and psychological complexity', with a clear implication that the best, most rewarding cases were those that involved a downright clash of contradictory beliefs or attitudes. Thus the Seventh Type is the kind that occurs 'when the two opposite meanings of the word, the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer's mind' (*ST*, p. 192). But there is a problem with this if you believe, like Empson, that criticism is most usefully employed in making rational sense of semantic complications that would otherwise open the way to all manner of mystified quasi-religious doctrine or 'paradoxical' pseudo-wisdom. For it did seem to many readers of the book that Empson was implying an equation—or at any rate a strong elective affinity—between full-blown cases of the Seventh Type and states of psychological conflict in the poet which most often resulted from some 'deep' clash of unconscious motives or desires. And many of his examples—especially the closing *tour de force* on George Herbert's 'The Sacrifice'—tended to

support this impression in so far as they focused on religious poetry where the orthodox (Christian devotional) reading came up against the signs of neurotic self-doubt engendered by adherence to a harshly paradoxical creed.

Hence the final image of Christ in Herbert's poem:

scapegoat and tragic hero; loved because hated; hated because godlike; freeing from torture because tortured; torturing his torturers because all-merciful; source of strength to all men because by accepting he exaggerates their weakness; and, being outcast, creating the possibility of society.

(*ST*, p. 233)

It is clear enough, from this passage and others like it, that Empson not only viewed such paradoxes as a great source of poetic concentration and power, but had also come to think of them—no doubt in consequence of reading some of Freud's late essays—as compulsively repeating a primal scene of repressed sacrificial guilt and desire which was played out over and again in the consciousness of latter-day 'civilized' reason.<sup>20</sup> Thus 'Herbert deals in this poem, on the scale and by the methods necessary to it, with the most complicated and deeply-rooted notion of the human mind' (p. 233). This idea is taken up in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), where it becomes a kind of ground-bass or running theme for the various stages of thematic transformation—again laid out on a scale of increasing psychological complexity—that characterize the history of 'pastoral' writing in Empson's massively extended definition of that term.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, one could argue that Empsonian pastoral is not so much a genre or literary 'form' as a standing possibility for endless variation on a basic structure of feeling, a technique of self-complicating irony ('putting the complex into the simple') whose instances range from the highly conventional—the Renaissance courtier-as-swain—to a poet like Marvell, suggesting profound philosophical puzzles in a style of relaxed contemplative ease, or again works like *The Beggars' Opera* or *Alice in Wonderland* where Empson finds a cluster of deeply ambivalent (not to say perverse) motives gathering around the figures of MacHeath, the sacrificial victim-hero and Alice, the child as idealized image of adult fantasy-projection. Such is presumably what Empson means when he talks (*à propos*

the Seventh Type) about ambiguities that in the end have to do with 'the most complicated and deeply-rooted notion of the human mind'. For behind all these variants—even the 'simplest'—there is more than a hint of the primal scene evoked in Empson's analysis of Herbert, a scene that many readers will nowadays associate with René Girard and his dark meditations on 'mimetic rivalry' and the origin of human social institutions in the act of (real or imaginary) parricide that first gave rise to the bonding-through-guilt of the parties to that fabulous event.<sup>22</sup>

However, there is still some doubt in Empson's mind as to whether such 'deep' ambiguities should really be thought of as fit material for the literary critic's purpose. Neil Hertz, in his article 'More lurid figures', has some shrewd things to say about the sense of gathering tension and excitement that overtakes Empson's writing as he approaches the 'secret places of the Muse', a domain where the ground rules of logic appear to be suspended, where the law of contradiction no longer holds, and where one ought to feel 'something of the awe and horror which are felt by Dante finally arriving at the most centrique part of earth, of Satan, and of hell' (*ST*, p. 196). For indeed one can view the whole book as building up to those extraordinary instances of the Seventh Type, cases that offer the maximum resistance to any reading premised on rationalist ideas of language, truth and logic. No doubt Hertz is right when he suggests that these pages convey a sense of threshold or liminal experience, an 'allegory of reading' (in de Man's terminology) or an 'end-of-the-line' encounter (Hertz) which can only find voice through such a rhetoric of crisis whose nearest equivalent is the Kantian or Romantic sublime.<sup>23</sup> At least this would explain something of Empson's disquiet as he moves into regions of conflict, paradox or advanced logical disorder where the conscious mind seems increasingly out of its depth. One could then perhaps read the essay on Marvell in *Some Versions* as a kind of pastoral self-reassurance on Empson's part, a reminder that poetry can evoke mental states which are 'neither conscious nor not conscious', which involve all manner of subliminal ideas or thoughts beyond reach of lucid awareness, but which none the less provide an apt stimulus for the poet's 'conceited' metaphysical style. 'Here as usual with "profound" remarks the strength of the thing is to combine unusually intellectual with unusually primitive ideas; thought about the conditions of knowledge with a magical idea that the adept