

ON FIRST READING EMPSON'S "LETTER II" ; NOTES ON POEM AS STRUCTURE

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By virtue of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, and *The Structure of Complex Words*, William Empson has long been recognized as one of the cornerstones of the New Criticism of England and America. Much less attention has been paid to his poetry though his *Collected Poems* has been in print for over thirty years.¹ This relative indifference is more than a little regrettable, for some of his poems are heartbreakingly beautiful and all are informed by a high intelligence which frequently works through a sustained and dazzling sense of verbal play. In this regard, "Letter II" is particularly representative of the subtle fineness of its author's perceptions and his profound sensitivity to the implicative range of language. Understandably these traits make for "difficult" poems, but in this connection it is worth recalling R. P. Blackmur's remark about Hart Crane. Of him, Blackmur observed : "it is syntax rather than grammar that is obscure."² The same can be said of Empson : his vocabulary is generally simple, though extremely wide in range, with words being drawn from mathematics, theoretical physics, psychology, anthropology, and mythology. It is the use to which these words are put that demands concentrated attention ; their contexts are invariably multiple and ambivalent. Indeed, Empson himself has remarked : "the process of getting to understand a poet is precisely that of constructing his poems in one's own mind."³ By attending closely to the syntactic and semantic structures of "Letter II" we may start to construct the poem in our heads and thereby to commence the process of understanding.

Stanza 1 presents the situation whose ramifications the poem as a whole contemplates :

Searching the cave gallery of your face
My torch meets fresco after fresco ravishes
Rebegets me ; it crumbles each ; no trace
Stays to remind me what each heaven lavishes.⁴

The situation is twofold, for on the major level the stanza presents the image of an explorer examining primitive paintings in a cave. On the minor level, the image is that of a lover contemplating the face of his beloved. The power and significance of the poem depends on the symbolic action which enacts the mental growth of poet and reader alike from the limited situation mentioned above to the complexly inclusive theme of the recognition of the fundamental human situation which is what the poem is about as well as what it does. The poem is concerned with the gradual realization of the impossibility of going fully backward or forward in time, of the pity of not knowing all culture but only a residue of past humanity, and of the terror of not being able to carry one's whole culture into the future. It is the enactment of this symbolic action which I shall now trace in terms of the linguistic interactions.

Semantic multiplicities appear in the very first line, for three contexts are presented. *Cave* provides the pattern of time past, primitive man and early culture, while *face* provides the pattern of time present on both natural and human levels. On the former level the reference is to the rock surface of the cave which relates to the primitive aspect but with the difference that it is viewed from the standpoint of the present and the explorer. On the latter level the word refers to the personal aspect which is embodied in the human face of the beloved. *Gallery* has a multiple function in mediating between these ideas and thereby constructing the third context which is the total one of the poem. The word *my* has the sense of "long, dark tunnel" which throws added weight on *face*, particularly in the human sense, by emphasizing *searching*. In this sense the whole line has an adjectival or modificatory relation to *face* ; it is made the focus of attention.

Another sense of *gallery* which is of equal importance is that of "a place for the exhibition of art" which looks forward to *fresco* of line 2. This sense of cultural records being on view is carefully built up throughout the poem in such references as *fresco*, *sketchbook*, *canvas*, *frame* and *portraits*. The fact that the spectator in stanza 1 is the explorer fuses these two themes from the beginning. That is, the notion that the spectatorial attitude toward art is an act of dynamic participation emerges from the ability to apprehend the bifocal vision that all men are explorers

time, this irony pervades all of human culture. Even apart from the syntactic subtleties by which these various meanings are ordered, they are held together by the semantic implications of *bare* which range from “bleakly empty” to “stripped vigour”, thereby encompassing the alternative readings in a single word.

A similar use of language appears in line 4, stanza 4 where *emptier* holds the alternative senses :

Only walk on ; the greater part have gone ;
Whom lust, nor cash, nor habit join, are cold ;
The sands are shifting as you walk ; walk on,
The new is an emptier darkness than the old.

The line can be taken to mean that the darkness which the explorer is entering is devoid of interesting objects of culture. This is to view the “new-old” contrast as one existing in space. By reading it as also a contrast existing in time, we see it as a comment upon the modern age, the present. In any case, the emphasis is upon the sense of loss, of something missing. At this point Empson’s explanatory note holds the ambiguity firm, for when he says that “they have a ground in common only so long as there is something new to find out about each other,” we cannot be sure whether he is referring to line 3, line 4, or both. ⁵ If it is read as referring to line 4, then the meaning could be that the explorer (humanity on the general level) in accordance with the advice “walk on” is doing the correct thing for now that he knows the secrets of this part of the cave, he should push on to different areas. This emphasizes the idea that man’s relations are dependent upon a substantial mystery ; man is aware of the various forms of otherness as a result of ignorance. Consequently, *emptier* ceases to be a pejorative term and takes on implications of freedom and the unfettered which provide the proper context for the explorer who is constantly searching for space in which to move around as well as for different experiences and new knowledge.

Having shown how the ramifications of *gallery* broaden out to control and condition the rest of the poem, we should now consider the use of *your* in stanza 1 and of *you* in stanza 4 from a similar standpoint. In stanza 1 *your* suggests that the explorer is speaking either to himself, to the cave or to some other person (the beloved). In stanza 4 the *you* indicates either that someone, presumably the poet, is speaking to the explorer or that the explorer is speaking to his beloved. This last is, of course, as in stanza 1, operating on a minor level and is only meant to suggest that this personal note is still present. It may also serve as a bridge in the transition of speakers from stanza 1 to stanza 4. Actually the transition begins

in stanza 3 with *glancing, walk on* which is ambiguous. The meaning may be either "I walk on, after glancing" or "after you glance, then walk on." These alternatives involve differences in subject and tense and from these follow differences in structure and tone.

It appears that on one level the poem divides into two parts which are linked by the transitional third stanza. The first part explores the cave with its shut-in atmosphere and contemplates what is limited in scope physically, geographically and imaginatively :

Searching the cave gallery of your face
My torch meets fresco after fresco ravishes
Rebegets me : it crumbles each ; no trace
Stays to remind me what each heaven lavishes.
How judge their triumph, these primeval stocks,
When to the sketchbook nought but this remains
A gleam where jelly fish have died on rocks,
Bare canvas the gold frame disdains ?

It focusses on past time which is something fixed and incapable of suffering addition or variation. The second part presents the poet speaking to the explorer and suggests that the latter is connected with such notions as "the traveller ; wanderer ; searcher for variety, novelty and increased knowledge ; the free spirit in the tradition of romantic anarchism" :

Glancing, walk on ; there are portraits yet, untried,
Unbleached ; the process, do not hope to change.
Let us mark in general terms, their wealth, how wide
Their sense of character, their styles, their range.
Only walk on, the greater part have gone ;
Whom lust, nor cash, nor habit join, are cold ;
The sands are shifting as you walk, walk on,
The new is an emptier darkness than the old.
Crossing and doubling, many-fingered, hounded,
Those desperate stars, those worms dying in flower
Ashed paper holds, nose-sailing, search their bounded
Darkness for a last acre to devour.

The concentration on the stars, even if from within the cave, gives a sense of spaciousness by means of which the background shifts from nature (cave) to the cosmos (stars). The tone, however, ironically reverses the notion of spaciousness

as equivalent to freedom which is connected by the star image to the notion of the explorer as the free man. For like the stars, the explorer and humanity are involved in a situation from which there is no escape. Stanzas 3 and 4 suggest that the answer to man's dilemma lies in adopting the role of the explorer, but stanza 5 suggests that even this is futile and that the explorer is an inadequate prototype for humanity. Regret and fear for the past are fused with terror and despair of the future.

The transition of reference involved in *your* (stanza 1) and *you* (stanza 4) is further aided structurally by line 1, stanza 2 and by the variations on *walk on* in stanzas 3 and 4. The phrase *how judge* orders through its understood infinitive form several different aspects of the problem. Its subject is also understood, but there is no sure way of determining a specific one. It could be 'I' in which case the explorer would be regarded as still talking; or the plural equivalent 'we' could also be employed thereby indicating that the explorer identified himself with the group (either of explorers or of humanity) and drew his strength from this relationship. This last interpretation would naturally place a more than rhetorical emphasis upon *let us* in line 3, stanza 3. Another possibility is assuming 'one' to be the subject. This emphasizes the question of the stanza as an intellectual problem; the impersonal subject has a neutralizing effect on the notion of being directly and immediately involved. Finally, the subject may be 'you' in which case it refers to the explorer and presents a sharp contrast between the explorer's statement in stanza 1 and the poet's or the impersonal question of stanza 2.

The use of the infinitive holds three different ideas together, each of which demands a different auxiliary verb to be assumed. The first idea is raised by the assumption of 'should' which presents the ethical or moral question of the possibility of judgement stemming from the paucity of data on which to base a judgement. The second idea appears with the notion of 'can' which raises the question of the possibility of judgement itself. This reading provides an element of despair and terror in tone; there is an implication of the complete impossibility of judgement or of rendering ethical and evaluative statements. The suggestion is that here man is confronted by overwhelming, brute facts, a note that is taken up in line 2, stanza 3 and developed more fully in stanzas 4 and 5. The third idea is embodied in "can" and raises the question of practical action by implying that some judgement must be made even though the basis is slight. This slightness might be meant to be called to mind by the phrase *general terms* in stanza 3. With the last of these ideas we are in a world of physical events which contrasts with the

other two ideas which refer to the world of mental events and appeal to the human conscience and consciousness respectively.

Stanza 3 is an answer to the question of the second stanza and consequently it is to be expected that it should continue the syntactic hierarchical structure. Again the subject is understood and may be either 'I', 'you' or 'we'. If 'you', then this relates back to stanza 2's similar use and corroborates the fact that the speaker is the poet and that the verbs are imperative. If the subject is 'we', then the *us* of the following line merely expands and continues the answer of the first two lines. But if the subject is 'I', then *us* may have been used as a rhetorical, impersonal form aimed at circumventing the note of permission which invariably hangs about the more parallel phrase "let me". It may also have been used in conjunction with the imperative and the understood 'you' to indicate that there are other people who *glancing, walk on* and that as a result the 'you' is plural. Back of this notion is the suggestion that the individual who has walked on can carry through his action and complete his answer only with the assistance of other people. In this sense, the last two lines of the stanza are an extension of the answer suggested by *walk on*, for not only should man indulge in motion of a possibly therapeutic nature but also in action on the level of human intelligence.

Stanza 4 continues the syntactic structure while introducing more forcibly and on the major level a note of urgency and vague, undefined, terrifying uncertainty :

Only walk on ; the greater part have gone ;
Whom lust, nor cash, nor habit join, are cold ;
The sands are shifting as you walk ; walk on,
The new is an emptier darkness than the old.

This is done through the imperative aspect of the verbal structure. It is reinforced by the first word *only* which implies that whatever one does, one must keep moving both as an explorer and as a cultural man. It does, however, contain a note of reassurance also which provides an ambivalent sense. The suggestion is that "if you will only walk on, everything will be all right." The first three lines have three statements separated by semi-colons and preceded and followed by a repetitive imperative form. The statements all emphasize the danger or urgency of the situation by simply recording facts. These are underscored by the second *walk on* which balances the urgency of the first and also contains a note of reassurance which reminds us of the advice of stanza 3 and the non-pejorative sense of *emptier*.

The informative factual nature of the language provides the terror and regret and the advisory, hortatory nature the reassurance. The former is emphasized if

we read *only walk on* as present tense with the subject "I" understood ; the stanza takes on a tone of gentle regret and melancholy. A sub-variation within this occurs which depends on whether we understand "I" as coming before or after *only*. In the former case the emphasis is upon the smallness, the incompleteness of the action and suggests that there is no marking in general terms going on. If the latter is taken, the emphasis is upon the individual's loneliness and isolation. The two sets of implications are mingled in *only* which holds both the notion of "simply" and of "alone".

In lines 1 and 3 the informative aspect is straightforward and connotes terror and apprehension. Both lines rely for their multiple relations on the repeated *walk on* which open and close them respectively. By way of contrast the literal statements of lines 2 and 4 are ambiguous in meaning and tone. The alternatives in line 4 which centre on *emptier* have already been considered. In line 2 the irony is even more explicit, since it revolves around antithetical attitudes to three basic areas of human concern — sex, economics and social pressure. These words have slighting implications in themselves ; for example, it is not 'love' but *lust*. A further depth of irony is gained by counterpointing *lust* against *ravishes* (stanza 1), *cash* against *wealth* (stanza 3), and *habit* against *character* and *styles* (stanza 3). This last is not so sharp, since the poet wishes to maintain an ambivalent tone and he can do so only by breaking the clearcut pattern of antithesis begun by the first two words. Thus it is possible to read the whole statement as an attempt to communicate simply and directly on an essential problem or fact (as in the manner of Hemingway). As a result, the tone is hung between the two poles of sarcastic, slighting irony and of passionate urgency over basic human verities. Here again we note that the literal, informative aspect conveys the note of terror and pity.

This ambivalence is maintained by the two verbal units in the line. Thus *join* may have a notion of forced yoking or ulterior motivation behind it in contrast to the ritualistic celebration embodied in the term as found in the marriage ceremony. Similarly, *are cold* may mean merely sterile or frigid, that is, wilfully inhuman (more like *jelly fish*, line 3, stanza 2), or it may refer to the final tragic act of inhumanity — death. The difference in tone parallels that which exists between the sneering contempt of the malcontent and the piteous magnanimity of the tragic hero.

Stanza 5 returns to the situation (stanza 1) but now it is viewed in the light of the question (stanza 2), its answer (stanza 3) and their ramifications (stanza 4) :

Crossing and doubling, many-fingered, hounded,
Those desperate stars, those worms dying in flower
Ashed paper holds, nose-sailing, search their bounded
Darkness for a last acre to devour.

It is by all odds the most difficult stanza as anyone who has tried to fit *nose-sailing* into the structure will acknowledge. The sense of terror and pity here becomes dominant from the opening line which is daringly constructed wholly of modifiers. This construction heightens the suspense, for the subject is not presented until line 2. The words themselves are plurisignificative and powerfully suggestive, both within the line unit and within the poem as a whole. *Crossing*, for instance brings to mind "those star-crossed lovers" which connects with the personal note of your face (stanza 1); the intersection of the paths of the stars which works on the level of direct statement; and the religious gesture which reinforces the answer *walk on* (stanza 3) by suggesting the necessity of man's accepting the inevitable and incomprehensible. Similarly, *doubling* suggests running at a set pace which corresponds to the normal path followed by the stars; contorting the body which relates to the human problem seen in terms of the stars; and changing direction so that one's path bends back upon itself which describes the motion of the stars at present.

These first two words concern themselves with the actions of the subject, while the next, *many-fingered*, presents a characteristic of it, and the final word, *hounded*, deals with the subject's relation to its context and more especially how it is acted upon. Thus they provide three different modes of insight into *those desperate stars* as well as a climactic hierarchy of modifiers. *Crossing and doubling, hounded* and *desperate* work immediately for the impression of frenzied flight and pursuit. And if we think of the fingers as ones of light, then it too takes on a quality of darting uncertainty.

The structural inclusiveness is maintained in line 2 by the possibility that *stars* as well as *worms* is a metaphor. *Worms* obviously refers to the burning embers of the explorer's torch, at least on the immediate level. It may also suggest that human beings die at the peak of their capacity to absorb and diffuse culture and are recorded only on the rapidly consumed pages of history; man is a worm physically as well as theologically. *Stars* may refer to human beings whose situation in a time-ridden world is analogous to that of astronomical bodies in their space-ridden world. If, finally, we think of the stars as *worms dying in flower*, then

the universe even at its outermost reaches is being consumed in some relentless (if unobservable) fashion. At any rate the astronomical context is linked to the human by the torch light (*ashed paper*), thereby bringing together the immediate, direct concern with the explorer and the mediate, oblique concern with the cultural problem. The light, whether flame or man's mind, is frantically searching for new areas to illuminate before it is forced to go out. Their darkness is limited (*bounded*) by the time of illumination and also by the power of illumination: this is true for the cultural as well as the physical situation.

The pity of the situation has been emphasized to date, but with the final word *devour* the note of terror is made paramount, thereby maintaining the ambivalence of tone to the very end. On the immediate level it gives the idea of light as an animal force ravenously consuming the darkness; this image serves to complete the pattern of rude power inaugurated with the *torch . ravishes* phrase. On the more oblique level it conveys by way of final irony the manner in which a society or civilization indelicately and indiscriminatingly bolts a new aspect of culture. Viewed from this angle, it is just as well that man, the world and culture are limited for it is the only way of avoiding complete despoliation. That this thesis is capable of suffering an ironic reversal, Empson would be the first to admit, but he would also suggest, I think, that this would be matter for another poem.

Notes and References :

1. One sign of a more sustained interest than heretofore is the appearance of a full-length commentary on the poems by P. Gardner and A. Gardner, *The God Approached* (London : Chatto and Windus, 1978). Significantly enough, however, their bibliography of criticism on Empson's poetry is only a page or so in length.
2. R. P. Blackmur, *The Double Agent* (New York : Arrow Editions, 1935), p. 136.
3. W. Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 2nd ed. (London : Chatto and Windus, 1947), p. 62.
4. W. Empson, *Collected Poems* (London : Chatto and Windus, 1957). p. 21.
5. Empson, *Collected Poems*, p. 100.

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